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'We Won't Back Down': Vermonters Launch Sit-In At Statehouse Demanding Universal Health Care 'Now!'

Burned by governor, protesters occupy House Chamber, saying they will not leave until Green Mountain Care law respected

by [Sarah Lazare](#), staff writer



Nearly four years ago, Vermont became the first U.S. state to pass a law for universal, publicly-funded health care. This photograph depicts a 2011 rally at the Vermont Capitol. (Photo: Vermont Workers' Center)

Update 1/9/2015 11:30 AM EST:

After holding the floor of the Vermont legislature in Montpelier for several hours, 29 universal health care protesters were arrested Thursday night. James Haslam, director of the Vermont Workers' Center, appeared on *Democracy Now!* Friday morning to recap the day of action:

Earlier 1/8/2015 5:00 PM EST:

Protesters occupied the chambers of the Vermont statehouse on Thursday afternoon, saying they refuse to leave until legislators meet their demands to respect the first-ever U.S. law for universal, publicly-funded health care, won by grassroots

movements nearly four years ago yet stymied by the governor last month.

The demonstration is a response to the mid-December announcement by Vermont Governor Peter Shumlin that he seeks to unilaterally [abandon](#) the universal health care plan, passed into law in 2011 under [Act 48](#) and named Green Mountain Care, even though the governor used the groundbreaking legislation to [bolster](#) his candidacy.

Timed to coincide with Shumlin's "state of the state" address, Thursday's sit-in—still ongoing at the time of publication—was staged by approximately 30 people, with "many supporters" rallying nearby, Keith Brunner of the Vermont Workers' Center, the organization that coordinates the state-wide "Health Care Is A Human Right" campaign, told *Common Dreams* over the phone.



Jonathan Leavitt

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Occupation of VT House Chamber with demand of legislature enacting Act48 Vt Statute establishing universal healthcare

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"I am here because it is a human right to have health care," Skyler Wind, a member volunteer of the Vermont Workers' Center, told *Common Dreams* over the phone from the protest. "We all deserve to be treated the same way."

Wind explained she is a single mom living with disability, with a disabled child, in extreme poverty. "Too many poor people like myself, we're the ones whose teeth are falling out, whose cancers are discovered too late," she said. "Those like me, who are so-called 'welfare queens,' can't afford co-pays and have to mess around with medication. Why can't my son—why can't I—get care when we need it?"

Immediately preceding the occupation, nearly 200 protesters had filled the halls of the statehouse, singing, "We have come too far, we won't back down. We'll flood these halls with justice, the time is Now!"



Protesters flooded the Vermont statehouse on Thursday. (Photo courtesy of Jonathan Leavitt)

"Respect Our Universal Health Care Law"

Act 48, which requires the full implementation of universal, publicly-funded health care in Vermont by 2017, has already suffered a series of delays since it was passed in 2011. The state legislature was set to decide on a financing plan for the bill in 2015, but in mid-December, Shumlin [announced](#) he would no longer move forward on the law, citing alleged economic reasons. "In my judgment, now is not the right time to ask our Legislature to take the step of passing a financial plan for Green Mountain Care," he said.

But it took Vermonters years to build a state-wide movement strong enough to pass Green Mountain Care, and grassroots organizations vow that they [refuse to](#)

"[acquiesce to this undemocratic decision](#)," and in fact, will make their voices louder. The past few weeks have seen organizing drives, protest [letters](#), and even a symbolic mass [burning of medical bills](#) in front of the Vermont statehouse to illustrate exactly what's at stake in a state where poverty is [on the rise](#) and incomes are falling.

"The health care crisis and economic crisis that so many poor and working class people in Vermont are facing hasn't changed," said Brunner. "The governor, for his own reasons, made the decision to throw in the towel. It was a political decision he framed as an economic decision. He is unwilling to have big businesses and wealthy individuals pay their fair share for health care."

An open letter delivered to state lawmakers earlier Thursday reads, "The Healthcare Is a Human Right Campaign asks all of our legislators to respect Act 48, our universal health care law, to review the governor's report on Green Mountain Care (GMC) financing, and to develop plans for moving forward with equitable, public financing. This process must happen in a transparent and participatory way, unlike the governor's discussions behind closed doors."

State-Wide Fight With Nation-Wide Relevance


Nationwide, eyes are on the Vermont fight, which has inspired similar organizing drives, from [Maryland](#) to [Maine](#), to build popular movements, anchored in [human rights principles](#), to win publicly-funded, single-payer health care for all people, regardless of income or documented status. A [report](#) released last summer by the Commonwealth Fund found that the U.S. health care system is the most costly in the world yet provides the worst care of 11 industrialized nations, adding fuel to charges that the for-profit U.S. health system is failing.

More than 50 organizations from across the country, including Grassroots Global Justice Alliance and Jobs With Justice, signed an [open letter](#) which was released Thursday and declares, "Now is not the time to give up or give in. One decision shall not determine the fate of a right fought for by many. The people of Vermont can and will have the final say in how to establish and pay for a healthcare system that will serve all of their needs, rather than the profits of a few."

A [statement of solidarity](#) with Thursday's protest, from the Southern Maine Workers' Center, reads, "Growing movements of ordinary working and poor people in and beyond Vermont reject this canned narrative of scarcity, and instead embrace a politics of abundance. We insist there is enough for all of us to meet our basic needs. We believe that working collectively to ensure our human rights is the only way to build communities where we can all thrive."

Updates and commentary on Thursday's protest, which was still ongoing at the time of publication, are being posted to Twitter:


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