

What Is Our Collective Solution To Health Injustice?



Sonali Kolhatkar

12-18-2024 ~ The fight over health care in the U.S. is about competing narratives: profit-making versus collective well-being. We need to articulate a publicly funded solution now—before corporate spin silences us.

The December 4 killing of UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson and the public outrage over the state of healthcare it sparked, is a tale of many competing narratives: the killer's story, the public's story, the industry's story, and the politicians' and punditocracy's story. Which one wins out determines whether the United States ultimately replaces the healthcare system we know with a publicly funded version or continues to accept the flawed one we have.

Sweep away all the news spin, and at its heart, Brian Thompson's killing has highlighted two crucial narratives, the first of which is that armed violence is a way to solve problems. Guns are a force so ubiquitous in our society today that we have become collectively numb to their destruction. It is a uniquely American act of desperation aimed at the industry that only someone like Mangione could be lionized for.

Secondly, the long-overdue prevailing story emerging from the incident is the injustice baked into our healthcare system that leaves nearly no one in the nation untouched.

The story that has yet to be embraced collectively is what a systemic solution to

the crisis looks like. That solution must center on publicly-funded healthcare and a complete dismantling of the insurance industry.

[Luigi Mangione](#), arrested after a days-long manhunt, hardly fits the profile of a vulnerable member of society wronged by Big Health Insurance. White, male, physically fit (other than the debilitating [back pain](#) he appears to have recently suffered), born into privilege, and sporting a head of thick hair and a winning smile, he is a man whose political leanings don't fit neatly into boxes that allow either the left or the right to unequivocally claim him or damn him. And yet he is just about the only archetype of a CEO-killer able to provoke the sort of public admiration in our white supremacist patriarchal world that Robin Hood would have been envious of.

I suspect that, like me, many people of color breathed a sigh of relief that the alleged killer wasn't a Brown or Black man, or an undocumented immigrant. If he were any of those things, the narrative of a CEO's murder would have been less about the CEO and more about the murderer. White men are allowed the space to be flawed human beings. Their motivations and mental health are interrogated since their race and gender absolve them of anything else. The "ideal hero" did the quintessentially American deed.

The fact that the CEO-killer wrote the words ["deny," "defend," and "depose,"](#) on bullet casings—words often used to describe the health insurance industry's tactics—made it clear from the outside that this was an act meant to tell a story: that a death-dealing industry governed by wealthy corporate fat cats deserves to be dismantled, that its time has come, that its leaders need to be taken down.

The killer struck a chord so deep that the industry and the punditocracy supporting it didn't have time to articulate a counternarrative before many among the public began celebrating the cold-blooded murder. Americans began [rooting](#) for a man who carried out the ultimate revenge fantasy of anyone who's ever been denied coverage. ["Wanted" posters](#) for other healthcare CEOs emerged on the streets of New York City, for "denying medical care for corporate profit." [Comments](#) filled with deep satisfaction and biting sarcasm over Thompson's killing appeared on Reddit boards. [Merchandise](#) inspired by the words on the bullet casings sold on retail websites such as Amazon. [Ballads](#) were sung on TikTok.

Stories are powerful. They can move us into action—individual vigilante violence or collective movement building toward solutions that benefit us all.

For decades, counternarratives by pro-industry groups kept us paralyzed into inaction. For example, 15 years ago, when the nation had the chance to rid itself of parasitic health insurance companies, a vocal “[astroturf](#)” group called the Tea Party, parading as a grassroots formation, stymied President Barack Obama’s attempt to fundamentally reform healthcare. Obama didn’t even back the best alternative—[Medicare for all](#)—and only went as far as proposing a “public option” to private health insurance, where people could buy into publicly funded health plans. The then-president [explained](#) that with a public option, “no government bureaucrat or insurance company bureaucrat gets between you and the coverage that you need.”

Republicans, centrist Democrats, and their [well-funded proxies](#) fought back hard with powerful narratives, making wild claims about government “death panels,” and killed the public option. The version of the Affordable Care Act that ultimately passed was a [gift to the insurance industry](#) with a few bright spots, such as the end of “[pre-existing conditions](#)” as a basis for price hikes. The story that private, for-profit health insurance is superior to publicly funded healthcare won out. It was such a powerful tale that the health insurance industry had us rooting for the profits of billionaires and against our own interests.

Now, a CEO is dead, allegedly at the hands of a telegenic white shooter, in an act that has seemingly broken our collective psychosis. Many claim the murder is merely [retaliation](#) for the untold numbers killed by health insurance denials of care. Thompson’s death has [unleashed countless horror stories](#) about the industry’s predations, while the response of wealthy executives and defenders of the industry has been, well, pathetic. UnitedHealth Group CEO Andrew Witty wrote in a [New York Times op-ed](#), “No one would design a system like the one we have,” and still he offered nothing more than greater transparency in how denials are decided upon rather than pledging to reduce or eliminate denials of coverage.

[Peter Thiel](#), billionaire and co-founder of PayPal, spent ten seconds sweating and thinking of a response to a question about public glee over the CEO’s killing before making an incoherent and nonsensical statement.

This is a moment like no other, an opportunity to rewrite the narratives around

healthcare, to re-cast it as a human right, a necessity akin to public education, not a profit-making opportunity for Thompson, Witty, and health insurance shareholders.

I fear that, unless we articulate concrete demands for publicly funded healthcare, we may lose this opportunity. Since Mangione's arrest, there have been concerns of copycat attacks against other insurance CEOs. A Florida woman was [arrested](#) for merely saying to a representative of Blue Cross Blue Shield after having a claim denied, "Delay, deny, depose. You people are next." Apparently, death threats are commonplace for health insurance executives. According to the [Wall Street Journal](#), "Vicky Gregg, the former CEO of BlueCross BlueShield of Tennessee, said she got repeated death threats when she was in the job years ago."

Can we unite around, not just our common hatred of a system that preys on us, but on the system that will solve the crisis? That is our challenge. We have only a small window of time before the industry and the punditocracy that backs it could beat us into submission, convincing us that sympathy over the murder of one man ought to eclipse the neglect of millions and that there is no alternative to the unjust system we are living with.

Even Obama [ultimately backed](#) a Medicare-for-all system, albeit after he was out of office. Senator Bernie Sanders, one of the most stalwart champions of publicly funded healthcare, has called for the building of a political movement rather than random acts of violence, to replace health insurance with a single-payer system.

[Sanders said](#), "The way we're going to reform our healthcare system is having people come together and understanding that it is the right of every American to be able to walk into a doctor's office when they need to and not have to take out their wallet." We deserve nothing less than that.

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