Health care reform

The issue is health care—affordable, accessible health care. We watch our parents or uninsured friends and family members go without necessary medicines and needed medical attention. We fear what will happen to our own health and that of our families if we become unemployed. If health care costs continue at their current level, we wonder about our ability to keep fully funded benefits in the next round of negotiations. We have a good health care benefits package now, but, as MSU employees, we are fully aware that our “employer-paid” benefits are ultimately paid by us through lower wages or reductions in other benefits.

Patient’s Bill of Rights
There has been quite a bit of talk about legislation that would protect patients who are in conflict with their HMOs and insurance companies. In 1997, Michigan passed a limited Patients’ Bill of Rights package that provides consumers with information on their insurance plans and establishes a grievance and appeals process for denial of treatment coverage and/or preexisting conditions.

The CTU supported similar national bipartisan reform in 2000. That legislation is now stalled as a result of interference from the Administration, HMOs and health insurers.

Although such packages are a good and necessary place to begin—and we need to make sure our candidates support them—they only assist those who are already lucky enough to have health care insurance. They do nothing to solve the problem of uninsured and underinsured workers who can’t afford their own coverage, laid off workers or others. Because these people still need and use the same expensive health care system we do—without the ability to pay—this cost shift is a very important issue for workers with insurance.

Pharmaceutical companies: profiting from pain
Escalating prescription drug costs is another area that must be addressed. Americans pay the highest prices in the world for prescriptions—an average of 30% more than Canadians pay for the exact same drugs. The companies increased our prices by another 17.1% last year while they enjoyed the highest profit margins of any industry, more than triple the average of all Fortune 500 corporations. While senior citizens are amongst those hardest hit, we are all suffering from this situation.

Huge pharmaceutical companies spend far more money on marketing and advertising their products than on trying to develop new and better drugs to meet the nation’s medical needs, according to Profiting from Pain: Where Prescription Drug Dollars Go, a report by Families USA. The nine publicly traded U.S. drug companies spent $45.4 billion on marketing and advertising in 2001 and only $19.1 billion on research and development, according to the report.

No lobbying group is as well financed and well connected as the drug industry, with 625 registered lobbyists on its payroll. The industry makes huge campaign donations, topping $26 million in the last election cycle.

An election issue
Politicians are hearing the demands of their constituents, and, it seems, each and every one has a suggestion to make about the situation. Even those in the pockets of the prescription drug companies now say they are for reform. The problem is in sorting out the reforms will help working families from those that only add more money to industry pockets.

Several lawmakers have proposed truly innovative changes that would make prescriptions more affordable. For over
example, in July the “Greater Access to Affordable Pharmaceuticals Act,” was introduced in the Senate (S.812). It would seriously inhibit the ability of drug companies to delay the introduction of generics. Other proposals would facilitate imports of medication from Canada or encourage state agencies to buy in bulk in order to get discounts like those enjoyed by the Canadian government. Another proposal would prohibit tax breaks on the money that a pharmaceutical company devotes to advertising.

Health care reform is a CT issue. It is our issue, and it is time that we demand action from our elected officials. We need to ask the candidates what they are doing to make health care available to working families.