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Time is now to fight back

Vermont seems like a different place these days. We have a growing crisis of inequity in our state, yet politicians turn the other way. The commitment to solving problems together and ensuring dignified lives for all people has been replaced by divisive measures that will leave many of us behind.

In this new harsh climate, this year's May Day march and rally at the State House in Montpelier take on a different flavor. People have become deeply disillusioned with a political system whose soft façade is crumbling. Is the State House still the People's House, or have political parties become so distanced from us that they simply renege on public agreements and promises, ignore state law, and make decisions behind closed doors with a small circle of big business advisers? Can we count on our representatives to represent us, or have they forgotten about people who struggle in the ongoing economic and health care crisis? The recent onslaught of proposals to slash jobs, cut public services, and drop universal health care has undermined people's trust.

In the not-so-recent past, people's disillusionment was mainly directed at the federal level, where corporate influence on political campaigns and congressional proceedings has long undermined the credibility of what we call "democracy." Many people used to think that things were different in Vermont. Yet after several years of cuts to jobs, wages and public services, the illusion is fading.

Whether it is abandoning our universal health care law, refusing to raise revenue in an equitable way to fund our public goods, attacking public sector unions, or supporting fossil fuel expansion like the fracked gas pipeline, we realize that Vermont's major political decisions are benefiting only a few and harming the rest of us. Why don't our representatives develop a budget that addresses people's needs and advances equity, as state law requires? Why don't we make decisions that are aligned with the basic values of dignity and equity and that benefit our communities?

This May Day, people will take to the streets to demand a real democracy that is accountable to our human rights and prioritizes the well-being of our communities.

Universal health care is a big part of this vision. Only if we treat health care as a public good rather than a corporate profit source can we ensure that everyone gets the care they need and pays what they can. The federal Affordable Care Act has made things worse for many in Vermont, driving up premiums and co-pays for low-income people while bringing more revenue to insurance companies and big hospitals.

The market-based insurance system is a significant cause of inequity in our state: Those with small incomes pay proportionally more for health care than the wealthy,

while making do with bare-bones insurance plans. This injustice harms people's health and increases the gap between the rich and the rest of us. That's why Vermont passed the country's first universal health care law in 2011, which politicians now feel free to ignore.

Yet they are utterly misguided in their refusal to act: Both the governor's financing report and an independent financing plan released by the Healthcare Is a Human Right Campaign show that the vast majority of people would be better off in a universal health care system. On May Day, people will send a loud and clear message: Universal health care is essential to creating a healthier, more equitable Vermont.

Public health care financing must be a key part of a state budget that meets people's needs and raises revenue equitably. Yet politicians have opted for the opposite approach: an unfair tax system that disadvantages low-income people and underfunds our public goods, resulting in more unmet needs and greater income inequality. As it turned out, abandoning universal health care was only the starting shot in a barrage of assaults against low- and middle-income people. Proposed austerity measures include cuts to a wide range of public services, layoffs of public workers, even an attempt to eliminate the right to strike. Furthermore, written into the budget bill is an explicit threat to continue the same assault next year.

Faced with all of this, poor and working people have no choice but to fight back. From the strikes by teachers, FairPoint workers and CCTA bus drivers, to the civil disobedience actions for universal health care during the inauguration and to stop the pipeline, and the "Fight Back" rally at the State House this weekend, people's outrage has been growing steadily in the run-up to this year's May Day rally and march. The time is now to reclaim our democracy and stand together in solidarity as we fight for our rights.

James Haslam is the executive director at the Vermont Workers' Center, which coordinates the Healthcare Is A Human Right Campaign. More information is available at their website www.workerscenter.org.
