

My name is Ashley Lewis and I am a medical student at NYU and am currently working on a PhD in Epidemiology, with a focus on health economics.

Today, I want to share a story about my family and the experience that motivated me to fight to make healthcare a human right.

My father was a unionized public employee for almost 40 years in New Jersey. Where I am from, having a union job was the best way to financial security and a middle class life. One of the biggest draws the union held for my father was the promise of consistently good healthcare for our family. Back then, public unions in New Jersey were one of the state's most powerful political forces. It was unthinkable that they could possibly be threatened.

This changed in 2011 when Chris Christie, along with Democrat and Republican state legislators suspended the union's ability to collectively bargain on healthcare. This resulted in New Jersey union employees paying more for healthcare benefits than many private sector employees across the nation.

For my family, we saw our healthcare costs skyrocket. I was a teenager at the time and, scared of what I was hearing in the news, asked my parents if we were going to lose our health insurance. My parents did their best to assure me, but I could see the uncertainty in their faces. Throughout those years our premiums grew and our choice of physicians shrank. This increase in my family's healthcare cost came just as my sister and I were entering college, another astronomical cost my parents were attempting to budget into their middle class finances.

Now, when I look back at this time, what sticks with me the most is the stress my family experienced during those years, knowing that our health insurance was never secure. This is the psychological and physical toll millions of New Yorkers experience every day, for those with and without insurance, because healthcare is seen as another commodity used as a carrot or stick so that the greedy and powerful can stay rich and in control.

For the millions of workers like my father, we need to fight for a better system, one that empowers workers to take control of their healthcare. With a for-profit healthcare system, this is impossible. When our healthcare system is dependent on private health insurance, it only adds to the leverage employers have over workers. It also pits workers' ability to survive against other interests, like the ability to work in a safe environment for fair pay. This is why the New York Health Act is the only path forward to ensure workplaces can no longer exploit the health needs of workers in order to quell the right to better wages, pensions and working conditions.

In closing, I want to address some common objections brought against the New York Health Act. Some people have said the New York Health Act isn't practical or sensible. But I ask, does it make sense that for-profit insurance companies pay elite private hospitals in this city ten times more for the exact same surgery than the price paid at the public hospital down the street? You do not need to study health economics to know this makes doesn't make any sense and is, in fact, one of the reasons why this city's public hospitals struggle to stay afloat as they care for the poorest and sickest patients. To those that say the New York Health Act restricts choice, I ask, what choice do you have when you're forced to delay mental healthcare because you can't find a psychiatrist in your restricted insurance network? I'll tell you, there is no freedom in such a system. Some might say we can't afford the New York Health Act, but I counter- what we really can't we afford are the million dollar salaries of health insurance CEO's and the crushing medical debt ordinary people are burdened with every day.

We have an opportunity to change all of this with the passage of the New York Health Act. We have the chance to liberate millions of people from the pain, suffering, and fear that currently dominates our for-profit system. All we need is commitment and courage. To the legislators in this room- history is watching you, do the right thing.