

Ralph Nader Radio Hour

Episode 521

“Bishop William Barber”

March 2nd, 2024

Steve Skrovan: Welcome to the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*. My name is Steve Skrovan, along with my co-host, David Feldman. Hello, David.

David Feldman: Morning.

Steve Skrovan: And of course, the man of the hour who's just coming off a birthday, Ralph Nader. Happy birthday, Ralph.

Ralph Nader: Thank you very much, Steve. Hello, everybody. Hello, listeners. Unlike any other program, this program is going to enlist your support and excite you for a transforming civic action drive led by the Poor People's Campaign and Bishop Barber for the November results, local, state and national.

Steve Skrovan: That's right, Ralph.

Poverty kills. There are more than 130 million poor and low-wage people in America, and poverty is the fourth leading cause of death in the nation. That fact is the focus of our first guest today, Bishop William Barber, Co-chair of the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival.

And on Saturday, March 2nd, the Poor People's Campaign is launching a day of nationally coordinated, simultaneous direct action in more than 30 state capitals and Washington, D.C. This weekend's mass poor peoples and low-wage workers moral march to state house assemblies will kick off 40 weeks of voter mobilization across the United States. We'll speak to Bishop Barber about the Poor People's Campaign and their mission to build a third reconstruction by activating millions of eligible poor voters and demanding “a public policy agenda that fosters life, not death.”

That's just in the first half of the program. In the second half, we ask the question, what does it take to steal from Medicare? In the second half of the program we'll welcome *Washington Post* health reporter, Dan Diamond. Mr. Diamond and his colleagues uncovered a scheme that cheated the Medicare program out of \$2 billion. We're going to find out how the deed was done.

As always, somewhere along the line, we'll check in with our relentless corporate crime reporter, Russell Mokhiber. But first, let's talk about a movement to mobilize poor people to fight for their lives. David?

David Feldman: Bishop William Barber is President and Senior Lecturer of Repairers of the Breach, which was established to train communities in moral movement building. He is Co-chair of the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival, and Founding Director and Professor at The Center for Public Theology and Public Policy at Yale Divinity School.

Welcome to the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*, Bishop William Barber.

William Barber: Thank you so much. I'm glad to be with you and glad to be with our longtime advocate and friend for so many, Ralph Nader. Thank you so much for having us on.

Ralph Nader: Welcome indeed, Bishop Barber. I've been a longtime supporter of the Poor People's Campaign, and very concerned about the lack of mass media coverage of your efforts, going into cities year after year, and actually convened a meeting with the editor of the *Washington Post*, Marty Baron, with local civic leaders to find out why, when you came to Washington, you didn't get coverage.

So we're going to try to develop a groundswell of support among our serious listeners, because the biggest mistake people who are not poor can make is that helping poor and low-wage people in this country doesn't improve their life. Total nonsense. And we're going to see how a greater turnout of poor and low-wage people in the elections can transform politics in this country at the national, state, and local level.

So let's start with what is the Poor People's Campaign that is being launched on March 2 in the District of Columbia, and in over 30 states about?

William Barber: Ralph, let me say something, too, about what you just said. The deafening silence as it relates to not just poor, low-wage people, but 135 million poor and low-wage people are in the contemporary American reality. That in itself is shocking. And then to add to that, poverty and low-wage is the fourth leading cause of death, higher than homicide, higher than respiratory disease, higher than gun violence.

If there's an uptick in death on any of those things I just noted, you'd have headline news. Homicide goes up, or you start having deaths, or when we got to 500 people dying a day from COVID, rightfully so, it was called an epidemic. Well, eight hundred people are dying a day from poverty. That's over a quarter million people a year.

We've been mobilized since 2018. And when we came to D.C. for the mass poor people's moral march on Washington and to the polls in 2022, we brought tens of thousands of people, 2.7 million people online. But as you said, oftentimes the media does not recognize that.

Here we are. We come out of COVID, 350-some-thousand people died during COVID for the lack of healthcare, not because they should have died. We now know that low-wage folk were three to five times more likely to die, whether they went West Virginia, which is predominantly white, or the Delta, which is predominantly black. We did a study on that, on death and COVID among the poor and low-wage. And we know that poverty, as I said, is 135 million people now, 52 million people who make less than a living wage of \$15 an hour.

We also know that in 2020, there was a vote in the Senate. We fought to get it through the House to raise the minimum wage, first time since 2009, got it to the Senate committee, and eight Democrats and 50 Republicans said no to 52 million people, which would have pumped over \$330 billion into the economy and would have lifted 43% of African Americans alone out of poverty, and more white people out of poverty, because the number of white people that are poor and low-wage exceeds the number of African Americans by millions, literally 20/30 million people.

So we decided to take another look—this gets us to March the 2nd—and asked inside of these numbers, what is the power metric? What is the hope? And we commissioned a study called *Waking the Sleeping Giant*. We found ~~this is what we found~~, that poor, low-wage people now make up 30% of the electorate across the country. And in battleground states where the margin of victory was within 3%, they make up nearly 40% of the electorate.

We know, for instance, if you look at the margin of victory in Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, North Carolina, and Michigan, the last election, add all of that up, you get about 270,000 votes. If you look at the number of poor, low-wage voters that did not vote, the number is over 4 million. Then the study concluded that the number-one reason poor, low-wage voters don't vote is nobody talks to them. We had 15 presidential debates last election. Not one of those debates was dedicated to, what are you going to do for the lives of 135 million people, ~~all of those~~ who are without health insurance, without paid family leave, so forth and so on.

What we now know is there's not a state in this country, particularly out in battleground states, where if 20% of poor, low-wage voters were mobilized around an agenda, around demands, and voted, they could not shift political calculations. In fact, in many states, it's less than 5%, like Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Michigan, Florida. It's less than 20% in North Carolina.

So on March the 2nd, in 33 states across this country, and the District of Columbia, we are launching a 40-plus-week campaign. We're doing it at state capitals, and we're focusing on state capitals first, because that's where so much political insurrection and damage is done regarding policies that could lift poor people.

We're saying, if you believe that we should abolish poverty, the fourth leading cause of death, pass living wages, healthcare, fully fund public education, protect women's rights, end the proliferation and profiteering on guns, and things of that nature, then join us in this launch. We are launching a campaign to touch 15 million poor and low-wage, infrequent voters. We're mobilizing 200 to 300 people per state that we're going to train deeply in how to do this work. 6000 people touching 45 people a day over a 9-week period can touch 15 million people in less than 10 weeks. If you do that four times, that's four times in 40 weeks.

And then after March 2nd, and this is all happening simultaneously, by the way, we're going to do a massive gathering on June 15 in Washington, D.C., at the Congress, demanding that these issues be taken up. We're also doing a summer intensive. It's happening this weekend, finally, on the anniversary of Bloody Sunday, a few days before Super Tuesday and before State of the Union address.

In June, we're calling it our summer intensive. And we're hooking up with labor and others to do this and all religious leaders because this is the 60th anniversary of Freedom Summer. And this movement is black, it's white, it's brown, it's Asian, it's native, it's young, it's old, it's gay, it's straight, it's trans, it's Christian, it's Muslim, it's Jewish, it's people of faith, people not of faith, who are saying it's time to wake the sleeping giant. It's time for a resurrection, not an insurrection. And it's time that we vote our power and go on the offensive and refuse to be silent or ignored anymore.

Ralph Nader: And I might add, you say in some of your materials, just to be clear, "We rise not as left or right, Democrat or Republican, but as a moral fusion movement to build power, build moral activism, build voter participation, and we won't be silent anymore." And you root it right in the preamble of the Constitution, which among the first words by our founders is that the union is to "establish justice and promote the general welfare."

William Barber: Exactly.

Ralph Nader: One of the things I like about your movement, Bishop Barber, is you don't shrink from connecting the plutocracy, the super-rich, the militarism, the giant corporations that are draining the resources and draining the political power to service their greed. Can you talk a little bit about that?

William Barber: Well, Dr. King said something that we often miss, and what I think was his greatest speech. Now, his greatest closing, was "I Have a Dream". As you know, the original title, though, of that speech was "Normalcy, Never again."

But at the end of the Selma to Montgomery march, Dr. King went back and told the story of the first reconstruction. We actually need a third reconstruction now in this country. But he told the story of what was the real cause of segregation and ending the reconstruction. And he said these words: "the greedy aristocracy of the south was afraid of the masses of Negroes and the masses of poor white people coming together and forming a voting bloc that could fundamentally shift the economic architecture of the nation."

We often miss, that for him, voting rights was not just about black people, but it was about building this power bloc. We said from the beginning that there are five areas that unite us, and we did deep-dive training to unite the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival. Rev. Dr. Liz Theoharis and I went all over the country in 2017, 2018, inviting people to join, if they agree with, number one, that these five interlocking injustices— systemic racism as it relates to black people, brown people, native people, and the collateral damage done to white people as

[indistinct 00:12:13] seen through the lens of voter suppression and denial of immigrant rights and the denial of rights to our native brothers and sisters. Systemic poverty that at that time was 140 million poor and low-wage people in this country, ecological devastation, denial of healthcare, the war economy, and the false moral narrative of religious nationalism.

We said, these are the interlocking injustices that demand a moral fusion, intersectional movement where we take the best traditions from our Constitution, from our religious values, and from our just moral values, even if people are not religious. We said, listen, our Constitution says that you can have no goal toward a more perfect union until you establish justice and promote the general welfare of all people.

That's essential. You cannot have domestic tranquility without that. Declaration of Independence said that when there's been a long train of abuse, that the people are required to shift and change that reality and that government. Well, we haven't even raised the minimum wage in this country since 2009. You think about that, Ralph. You know it better than anyone. Profits have gone up, corporate leaders got more money, productivity has gone up, but we've not raised the minimum wage from 7.25 since 2009. That is literally now 15 years. Fifteen years.

And during COVID, we changed the name of people from service workers to essential workers to force them to go to work. That you have to go to work to save the rest of us. But then we treated them like they were expendable. You go to work, but we're not going to have living wage, we're not going to have guaranteed healthcare, you're not going to have paid family leave. And we've literally put people at risk to save the rest.

So we say, our votes that we're talking about are not votes for personalities, but demands. If you want these votes, then speak to the people. But we're also saying the poor and low-wage vote, whether it's in Eastern Kentucky, where we spent a lot of time, or whether it's in the Tenderloin out in San Francisco or Upstate New York, or down in Mississippi and Alabama, or Appalachia and West Virginia, you cannot, in a democracy, let your power sit on the shelf. If folk are not recognizing you, you must force them.

And we now have this power. We don't even know what battleground states are. Because if poor and low-wealth people voted at the same percentage rate as middle class and others, it would change all of the political calculations. And it is the fear of the greedy aristocracy. It is time for us to realize their fear.

Lastly, I'm a preacher, and I hate it, Ralph, when I hear people do this one line. They may not even be church-goers, but they'll say, "Well, the Bible says, and Jesus said, the poor will be with you always." I said, that is not true. He said it, but you're quoting it out of context. The original scripture actually says, in Deuteronomy 15, "There need be no poor among you." In other words, poverty is a man-created, human-created reality. It is the result of policy violence. It is a result of bad policy.

If anything we learned during COVID, the one thing it showed us was, we went into COVID 140 million poor and low-wealth people, 87 million people either uninsured or underinsured, their system was broken. But then we did a little investment, should have done more, but there was an

investment. We did Child Tax Credits. Child poverty dropped 60%. We did extended Medicaid expansion. Millions more people got healthcare. Poverty dropped to 115 million people. Then in six months, we said, okay, that's enough. Took it away. And now it shot right back up to 135 million people.

We learned that it is the investment, good policy—bad policy is mean, it is violent, and it is deadly, because now we live in a reality. And we're going to keep saying it. This is why on Saturday, we're focusing on this one fact. Poverty is the fourth leading cause of death in this country. If you are not for ending policies that perpetuate poverty and low wages, then you are an accessory to the crime of human beings' lives being taken.

Ralph Nader: Let's talk about the mechanics, Bishop Barber, about getting the vote out. I always thought that you want not only to get the vote out, but you want the people who voted to meet after the election and celebrate with a potluck supper.

You need transportation for those who can't get to the polls and don't do absentee voting. And you need little things, like when people who don't usually vote go down and vote and then they wear a button called "I voted," all little things and facilities. Are you working on that part, the mechanics of it? And do you have enough funding?

I just want to compare something here. These CEO heads are making \$10,000 to \$20,000 an hour on a 40-hour week. And the other thing I want to compare is there's a Democratic Party leaning PAC that just announced they're going to spend \$140 million on television testimonials by real people, praising the Democrats. \$140 million, probably wouldn't get out 1000 votes. So how are you going to actually get them to the polls?

William Barber: Well, I would often tell them, give us \$5 million and we'll turn the vote out. You don't need testimony just praising folk. You need testimony saying where real people are and what policies, not just that you pass, but what are you going to do. We've said to both sides of the isle. Our people went in last week to both Republicans and Democrats in state houses, and we're going to do the same thing in Congress with the message, get the living wage bill out of committee. Pass it on the Senate floor. Throw it to the House, and let the House either deal with it or not.

And then whoever's running, say, "Listen, if you elect me, here's what I'm going to do in the first 50 days. We're going to pass the living wage. We're going to get complete healthcare. We're going to fully fund public education. These are things that the majority of people want anyway, according to a lot of the polls. But our politicians just go silent on it.

And our debates are so impoverished. We end up talking about people's hair and who said the last crazy thing. Fifteen presidential debates, and not one presidential candidate was asked in a 30-minute period, if you are elected, what are you going to do about a reality impacting 43% of adults in your nation and 52% of the children in your nation, and that's poverty and low wages.

So here's the thing, Ralph. We always need resources. And if anyone wants to help us, right now, Repairers of the Breach is holding the organizing portion of this effort. So listeners can go to that website and donate and it'll go toward this effort.

In addition to that, we have coordinating committees in every one of these states. Now, we're not trying to create another organization. We are a movement. This is a movement. So we coordinate. Every coordinating committee has 10 poor, low-impact people, 10 moral religious leaders, 10 organizations and advocates. And they are mobilizing a core group of people in each state that will not only reach out to folk, but will also help do some of the kinds of things that you're talking about.

In addition to that, we have been working since 2018. We tested this model in 2022 and in 2020. But in 2022, we took 400 people, touched 2.7 million infrequent, low-wage voters, and we have the metrics of what they did and where it made a difference that the media doesn't talk about. For instance, in Georgia, after the election, then the special election, the runoff, if you will, because no one got 50% of the vote, we touched every poor and low-wage voter in that state with the message, nonpartisan, but a message about policy.

Then we went back and looked at how many of them moved to the polls that had not voted. And those that moved were three times the margin of victory. We know that in Michigan, for instance, the margin of victory was 10,000 votes, but over 1 million poor and low-wage voters did not vote. In Pennsylvania, over 1.67 million. And the margin victory won by 40,000. In Wisconsin, over 1 million, and wasn't but 20,000. In Florida, it would only take 2%.

These are real metrics. And a lot of the people, Ralph, we're not just talking about somebody who's on the street. We're talking about a family of four making less than \$50,000 a year, which is poor and low-wage in this country. And one of the things that we're beating them back is that poor whites vote against their own self-interest. Our data shows, our research, that poor and low-wage folk, when they vote, actually vote about 54% to 56% of the time for a more progressive agenda. And when that agenda is presented to them and when they are talked to, it goes up higher. For instance, in 2018, we had two candidates running for governor in Kentucky. Our campaign went to Louisville and to Eastern Kentucky. We were organized there anyway. Now, Eastern Kentucky, folks said it's Trump country. It's not Trump country. It's not even red country.

In Harlan County is where Lyndon Baines Johnson launched the war on poverty. Harlan County, Kentucky. Harlan County, USA. But a presidential candidate had not been back there since then. We went out there, we talked to folk, we helped connect the dots, and we showed how the very people supporting religious nationalism and anti-gay people, anti this, anti that, were also against union rights, against living wages, against healthcare. And four of those seven counties flipped.

Governor Beshear unseated an incumbent. We never endorsed him. But what Governor Andy Beshear did do and learned from the campaign, he started going to those areas in East Kentucky and in Louisville and he started talking to them about living wages and healthcare and protecting their water rights and union rights, and said if he was elected, this is what he would do. He would

even restore Medicaid expansion. And in a southern state like Kentucky, he unseated an incumbent.

I come out of that—we're in North Carolina. Quick story. We had the Moral Monday movement starting in 2013, lasted over four years, beat the extremists in the courts over voter suppression. We unseated incumbent Tea Party person out in the mountains of North Carolina. We brought together people of every different race, creed, color and party. We had nearly 2000 people to do civil disobedience. About 12% were Republicans, but they were not this so-called brand of Republicans. They were more like Eisenhower, Theodore Roosevelt, Abraham Lincoln Republicans.

But my point is, one of the things we did, we knew that if we could move 10% of the unregistered voters in that state, we could make a difference. And in 2014, we were the only southern state that sent an incumbent extremist Republican governor home. Sent him home. We never endorsed the other candidate.

Ralph Nader: That's exactly right. What you're saying is exactly the formula that needs to spread all over the country.

Here are a couple of ideas. One is, last year we had an effort to get the vote out, called winningamerica.net. You might want to look at it. It's 23 civic leaders, many of them you know, who laid it out—the language, the strategies, the slogans, the rebuttals, and the get out to vote techniques. One of the slogans was, "Go vote for a raise, you've long earned it. It's about time. Go vote for a raise. You've long earned it. It's about time."

The other thing, I think, will fascinate you, besides looking at what we did on winningamerica.net, is there aren't going to be presidential debates in the normal sense because the Republicans have pulled out. So that leaves a wonderful opportunity for presidential debates in six swing states. Arizona, Georgia, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, Michigan. Six swing states.

So in six cities—and who doesn't want a presidential debate in their city? In six cities, the mayors, the city council, the unions, the Chamber of Commerce, civic groups, they all want a presidential debate to come to their city. And so we've put out a call for mayors to organize invitation committees involving the Urban League, League of Women Voters, NAACP, Hispanic groups, good government groups, to get the candidates to come to the cities.

Now, since it's swing states, it's going to be very hard for people like Trump and Biden to say no in swing states, especially if left-right demands from the cities are conveyed to them. And all people in these cities want presidential debates. It gives them national TV coverage with audiences from 50 to 100 million people. And that way you can get the questions asked that are never asked on these choreographed RNC, DNC presidential debates. And you can get the issues, and you can fire up the students in the schools and excite people to go out to vote and fulfill your purposes. What do you think of that?

William Barber: Well, I think it's a powerful model. I think the more we can do to have real debates and not stuff that's pre-programmed and nice and just turns on issues that really don't even matter to people who are most hurting in this country that have actually turned off. As I said, the study that we did said, the number-one reason poor and low-wage voters weren't voting at their strength was because nobody talks to them. Nobody talks about their issues. There wasn't even transportation or voter suppression. Those were two of the reasons, but they weren't the top reason.

The top reason was nobody talks to them. We're thinking about how to do a similar presidential. I want to look at that model that you have. But here's the catch in all of it. And I say this even to my progressives and so-called liberal friends and union folk and civil rights groups. Even too often they don't say the word "poor" and "low-wage". That's the problem. It's a deafening silence. It's a language void. It's almost as though there's a fear.

When we decided we were going to launch the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival, I had folk call me and said, well, you don't want to call it a poor people's campaign because poor people will be offended. I said, the poor people are the ones that told us to name it that, because they're tired of being ignored. Low-wage folk are tired of being ignored.

When I went up to West Virginia and met women who are low-wage workers, who, on Tuesdays, sell tacos to people passing by so that they can have enough money to help each other during their menstrual cycles, and they told me to say it just like that, those folks are tired of being ignored.

When we went down to Alabama, they were trying to mobilize a labor union at the Amazon plant, and the leader of Amazon was standing against them. And these are folk that want not only a living wage, but want fair wages, that what they should be earning in their plant compared to what other folk are earning. Too often, the conversation will say things like, well, we want to help those who are fighting for the American dream. No, those who are poor and low-wage. We want to help workers, but they don't say poor and low-wage.

If we cannot say the word that really represents where people are—people are poor and people are low wages, 135 million of them, children and adults, whatever debates we have, what I'm pushing for, what our movement is saying, is if those debates don't talk specifically and directly to poor and low-wage people, then they are missing the most powerful possible voting bloc in this country that has not been touched.

Celinda Lake, you know her as a major poster. And the other day, looking at what we're talking about, she said, anybody that knows that there are a million people in a state that could be already registered, and you're losing or winning that state by 10,000 or 20,000 votes and you don't intentionally reach out to them, you're either foolish or politically suicidal, one or the other.

Ralph Nader: Yeah. She knows what she's talking about. You're absolutely accurate. This abolition of the word poor started big time with the Clinton Administration. All they would talk about is the middle class, middle class, middle class. They had surveys saying that the television news doesn't like to cover poor people's plight and activity, so we have to just talk about the middle class. But you've turned that around more than anybody in the country. You've got to face reality.

William Barber: But let me just say this, because I'm hard on myself as well. And here's the other piece of that. Yes, we know this whole welfare reform, you can reform welfare, but without even providing folk the work and the work that kind of pay—Martin called it slave wages. People forget slavery was full employment. And guess what, if you did not enjoy the fruit of your own labor, it's because you didn't make anything.

And in the Constitution of the state of North Carolina, fusion coalition politicians in 1860, 1870, when they rewrote the Constitution, Ralph, they put this language in the preamble. “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all persons are created equal, endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, among which are life, liberty, and the enjoyment of the fruit of their own labor.”

And the reason they put that in there, it was a prescription against slavery, but it was also a prescription against people working for low wages. That was in 1800s. So here we are today and, yes, the politicians have done it, but there's something even worse to me. The Pew Foundation did a study two years ago of 50,000 sermons preached in the American pulpit. And when they examined them, poverty, which was the number one issue of Jesus and the prophets, did not even register in those sermons.

In the predominantly white church, the sermons that registered the most was talking about doctrine, like what do you believe about heaven and so forth. In the African American church, praise and worship. But the thing that the prophets and Jesus focused on, the poor, the least of these, those in the margin, didn't even register.

So when the religious cultist loses its prophetic voice, that has a deadening impact on society, sometimes even greater than the political, because it's an undercut at the moral fabric of the nation, which is why in our coalition, we are mobilizing poor, low-wage folk, but also religious leaders, regardless of their faith, who have constituencies and advocates. And that's who's standing together. In fact, every coordinating committee has to have three chairs—a poor and low-wage person, a moral religious leader with constituency, and an advocate.

Again, if your audience joins us on March the 2nd all over the country, we start at 10 o'clock for gathering, at 11 o'clock—you can find us because all of the states we're at. We'll be at the state capitals.

Ralph Nader: Before we conclude what would you like our audience to do by way of resources, volunteer time for the Poor People's Campaign, launched on March 2nd, Saturday when this program goes up, Is the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) very influential with very senior legislators? Are they full-throated behind your Poor People's Campaign in the coming months?

William Barber: Well, I don't know yet if any group is, and I tend not to limit my conversations to black or white, because one of the great narratives we have to get past is that poverty isn't a black issue or a minority issue. What I'm saying is we are meeting with them and pushing, We're saying to the Progressive Caucus, Hispanic Caucus, Black Caucus, this is where over 43% of this country is, and we need a full push.

We have a bill now, a resolution that people can sign up on. It was introduced by Barbara Lee and Primila Jayapal, Jamie Raskin and a number of others. It's a resolution called the Third Reconstruction: Ending Poverty and Low Wages. It's a resolution to say, if you have the resolve to even raise this issue, sign off on this resolution. We know it's not the bill, but if you don't have the resolve, you're never going to get to the bill.

I think we had about 60 persons to sign. That's beginning so far. We're pushing that because we want to know where folks stand on this issue. So we're pushing for more of them to be full-throated, fully engaged. But what we know and what poor and low-wage folk know and religious leaders, is we have to be fully engaged first. And so this is an offensive effort, Ralph. This is where poor and low-wage folk are saying, wait a minute, the stones that the builders rejected have a power now to be the chief cornerstone in building a third reconstruction.

We have power that we have not even used fully. And it's time for us to say, no more. No more silence. No more sitting on the sidelines. There's nowhere in the world we're going to have this power. And listen, we don't even have to mobilize 80% of it, or 90 or 50. Just 20% in most states. In many states, under 10% changes the political outcome.

So if your folk want to be involved for mobilization, for helping us with gathering the 6000 people we're going to be training, they would go to www.poorpeoplescampaign.org. And on that site, they will see a text. They'll text the word moral to a number. If they want to give something for the organization part, the mobilization, the spending, go to www.breachrepairers.org. And donate there and designate it for this mobilization, for the mass moral march on state capitals and the launching of this 40-plus-week campaign. That's how they can help.

We want all people to join. If you're poor, if you're low-wage, if you're a religious person, if you're a non-religious person but you believe in the moral arc of the universe, if you're an advocate, if you are a person of wealth, but you understand that with that wealth comes responsibility and that you cannot sit on the sideline and excuse yourself from this fight for a more just society, then join us.

And lastly, if death bothers you, especially the death of innocent people, where 800 people a month are dying from the ravages, the stress, the pain and the violence of abolishable and unnecessary poverty and low wages, it does not have to be. And together we can build a third reconstruction to stop it.

Ralph Nader: No doubt. I fully support what you're saying. And listeners, you should seriously contemplate participating in time. And if you can, in resources. And I'm very glad, Bishop Barber, you're including Congress here as an essential institution to make things happen, but only when they feel the heat from organized people in states all over the country.

Launched on March 2nd, the Poor People's Campaign in over 30 states. Thank you very much, Bishop Barber. And do stay in touch, because a lot of Progressive citizen groups are not connected to what you're trying to do, which could transform the result in November. And they need to be

connected with your people and your organizers because they have a lot of good ideas, a lot of time and a lot of people who are members in those over 30 states for your campaign.

William Barber: We will do so. Thank you so much, Brother Nader. And thank you for all you've done in history and continue to do to lift up the lives of people who are often left out. Thank you so much.

Steve Skrovan: We've been speaking with Bishop William Barber. We will link to the Poor People's Campaign at ralphnaderradiohour.com.

Up next, we speak to a reporter who has uncovered a \$2 billion Medicare heist. But first, let's check in with our corporate crime reporter, Russell Mokhiber.

Russell Mokhiber: From the National Press Building in Washington, D.C., this is your *Corporate Crime Reporter Morning Minute* for Friday, March 1, 2024. I'm Russell Mokhiber.

Eliezer Yudkowsky says that every single person we know and love will soon be dead. They will be murdered by rebellious, self-aware machines. "The difficulty is people do not realize we have a shred of a chance that humanity survives," Yudkowsky told the *Guardian* newspaper. Yudkowsky is the lead researcher at a nonprofit called Machine Intelligence Research Institute in Berkeley, California. "If you put me to a wall," he told the *Guardian*, "and force me to put probabilities on things, I have a sense that our current remaining timeline looks more like 5 years than 50 years. Could be 2 years, could be 10." By remaining timeline, Yudkowsky means until we face the machine wrought end of all things.

For the *Corporate Crime Reporter*, I'm Russell Mokhiber.

Steve Skrovan: Thank you, Russell. Welcome back to the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*. I'm Steve Skrovan, along with David Feldman and Hannah, Ralph and the rest of the team.

\$2 billion is missing from Medicare. Who done it? David?

David Feldman: Dan Diamond is a national health reporter for the *Washington Post*, focused on accountability, federal agencies and public health. He joined the *Post* in 2021 after covering the Trump Administration for *Politico*, where he won a George Polk Award for investigating political interference in the pandemic response.

Welcome to the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*, Dan Diamond.

Dan Diamond: Thank you so much for having me on the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*.

Ralph Nader: Thank you very much, Dan. The title of your article, which was a blockbuster, is, quote, "US investigates alleged Medicare fraud scheme estimated at 2 billion, with a B, dollars". We'd like you to explain this \$2 billion fraud to our listeners who may be disbelieving, but really, listeners, it's very true, and it's just the tip of the iceberg.

Dan Diamond: Well, Ralph, I would say that first, I have been pestering lawmakers over the past week or so since our story published for their reactions and response. And there do seem to be lawmakers of both major political parties who are upset by this. And Medicare fraud does seem to be animating, at least on Capitol Hill, some interest.

I can't speak for the White House, but yes, walking through our investigation, which I did with Lauren Weber and Dan Keating here at the *Post*. Several weeks ago, we got a tip from a group of Accountable Care Organizations (ACOs). You and your co-hosts may know what those are, Ralph. I'm not sure our listeners do.

These are doctors and hospitals who have incentives to deliver high-quality, low-cost healthcare. And they get bonuses from the federal government if it looks like they're doing that. But if it looks like they're delivering healthcare that is high-cost, they get penalized at the end of each year. They're responsible for a group of patients in their community.

So these Accountable Care Organizations all over the country started to notice a trend that they couldn't explain, that their patients appeared to be using massive numbers of urinary catheters, specifically two kinds of intermittent urinary catheters. These are devices where if you are incontinent and need to relieve pressure on your bladder, you might use several of these catheters per day. These Medicare beneficiaries all across the country, according to the billing records, were suddenly using many millions of dollars more in each of these communities and collectively, hundreds of millions of dollars across the country, if not billions of urinary catheter orders.

So these Accountable Care Organizations, their doctors, their executives, started looking in and realized that these patients who appeared to be using the catheters were not ordering them, were not receiving them. No one really wanted these catheters. So they brought the tip to us and they shared it with some other media folks as well. And we did talk to patients who had received these bills and confirmed as much that they did not want these products. They never ordered them. They never got any in the mail.

And the link appears to be seven companies around the country that sprung up very quickly and started doing the same scheme. I say scheme, I should note that it's all alleged, but the evidence is strong here that these companies had real patient data, using real physicians, too, to place these orders for catheters that nobody wanted, needed or received.

And this was first brought to the attention of Medicare many months ago. Ralph, you talked about how the federal officials here are overwhelmed. This was on their radar screen for quite some time. We were able to confirm that the federal agency involved in healthcare billings, Health and Human Services, as well as the FBI, are investigating this right now. While they wouldn't confirm that on the record, we have sources who are able to describe the investigation, and it does appear to be a ring of billing that is in the neighborhood of \$2 billion, if not more.

Ralph Nader: What kind of auditing system does Medicare have in the federal government? Where are the auditors? We live in a computer age. This pattern of incredible surge over one year should have been ringing bells 24 hours a day. Where are the watchdogs?

Dan Diamond: That's our question, too. I think this was first on the radar of some patients and officials over a year ago. So why was it allowed to continue? And Medicare officials have not given us answers on the record on that. If anything, they will still not confirm that there's an investigation going on.

But the suggestion is, Ralph, that maybe some of this continued almost as a baiting of the hook, that even though it looked like some of these payments were going out, the payments were instead going into escrow. They weren't going to these companies sending the bills while investigators spent weeks, months trying to figure out who was behind them. I'm not sure that that's the case, but that's one explanation for why this might have continued longer than it otherwise should have.

I think a second possibility here is that different companies ramped up their billing at different times. So there were some that ramped up billing in 2022. There are others that ramped up billing in 2023. And even as some of these have potentially been caught and put on hold, there may have been other companies that sprung up as well.

But you would think, to your point about the auditing and the automated systems, that once this scheme was detected, it doesn't matter whether it was company A, B or C, you'd be on the lookout and able to stop it in the future. So that does raise the question for us—why did it continue and reach this huge total of billings?

Ralph Nader: This raises some questions. One of the reasons is that we worked very hard in 1974 to get a strengthened Freedom of Information Act through, and it can only be enforced by the media and the citizenry. The government doesn't enforce the Freedom of Information Act, and I think it could produce a lot of inside information that could blow this whole massive fraud on Medicare and Medicaid wide open.

Here's another question. How did these fly-by-night companies—by the way, these seven companies look like shell corporations,. They disappear or they're sold for a small amount of money so the culprits can jump ship, leave the company that's sold in other hands. How did they get the names of all these elderly beneficiaries of Medicare?

Dan Diamond: Another great question that we're trying to get an answer to as well. There have been data breaches over the past number of years in healthcare. This would suggest a massive data breach. There were hundreds of thousands of patients who appear to be implicated in this, their data being used for these apparently false catheter orders. So that would speak to a significant breach.

There was a major breach of Medicare data in the past two years involving hundreds of thousands of patients. We don't know if that was linked to this specific case, but you're also hitting on, Ralph, the companies that pop up and go away. Some of these companies we know, and my colleague,

Lauren Weber, tracked down and talked to some of the folks involved. There had been what appeared to be legitimate Medicare billing companies operating very small scale, that changed hands, that sold their business, sold their legitimate storefront to the folks who then immediately ramped up these fraudulent billings.

We spoke to the former owner of a company called Pretty in Pink. She said she sold the company for about \$50,000 a year ago. That company that she sold for \$50,000 was then linked to over \$260 million in catheter bills last year. So there were companies that had been around for some time that were then coopted for the catheter billing that we've seen.

Ralph Nader: Another question is, was it easier for these companies to engage in their fraud with elderly beneficiaries under Medicare Advantage, which we call Medicare disadvantage, compared to elderly beneficiaries in traditional Medicare? Did you distinguish any difference?

Dan Diamond: I don't think we know that yet. We've spoken to Medicare beneficiaries in traditional Medicare who were caught up in this, and we've seen folks in Medicare Advantage as well. We're putting together a picture of all the folks who have got in touch with us.

And if there are people listening to this to whom this sounds familiar, they're welcome to reach out to me at dan.diamond@washpost.com. Or you can find me online, Dan Diamond. We're trying to figure out if there are patterns or trends. So far, too early to say whether a certain insurer, a certain population and part of the country is more at risk here than others.

Ralph Nader: Let's say you're a reimbursor working for Medicare in the Department of Health and Human Services, and across your desk comes a huge bill for hundreds of urinary catheters to one beneficiary. How could you not catch that? Is everything on algorithm, just bill in, pay out?

Dan Diamond: I'm just speculating here because we don't have all the reporting. I think there are a couple of things going on.

First, the number of Medicare beneficiaries who use these catheters often would get hundreds at a time. There was a population of about 50,000 people, we'll say, across the country, who routinely were using these catheters. So the initial spike might have been harder to pick up if it was truly, as we believe, patients all over the country.

As this was first beginning in 2022, it might not have been obvious that there was quite a surge. But by 2023, yes, it should have been pretty obvious for several reasons. First, the data that you're pointing to, Ralph, and second, that patients started noticing and calling in, calling the Medicare fraud line, reporting these claims.

So one would think that somewhere at Medicare, there was the alert that this was a scheme to be looking out for. On the state level, several states began last year to issue warnings. The State of Hawaii, the State of Oklahoma, among others, saying, watch out, Medicare beneficiaries, for these catheter fraud schemes. So that was nine months ago at this point.

Medicare itself, nationally, were not aware of any similar warnings or action, at least publicly. Again, they may have been doing things behind the scenes. They may have been wanting to bait the trap for these potential fraudsters. And maybe that's why they didn't say anything. But still, it raises real questions why they have waited so long to do anything and why it takes news coverage in February 2024 to put a spotlight on something that's been going on for 18 months.

Ralph Nader: Well, you're right. There's something going on over the years in the federal government, whether Republican or Democrat that is, to put it mildly, sluggish at this huge heist that's been going on on Medicare and Medicaid.

Dan Diamond: This investigation really activated me and my colleagues. Ever since the first tip came in, I think we've talked every single day about some aspect of this investigation. So I can't promise that we're going to be doing certain stories, but we have a number of threads that we're pulling on for follow-up stories.

And I feel like it's a huge issue. If there's a \$2 billion Medicare fraud scheme that no one's paying attention to and you kind of stumble onto it, it just made me wonder as a reporter, what else is there that is being missed and, with a little bit of sunshine, could be pulled into the light?

Ralph Nader: Hannah?

Hannah Feldman: Do Medicare and Medicaid and the related government offices, offer whistleblower rewards like the SEC does? Is there a mechanism to incentivize people to blow the whistle on companies pulling off these frauds?

Dan Diamond: Great question that I don't have an answer to. I don't know, but I'll now try and find an answer. I know that there are various protections for staff who blow whistles, but in terms of incentives, I think there might be, but I'd only be speculating. I don't know for sure.

Ralph Nader: The, Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC), as Hannah said, provide incentives and it's working quite well, actually. And the auto safety agency is trying to work out its own statutory authorization for whistleblower awards. And then there's the federal False Claims Act of 1986, I believe, which has given incentives, Hannah, to government officials to blow the whistle on corporate fraud on the government. And it's brought in over \$70 billion so far, with a B. So that is used.

And there are quite a few law firms who specialize in this, and they're driving the use of the federal False Claims Act, which is supported by Republican Senator Grassley and was enacted with the help of Democrat Congressman Howard Berman from California. So that points to Dan's indication that it's not just some Democrats interested in it, but there have been some Republicans.

Before we conclude, Dan, is there anything else you want to say that we haven't asked you about?

Dan Diamond: This was comprehensive. I should say, I am not someone who has spent much of his reporting career on Medicare fraud. I'm learning as we're going, which might be obvious in

some of the answers to your questions. These are topics I've been familiar with but never really studied. My beat has been somewhat different, but my interest has really piqued here.

The lack of enforcement is a big question for me. And whether there are other schemes out there that we can try to work to uncover this year. That is a goal for me. So these are topics that I'm trying to get smarter on, and the questions, and suggestions you've brought on this call are helpful to me. So I'm grateful for the time.

Ralph Nader: Well, thank you, Dan. One of the biggest schemes is Medicare Disadvantage, which the Justice Department is prosecuting a piece of. And these don't involve shell companies. They involve giant health insurance companies that have been allowed by Congress to corporatize more and more of Medicare.

They're now over 50% with their massive deceptive advertising, luring elderly people into Medicare Disadvantage, which is basically corporate health insurance, with all the problems of overcharging, denying benefits, requiring bureaucratic approval of doctors for procedures and so on, and it's also subsidized by traditional Medicare beneficiaries. So that's a big one for you to take a look at someday.

Thank you very much. We've been talking with Dan Diamond, investigative reporter for the *Washington Post*, who produced, with his team, Lauren Weber and Dan Keating, the report on February 9, 2024, in the *Washington Post*, "U.S. investigates alleged Medicare fraud scheme estimated at \$2 billion". Just the tip of the iceberg. Thank you very much, Dan Diamond

Dan Diamond: Thank you so much. I've enjoyed this conversation.

David Feldman: I have a quick question for Ralph as a follow-up.

Does medical debt affect your credit rating? If not, shouldn't senior citizens ignore any bill, anything they get from a hospital? Shouldn't they ignore all bill collectors and just stop paying their bills?

Ralph Nader: It does affect your credit rating. That's why Danbury Hospital, filed hundreds of lawsuits against their patient debtors. It's a small hospital. Just to give you an example what's going on around the country, they load up the small claims courts and the superior courts with these. Canadians are stunned when you tell them that patients are sued by their hospital. They just can't believe there's a society so callous, so recessive, so indifferent, so apathetic, south of the border.

David Feldman: Well, in New York, I think it's against the law for medical debt to affect your credit rating.

Ralph Nader: Well, that must be a recent law.

David Feldman: Yeah. In terms of culture jamming, I hate to use the term artificial intelligence, but can't you just ask AI to write a letter for you questioning the bill, and instead of paying it, just

throw back paperwork? Isn't it worth your time? If you have a bill of \$600, why not pop an AI generated letter questioning the bill into the mail and postpone the payment for as long as possible and create a paper trail so that when they take it to small claims court, they'll just drop it?

Ralph Nader: You want an answer?

David Feldman: Yes.

Ralph Nader: Okay. The seller goes to a bill collector. These are hard knuckle guys. They call you up and they say, do you want your credit score to drop? Do you want your credit rating to crash? It doesn't matter what New York State says. It's what they say on the phone to scare the hell out of people.

And then who has the time? There are only a few David Feldmans who have the time to do this, back and forth threats that are executed. They're not just kidding. They can put in a report into one of the three credit score companies that are secretive and have more data on you than any dictatorship has had on its people, and they can ruin your credit score.

Hannah Feldman: Ralph, not to be pedantic, but the correct collective noun is David Speldman, like attorneys general.

Steve Skrovan: We've been speaking with Dan Diamond. We will link to his work at ralphnaderradiohour.com.

I want to thank our guests again, Bishop William Barber and Dan Diamond. For those of you listening on the radio, that's our show. For you podcast listeners, stay tuned for some bonus material we call "The Wrap Up", featuring Francesco DeSantis with, "In Case You Haven't Heard". A transcript of this program will appear on the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour* Substack site soon after the episode is posted.

David Feldman: Subscribe to us on our *Ralph Nader Radio Hour* YouTube channel. And for Ralph's weekly column, it's free, go to nader.org. For more from Russell Mokhiber, go to corporatecrimereporter.com.

Steve Skrovan: The American Museum of Tort Law has gone virtual. Go tortmuseum.org to explore the exhibits, take a virtual tour and learn about iconic tort cases from history.

David Feldman: We have a new issue of the *Capitol Hill Citizen*. It's out now. To order your copy of the *Capitol Hill Citizen*, Democracy Dies in Broad Daylight, go to capitolhillcitizen.com.

Steve Skrovan: And remember to continue the conversation. After each show, go to the comments section at ralphnaderradiohour.com and post a comment or question on this week's episode.

David Feldman: The producers of the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour* are Jimmy Lee Wirt and Matthew Marran. Our executive producer is Alan Minsky.

Steve Skrovan: Our theme music, "Stand Up, Rise Up", was written and performed by Kemp Harris. Our proofreader is Elisabeth Solomon. Our associate producer is Hannah Feldman. Our social media manager Steven Wendt.

David Feldman: Join us next week on the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*. And I know I speak for the entire crew here and all our listeners, happy birthday, Ralph, and thank you.

Ralph Nader: Thank you, David. Thank everybody who makes this program possible. We know their names and so do our listeners.