Doohnibor: That's 'Robinhood' Backwards, or Taking from the Poor to Give to the Rich [VIDEO]

April 27, 2012 By Regan Hofmann

Here we go again. A nation in financial trouble erupts in debate over whether those who can afford to help stabilize the economy will pitch in or whether we will instead gut budgets designed to protect people in need.

Yesterday, ACT UP held their 25th anniversary demonstration on Wall Street in NYC. They partnered with Occupy Wall Street and AIDS advocacy groups like Health Gap, Housing Works, VOCAL-NY and many others to march from City Hall to Wall Street. Their ask? A small tax (0.05%) on Wall Street transactions and speculative trades to help raise the money needed to end the AIDS pandemic and provide universal healthcare in the U.S. (The advocacy kicked off earlier in the day when 10 activists were arrested in a smaller, related demonstration on Wall Street.)

While AIDS activists locked up the streets of lower Manhattan, another Occupy rally took place in Union Square. Though it seemed to be about a different subject--namely making it more affordable for young people to go to school in America by preventing interest rates on student loans from doubling--the two demonstrations were linked by HIV/AIDS.

This is because one of the bills headed to the floor of Congress today intended to solve the student loan interest rate crisis would be funded using dollars currently slated to help states and communities fight diseases like HIV/AIDS, heart disease, cancer, stroke, and diabetes--a move that ultimately reduces health care costs.

On Wednesday, U.S. student debt reached $1 trillion dollars. (According to the Federal Reserve, the number is $870 billion.) The problem's about to get worse. Unless Congress passes legislation to prevent it by extending the Bush-era 2007 College Cost Reduction and Access Act, interest rates on subsidized Stafford student loans will double from 3.4 to 6.8 percent in July of this year.

No one argues that interest rates for poor and middle class student should be maintained for another year. The question is how we'll pay for it.

Guess who's sponsoring the bill that helps students at the expense of public health dollars? Yep. The GOP. Speaker John Boehner's proposal would finance the $5.9 billion cost of maintaining the

3.4 percent interest rate for one year by repealing the Affordable Care Act's Prevention & Public Health Fund.

It's really critical to note that this bill was slammed together last minute and seemed to appear out of nowhere. Perhaps that's because just last week, the GOP voted FOR the Ryan budget which...doubles the interest rates for student loans (among other atrociously bad things).

Under pressure from the president and Congress, the GOP scrambled to find a way to protect students (good idea!) but decided to do it at the expense of desperately needed preventive health care (bad idea!). Oh yes, and they called the dollars they're tapping a "slush fund." Hmmm. In a nation with 56,000 new HIV infections a year, a preventable disease mind you, how is it that that money is not needed for more and better prevention? A few other things those dollars might cover: screenings for breast and cervical cancer, childhood immunizations, initiatives to reduce birth defects. Ladies, do you smell what I'm cooking? Are we just going to stand by while some of the boys in DC threaten the safety of our bodies and children? Methinks not.

Meanwhile, the Democrats have a different and to anyone who cares about the health of Americans and capping future health care dollars, arguably a better idea. Democrats want to fund the freeze on the student interest rate (in part) by increasing corporate tax rates, say, for example on the oil companies.

According to The Hill's report of the action yesterday:

"On Tuesday, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) introduced an offset that would require shareholders in S-corporations -- typically small-sized businesses -- to pay payroll taxes from which they're now exempt.

Rep. George Miller (Calif.), the senior Democrat on the House Education Committee, introduced legislation Wednesday that would cover the $5.9 billion cost by eliminating tax breaks for the oil-and-gas industries.

Reid's proposal has been rejected by GOP leadership."

If you ask me, it sounds a little like...the ACT UP ask? Asking the largest and richest companies in the nation to forgo a fraction of their profits to help keep disinfranchised Americans healthy and alive, all while protecting the public public health, future generations and reducing future health care costs.

Of the 34 million people estimated to be living with HIV globally, there are 28 million not accessing treatment that both sustains their lives while slowing the spread of the virus. In the United States, there are an estimated 750,000 people living with HIV not accessing treatment. HIV infections occur daily around the world. Since treatment, when taken consistently, can lower the risk that the virus will spread by up to 96%, treatment can double as a form of prevention.

This means money spent on HIV treatment is prevention. And we need to simultaneously support scientifically proven methods of biomedical and non-biomedical methods of HIV prevention.

When will some of the leaders of this nation realize that gutting the safety nets for our nation’s most vulnerable people or burdening young people with larger loans in a challenging job market is just bad business for the future of America?

How is it that we must choose between the ability to educate future generations affordably and keep them safe from preventable diseases? The GOP-sponsored bill to keep student interest rates from doubling comes at a huge price to preventive health dollars.

I don’t want to see student loans double. But I also don’t think the only solution is to pay to protect America’s students at the expense of America’s health. Because for a truly prosperous and healthy nation, we need widespread access to health care and education. And not just for the minority.

The revolution’s coming. I stood with a lot of angry, frightened, disinfranchised people fighting for their lives yesterday. There comes a time, when you’ve done enough bad things to people you think have no power to fight back that they do.

And few people fight harder than those fighting for their lives. I know. I’m one of ’em.

Join us to support students and people living with HIV right now by sending tweets using #dontdoublymyrate, #taxwallst #endaids. To show solidarity with POZ and ACT UP, use @pozmagazine and @actupny in your tweet. Thanks for joining the fight!

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