

Eugene Mitchell  
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EM: I'm Eugene Mitchell. I was executive secretary of the Alberta Federation of Labour in 1979 when the resolution was passed at the Federation convention setting up the Friends of Medicare. Resolutions get passed at conventions and this happens with all kinds of organizations, but what happens afterwards is another thing. I know at that time we probably lobbied the government to change their ways and don't try to destroy the Medicare system. They were the ones that were trying to do it, so it was somewhat difficult. We realized that the labour movement themselves were not going to do it. We tried to solicit community groups, and we did do that. Things got going. We had meetings with groups in the community, and other people started picking it up.

Q: Why did Medicare need friends? What kind of attacks were taking place?

EM: Alberta has been ruled by rightwing Tory governments for so long, I guess before any of us were born, which includes the old Social Credit. We were the last province to come into Medicare anyway. The Alberta government reluctantly came in. They came in only because of federal funding. Anyway, it was established. But ever since that day, the attacks have varied over the years. They've attempted to do extra billing, they've tried to privatize certain parts of the system. But people have fought back, people have fought back. I remember a few years ago there was a major attack on the Medicare system. Major rallies took place across the province. I remember going down to the Coliseum and the place was full.

Q: Was that Bill 11 in 2000?

EM: That was it exactly. So the government would back off. It was quite obvious the people in this province liked the public healthcare system. But the philosophy of the Tory government seems to be that we don't want any publicly run system, we'll try extra billing. That was stopped because of the feds; it was against the Medicare Act, the Canada Healthcare Act. But over the years they've been slowly privatizing.

Q: What did they privatize?

EM: Calgary has been leading in this respect. They've got these private clinics. The government is contracting out to them and patients are going to them. Even right today they say, well we're putting money back into the system so we can catch up with the hip and knee replacements, but who's doing it? Not the public hospitals – it's going to these private practitioners. They're raking in all the profit. So you're going to see this type of erosion. The next thing the insurance companies start moving in selling insurance. This is the way it was before Medicare came in. You had to go out and buy private insurance. This is the type of system they have in the United States. So many of their population have absolutely no coverage, a whole bunch more to add to ? premiums. Then you have

to get your wallet checked at the door when you go into a hospital. So that attack has been going on. But to get back to Friends of Medicare, in its early days it sort of started up and faded away. Then the next attack would come from the government and there'd be enough outcry from around the province, they'd back off a little bit. Then they'd come at us again. But the last few years Friends of Medicare has been a pretty solid group and has gained a pretty solid reputation around the province. They really have.

Q: Why is Medicare so important and why should working people protect it?

EM: Simply, working people are trying to raise families. A lot of working people don't have high incomes and they really can't afford to go out and pay some insurance company hundreds of dollars a month to get healthcare coverage. We think the only fair way to do it is through the taxation system. But then again, we used to have a progressive tax system in this country federally and provincially. The province now is going to a flat tax, so the wealthy pay as much as the poor working guy. Even if it is paid out of taxation it isn't fair, because the working guy is paying more in proportion than the wealthy guy. So those kinds of inequities in society, that's what the trade union movement has always been fighting for, to get those things changed. Hopefully that'll continue.

Q: Who and what are we up against when we try to protect Medicare?

EM: We are up against the major money people, not only in this province but right across the country, North America. The big insurance companies, these big corporations that they have in the United States running their healthcare systems, they're chomping at the bit to move into Canada. Of course the government of this province is all too willing to help them.

Q: The Lougheed government was in some ways better than the Getty government.

EM: Oh, much better. When I look back with the Lougheed government, they didn't seem to have a social conscience and didn't care about some of these things and were trying to destroy it. But there was always that real rightwing faction even in that government that was always pushing and pushing. After Lougheed left I think it got worse. The rightwingers have taken over. Now we're getting the situation today in the province where the very extreme right don't think that this Tory government's rightwing enough. They want to get a new party, and they'll really destroy it.

Q: What has been the contribution of trade unions? Have trade unions rightfully been credited with the creation of Medicare?

EM: Oh yeah. The trade union movement fought to establish public healthcare. We had a friendly government in Saskatchewan under Tommy Douglas. There were healthcare programs set up then, public health system. Then the real fight that took place in that province – the doctors didn't want it, the insurance companies in particular didn't want it, and the fight that went on at that time was pretty bitter. You've gotta give a guy like Woodrow Lloyd at that time, who was the premier of Saskatchewan, that really stood his

ground on that one and didn't cave in. They got their public healthcare system in Saskatchewan. Of course after that then the trade union movement started putting pressure on the federal government to bring this in nationally. They eventually did. Basically in this country today, you can go from one end of the country to the other. The average person, you want to get rid of this and go buy private insurance for healthcare? The answer is absolutely not.

Q: Why have doctors been opposed or equivocal?

EM: I think they've become a part of the capitalist system. Some of them get very wealthy, then they set up their own private clinics and have other doctors working for them. I'm not sure that serves the public very well. Why don't we have public clinics? You don't see the doctors on salaries. My goodness, if I stood up in public today and said we should put all the doctors on salary, they'd think I'm some kind of a nutcase. But why shouldn't they be?

Q: Why should they be opposed to Medicare? They bill and that's it.

EM: That's right, they bill and they keep getting paid. But it's still sort of a private thing for them. They're guaranteed their money. We guarantee their money.

Q: If you were to give a message to trade unions in Alberta today on the 30th anniversary of Friends of Medicare, what would you tell them?

EM: I would tell them, get involved. Get involved with Friends of Medicare, get involved with your unions, get involved politically. That's where the answer is.

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