



December 2009

ANNUAL REPORT FROM THE CHAIR

ORGANIZATIONAL MATTERS

◆ Our last annual business meeting was held on December 7, 2008, at the Restauration Walden. The past year was reviewed, officers were elected to the executive committee for 2009, and plans were made for the coming year.

◆ With the new U.S. administration and the changing mission for American Voices Abroad Berlin, we considered the possibility of changing our name. At the annual business meeting in December, a possible name change was discussed, preceded by several emails to the entire membership. Ultimately, we could neither reach a consensus about a new name nor even decide whether to undertake a name change at all. Balloting remained inconclusive, so we remain American Voices Abroad (AVA) Berlin.

We did, however, decide to poll the membership about the future of AVA-Berlin. We asked everyone to take the time to send us their thoughts. In the words of ISABEL COLE, who spoke on behalf of AVA-Berlin at the inauguration celebration at the Goya: “Those of us who have spent the past eight years protesting and criticizing must now, more than ever, learn how to protest and how to criticize constructively, how to support, as well as how to contribute ideas and inspiration in the difficult times ahead.”

One of the results of this poll, namely the suggestion of getting involved in a broader range of issues, can be seen under SPEECHES DELIVERED, LETTERS WRITTEN AND PETITIONS SIGNED ON BEHALF OF AVA-Berlin below, where items 4, 5, 6, and 7 all address health care reform and a robust public option.

◆ DAVID MACBRYDE continues as our mailing list administrator. Contact DAVID at davidmacbryde@web.de to make any changes in your address or to add someone to the mailing list. He is also the person to contact if you would like to announce something that you are publishing, performing or exhibiting.

◆ KAREN AXELRAD has continued to photograph AVA-Berlin events. Be sure to see her photos of our 2008 annual business meeting at:

www.pbase.com/karenaxe/ava_berlin

as well as the photos that KAREN presented at the Inauguration Party at the Goya:

www.flickr.com/photos/karenaxe/sets/72157620914732179/

◆ JON WOLFE continues as our web master. Check us out at www.avaberlin.org. This is where you can check what we're doing and how newcomers and visitors to Berlin can find us.

◆ KAREN AXELRAD and ANN WERTHEIMER revised our leaflet several times this year. Note KAREN's improved AVA-Berlin logo, the same logo that appears at the top of your mail from us.

◆ The dues for full membership with voting rights in AVA-Berlin are still €30 per year, or a self-assessed smaller amount if necessary. Details are in the treasurer's report. If you are active in AVA-Berlin, you know how frugal we are with your money. If you are not active, make up for it by helping us finance our activities by sending us your dues. Just go to www.avaberlin.org and click on DUES at the top on the right.

◆ ANN WERTHEIMER continues as liaison to the United for Peace and Justice coalition, which we joined in 2006. As a local group without any employees, we pay \$50 per year for membership. We pay these dues so that the UFPJ coalition “can stand on its own feet and remain sustainable, so that we may all stay connected, sharing resources and coordinating our work...” Among the many groups that belong to the UFPJ coalition and that you might recognize are the American Friends Service Committee, Global Exchange, Peace Action, and the Tikkun Community.

◆ We continue to support Connection e.V. with modest donations for André Shepherd's campaign to be officially recognized in Germany as an asylum seeker. See www.connection-ev.de.

◆ After several years of first Thursdays at Barcomi's deli in Mitte, we have moved our Stammtisch. Barcomi's needed to close at 9 pm, and that was too early for us. So until further notice, we are meeting at the Seerose, Mehringdamm 47, in Kreuzberg, in the room in the back, as always on the first Thursday of the month. The current venue for the Stammtisch can always be confirmed at www.avaberlin.org.

◆ On August 6, we tried a different format for the Stammtisch – we prepared a theme for the evening, namely health care reform in the United States, a project that we had been working on—see our health care action letters below. Some of the twenty-four AVAers who were there are captured in KAREN AXELRAD's photos of the lively discussion; see:

www.flickr.com/photos/karenaxe/3797939860/in/set-72157621845475653/

Our second themed Stammtisch (on December 3) focused on the Copenhagen United Nations Climate Change Conference, December 7-18. Just what is at stake in Copenhagen? What solutions are being proposed, what are their pros and cons, and how can we best understand the negotiations? What is the Obama administration's position? And how can we take action? Though its goals are being toned down, much is riding on this conference. See <http://en.cop15.dk/>. ISABEL COLE and PHIL HILL made interesting presentations and the entire Stammtisch discussed these questions.

SPEECHES DELIVERED, LETTERS WRITTEN AND PETITIONS SIGNED ON BEHALF OF AVA-BERLIN

◆ On January 20, at the Inauguration party at the Goya, ISABEL COLE delivered the following speech on behalf of AVA Berlin. We received many comments about the speech and thank ISABEL for composing and delivering it. See:

www.pbase.com/karenaxe/inauguration

for KAREN AXELRAD's photos, and specifically the picture of ISABEL under our logo

www.pbase.com/karenaxe/image/108376116.

"I am very grateful for the opportunity to say a few words here tonight on behalf of American Voices Abroad – Berlin. Our group was founded in February 2003 as Americans in Berlin against the War. We are a non-partisan group open to critical Americans of all persuasions; not just an antiwar group, we focus

on civil liberties, justice and responsible US foreign policy. It is a way for those of us who live abroad to remain engaged and active as US citizens, to reconcile notions of global and American citizenship. Crucial to this kind of citizenship is intellectual curiosity, critical thinking and openness to political discussion and debate, whether on the Stammtisch or the policy level; this is what American Voices Abroad–Berlin has sought to uphold throughout years when critical thinking was often denigrated as unpatriotic. Little did we dream that we would one day welcome a new president who would so persuasively embody and encourage this kind of citizenship.

I am profoundly grateful for this historical moment. It is a moment which many of us have been awaiting for eight long years. Let me speak on a personal level, though I believe my feelings are shared by many, not only in our organization or in the antiwar movement. These have been bitter years that have challenged my faith in America as a country governed, at the very least, by common sense and common decency. In many ways, unreal-seeming years which I spent counting down toward the unreal-sounding year 2009. At the same time, my expectations were almost cynically low. What would January 20, 2009 bring? A lesser evil? At least the semblance of normality? Of sanity? At any rate, it would bring an end. It was much harder to imagine this day as a beginning. That, to me, is a measure of the demoralization of the Bush years; even those of us in opposition found it more and more difficult to imagine an America that rises above them. Barack Obama's first great accomplishment was to enable us to imagine this America. In this act of imagination, America has already risen above itself, taking an unexpected and important step toward overcoming a legacy of racism.

Who could have imagined that this Inauguration Day would follow so significantly on Martin Luther King's 80th birthday—a symbolic milestone followed by a real one, the painful reminder of promise tragically cut short followed by the celebration of promise realized? That it would follow on an election campaign in which America realized for the first time that the face it presents to the world could be a black face, or a woman's?

Over the past months we have already grown used to these remarkable developments. Now, I hope, we will also grow used to a new political culture, one that encour-

ages, rather than marginalizes, the notion of critical, active citizenship and genuine debate. Obama has inspired millions of Americans to become politically active, creating their own vibrant and diverse political initiatives far from the halls of Washington. His openness toward this sort of grassroots political engagement has the potential to truly rejuvenate our political system.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt once responded to the labor and civil rights activist A. Philip Randolph, "I agree with you, I want to do it, now make me do it." Now that we have a president with a similar gift for breaking down barriers, let us take up the challenge. Those of us who have spent the past eight years protesting and criticizing must now, more than ever, learn how to protest and criticize constructively, how to support, as well as how to contribute ideas and inspiration in the difficult times ahead.

But now, let us celebrate a moment that few of us ever imagined we would experience!"

◆ At the beginning of March, AVA-Berlin, along with United for Peace and Justice (of which we are a member group), the Center for Constitutional Rights, the National Lawyers Guild, Peace Action, Progressive Democrats, and many other groups and individuals, signed the following "Statement on Prosecution of Former High Officials" drafted by the Robert Jackson Steering Committee.
www.afterdowningstreet.org/robertjackson

"We urge Attorney General Eric Holder to appoint a non-partisan independent Special Counsel to immediately commence a prosecutorial investigation into the most serious alleged crimes of former President George W. Bush, former Vice President Richard B. Cheney, the attorneys formerly employed by the Department of Justice whose memos sought to justify torture, and other former top officials of the Bush Administration.

Our laws, and treaties that under Article VI of our Constitution are the supreme law of the land, require the prosecution of crimes that strong evidence suggests these individuals have committed. Both the former president and the former vice president have confessed to authorizing a torture procedure that is illegal under our law and treaty obligations. The former president has confessed to violating the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act.

We see no need for these prosecutions to be extraordinarily lengthy or costly, and no need to wait for the recommendations of a panel or "truth" commission when substantial evidence of the crimes is already in the public domain. We believe the most effective investigation can be conducted by a prosecutor, and we believe such an investigation should begin immediately."

◆ On May 31, Dr. George Tiller, one of the few doctors in the U.S. who performed abortions late in pregnancy, was murdered in Wichita, Kansas, in the foyer of his church as he was handing out the church bulletin. Moments after services had begun, Dr. Tiller was shot once with a handgun, the fourth doctor in the United States who performed abortions to be killed since 1993.

At the beginning of June, shortly after the murder, ANN WERTHEIMER, as chair of AVA-Berlin, sent the following note to President Obama: *"Many of your supporters, and I can speak for many U.S. citizens living abroad, hope that you will attend worship services at Dr. Tiller's Reformation Lutheran Church in Wichita next Sunday."*

◆ On June 29, AVA-Berlin sent the following letter (written on our behalf by CAROLYN PRESCOTT) to those in Congress involved in the health care debate. We also sent the letter to all AVAers so that we could forward it personally to our own Representative and Senators.

As a non-partisan group of Americans living abroad who remain engaged and active as U.S. citizens, we of American Voices Abroad Berlin¹ are following the debate about health care in the States with particular interest. We hope that Congress will examine various foreign plans - Germany, Britain, Scandinavia, Canada - in order to eliminate some of their weaknesses and focus on their strengths. Having experienced the health care system here in Germany, we feel we can contribute to the discussion by sharing some information about a system that achieves near universal coverage and high-quality health care at a significantly

1. American Voices Abroad Berlin (AVA-Berlin) is politically progressive and independent of all political parties. AVA-Berlin is opposed to preventive war and the Patriot Act. It is dedicated to fair elections, civil liberties and social and economic justice at home as well as to a foreign policy rooted in respect for international institutions and the rule of law.

lower cost than the American system.²

The German system³ has the following features:

- Health care coverage is mandatory. About 88% of the population is covered by one of over 200 nonprofit public insurance funds, but some people do purchase private insurance based on their circumstances or because of the extended coverage (such as private hospital rooms) offered by some private companies.

2. COMPARING COSTS: A PATIENT'S STORY

On March 17, 2008, while visiting friends in Berlin, Germany, Karen Hillmer fell down a steep flight of stairs at a subway station and broke many bones. Karen required five operations in a span of a few weeks, each operation involving surgeons from different specialties within orthopedic surgery. Karen spent a total of six weeks in the hospital. During that time, in addition to the surgery and round the clock skilled nursing care, she received physical therapy every day. On April 25, 2008, Karen was moved to a clinic in Berlin specializing in rehab medicine for geriatric patients. During the five weeks in this clinic, Karen received skilled nursing care, extensive physical therapy and occupational therapy each day. On May 29, 2008, Karen was able to fly back to the U.S.

The total bill from the hospital for all the care she received during her six-week stay was just over \$28,000. The bill from the rehab clinic was about \$11,000. (The dollar amounts given here are based on an exchange rate of about \$1.60 for 1 euro, the worst exchange rate ever for the dollar.) Thus, the final bill totaled \$39,000.

Karen required two follow-up operations after returning to the U.S. The most recent one was performed on her left elbow. It was done as an outpatient procedure with several x-rays and radiological therapy before the operation and extensive occupational therapy for about 18 days after the operation. The combined costs of this care, which took place over a period of about 3 weeks and did not include any inpatient care, was \$19,600. The operation only involved one surgeon working on one specific problem while each operation in Germany required several surgeons working together on different problems at the same time.

To summarize, 11 weeks of in-patient care and 5 complicated orthopedic operations in Germany came to \$39,000, while 3 weeks of out-patient care and one orthopedic operation in the U.S. came to \$19,600.

3. Two Sources of Information on the German System:

Reinhard Busse, M.D. M.P.H., Professor of Health Care Management, Berlin University of Technology and Charité—University Medicine Berlin
http://www.commonwealthfund.org/~media/Files/Resources/2008/Health%20Care%20System%20Profiles/Germany_Country_Profile_2008_2%20pdf.pdf

Uwe E. Reinhardt, James Madison Professor of Political Economy, Princeton University, Health Reform Without a Public Plan: The German Model, (Today's Economist), April 17, 2009.
<http://economix.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/04/17/health-reform-without-a-public-plan-the-german-model/>

- Premiums for the public option are levied based on income, or, in the case of children and the unemployed, are covered by government funds.

- A government health fund manages the distribution of collected premiums to the public option insurers based on assessment of actuarial risks of the individuals covered.

- No one in the public system can be excluded or charged excessively based on pre-existing conditions or their current state of health. Private insurance companies are also subject to certain requirements related to coverage of persons with ill health.

- Insurance is largely portable and considered by most to be affordable. In addition, as patients/consumers, we note the following:

- We choose our own doctors.

- We do not have long waiting times for consultations, diagnostic procedures, or surgeries and treatments.

- We seem to have access to the same advanced medical technologies and medications that are available in the U.S.

- We have very limited co-payments; we do pay a fee of 10 euros for each first doctor and dentist visit per quarter as well as 5 to 10 euros per pack of medications and 10 euros per inpatient day up to 28 days.

The German system is not perfect and continues to undergo changes in order to cover and contain costs. However, the underlying principle of the German system, that health care should be financed by individuals on the basis of their ability to pay but should be available to all who need it on roughly equal terms, has been maintained. There is a sense here that it is in everyone's practical and humanitarian interests to promote health and to care for the sick and injured in the society as a whole. We would encourage Americans to consider features of the German system on their merits rather than dismissing them with scare words like "socialist" or presenting them as too clumsily or expensively bureaucratic, as we know first-hand that they generally are not.

We strongly urge lawmakers to bring American health care up to the standard enjoyed by others in the developed world.

◆ On August 3, all AVAers received a second health care action letter (see D above for the first one) in the form of frequently asked questions. These FAQs, asked and answered by CAROLYN PRESCOTT and ANN WERTHEIMER, were accompanied by a letter to our Senators and Representatives:

Dear Representative / Senator _____,

After sending you a letter a few weeks ago about the German health care system, I realized that there are many unwarranted assumptions and unanswered questions about a health care system with a strong public option. Judging from the news, many Americans have questions about the details of such a system. So please take a look at the FAQs below, which I hope answers any questions. I am your constituent but also a member of American Voices Abroad Berlin (Germany), where I live, and I feel that a strong public option is a must.

Sincerely, your constituent, —

FAQs ABOUT HEALTH CARE COVERAGE IN GERMANY

Question: Why should we as Americans consider features of the German system in crafting our own health care reform?

Answer: In planning our own public health care system, we should investigate the strengths and weaknesses of many other systems. We can then choose the best of some of them and avoid the pitfalls of others.

Question: Does Germany have a single-payer system?

Answer: No, it is a hybrid system: a public plan and private plans. The public option covers about 90% percent of the German population, with most of the rest covered under private insurance.

Question: What does public option mean in Germany?

Answer: Germany has around two hundred nonprofit companies called sickness funds, which comprise the public option. Germans can select from these sickness funds, each of which provides their members with a comprehensive benefit package. The sickness funds are nonprofit entities; there is nevertheless competition for price and quality among them because the funds seek to survive and grow.⁴

Public option sickness funds may not refuse someone on the basis of a pre-existing condition or drop them if they become ill. A centralized agency administers

4. Interview with Kurt Lauterbach, in Frontline: Sick Around the World: Five Capitalist Democracies and How They Do It , Public Broadcasting System series, April 2008.
www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/sickaroundtheworld/interviews/lauterbach.html

a pool of money to sickness funds to cover their sicker patients; that is, they ensure that sickness funds have the means to cover the health needs of those people they carry who have chronic illnesses such as diabetes or intensive illnesses such as cancer.

Question: Is enrollment in the German system mandated? If so, who pays for people who can't pay?

Answer: Yes, health care coverage is mandatory; you must be covered by some plan, either public or private. Employed persons generally have half of their premiums paid by their employer. Unemployed persons remain members of the sickness funds they were in when employed. Their contributions are paid by federal and local governments. The contributions of retirees are paid by the pensioners themselves and by their pension funds. Thus, the public health insurance program redistributes from higher to lower income groups, from the healthy to the sick, from the young to the old, from the employed to the unemployed, and from those without children to those with children. The idea is that everybody's in it together, and nobody should be without health insurance.⁵

Question: How much does the average German pay for health care under the public option?

Answer: State health insurance contributions are based on your gross income (around 15.5% with an income cap), with employers and employees each paying about half of the premium. The individual's contribution is 8.2%; the employer pays the remaining 7.3%. In addition, Germans are now required to carry long-term nursing care insurance, which is charged at 2.2% of your gross income, with employers paying half.⁶

The income cap is \$62,781, or around \$5,232 per month (July 28, 2009 conversion rate). So if you make, for example, \$85,000 per year, your contribution would be the same as that of someone who makes \$62,781 per year,⁷ even though that would amount to a lower percentage of your income.

Benefits are commensurate with those of most major medical insurance plans in the U.S. and include basic dental care.

5. "Most Germans Happy with German Health Care," National Public Radio feature, reported by Richard Knox, produced by Jane Greenhalgh, June, 2008.
<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=91971406>

6. Krankenkassentarife, an independent website that provides information (in German) on the German health care laws, 2009:
www.krankenkassentarife.de/krankenkassen_grundlagen.htm

There are no deductibles and only minimal copayments. Again, premiums are set according to earnings rather than risk and are not affected by a member's marital status, family size, or health; they are the same for all members of a particular fund with the same earnings. In a household with two wage earners, each pays the full premium assessed by his or her sickness fund according to his or her income.

Question: How much are health care costs in Germany compared to those in the U.S.?

Answer: Health care costs for an entire country are measured in terms of the percentage of gross national product (GNP). In Germany that percentage is 10.7% of GNP, while in the U.S. it is 15.3% (2008 figures).⁷ When the costs for various treatments and procedures are compared, the costs in Germany average about a third of those for the same procedure or medication in the U.S.

Question: Are there waiting lists for surgeries, expensive treatments, etc. in Germany? Are high-tech diagnostic procedures and treatments readily available?

Answer: There is no waiting time in the case of acute illnesses and emergencies. Waiting times to see specialists and to undergo surgeries and treatments tend to be quite similar to those in the U.S. Elective surgeries have an average waiting time of one month. High-tech diagnostic procedures and treatments are readily available.

Question: Do doctors or dentists in Germany bear high costs for their medical education?

Answer: Medical and dental schools, like all other forms of higher education, are virtually free in Germany, requiring only the payment of administrative fees. Of course, medical students, like students in all fields, must pay for their own room and board. Young people who can't afford their room and board while they are getting an advanced degree are eligible for various kinds of public loans. Repeat: there is no tuition for medical or dental school, or any other advanced degree, in Germany. Tertiary education in Germany is virtually all public.

Germany has more physicians per capita than the United States, and physicians typically make less than in the States. For example, a family doctor in Ger-

many makes about two-thirds as much as he or she would in America.

Question: Do doctors or dentists in Germany bear high costs for malpractice insurance?

Answer: German doctors pay less for malpractice protection through medical protective associations rather than through for-profit medical malpractice insurance companies.

Question: How much are typical deductibles and co-pays for Germans under the public option insurance?

Answer: There are no deductibles. Under the public option, a patient pays 10 euros (about \$15 as of this writing) per quarter year; that is, 10 euros are paid for the first doctor's visit during a quarter of a year. If no visit is made during, let's say, January 1 through March 31, no payment is required. If there are many visits, the payment is still only 10 euros. The dentist costs another 10 euros for the first visit per quarter. In-patient hospital days now have a co-pay of 10 Euros per day up to 28 days. There are generally no further co-pays except for a few designated treatments; such as dental crowns, for example.

Question: Does public option insurance pay for medication?

Answer: Medications have co-payments of between 5 and 10 euros (around \$8 to \$15) per prescription.

Question: Do you pay your bills and get reimbursed, or does the insurance pay directly?

Answer: You submit your health insurance identification card to the doctor, dentist or hospital and make your copayment, if there is one. You do not see the bill.

Question: Is there rationing?

Answer: While doctors may feel some pressure to hold down costs, treatment decisions are not generally individually arbitrated through the sickness funds. Some treatment decisions may require evidence of need; for example, a dentist has to show the need for certain types of extensive gum treatments.

Under the law that applies to the German health care system, there is a Joint Federal Committee composed of representatives from associations of physicians, dentists, hospitals and sickness funds. The JFC assesses the effectiveness of traditionally covered services and of new diagnostic and therapeutic procedures. Cov-

7. Frontline: Sick Around the World: Five Capitalist Democracies and How They Do It , Public Broadcasting System series, April 2008.

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/sickaroundtheworld/etc/graphs.html>

erage guidelines are issued after public notice of the subjects under consideration, and comments by interested parties and experts enter into the decision-making. JFC decisions on procedures are made according to evidence-based criteria. Such criteria range from randomized, controlled clinical studies to consensus conferences and expert opinions. Since care under the law must correspond to the generally accepted standard of medical knowledge and the progress of medical science, clinical practice guidelines and prevailing practices are highly relevant for coverage guideline validity. In case of individual sickness fund denials of reimbursement of a treatment not yet addressed by a JFC guideline, patients may appeal to a special court that will consider the evidence; generally one does not need to hire a lawyer to go through this process. Thus there are checks on the power of the JFC to limit clinical autonomy⁸ There is no age rationing for any procedure.

To make this process somewhat more concrete, we offer a few examples of costs refused or limited versus those paid for by one or more sickness funds: Some disallowed treatments under the public option, for example, are homeopathic remedies, Vitamin B injections (except in the case of a proven deficiency), and Viagra (considered a lifestyle drug). In some cases, the sickness funds cover a basic need such as glasses or a hearing aid, but if the patient wants a top-of-the-line, in-the-ear hearing aid or designer glasses, he or she must supplement the basic amount paid by the sickness fund. A few examples of treatments that are fully covered in the German system are very expensive, end-of-life cancer drugs; mental health therapies and medications; and home care hospice services. In addition, some sickness funds pay for preventive measures such as up to 20 yoga sessions per year or Nordic walking courses, both of which have reportedly been shown through clinical trials to be beneficial in preventing certain illnesses or improving health.

Question: Is there a lot of bureaucracy?

Answer: Administration costs of the system, which is another way of referring to and measuring bureaucracy, account for about 6 percent of spending in the public option sickness funds (which again, cover about

90% of the population).⁹ Patients experience virtually no bureaucracy; they do not have to deal with any agent or financial paperwork. Among the private insurance companies in Germany, the administrative costs are around 17%. In the U.S. system, administrative costs are estimated at close to one-fifth, or 20%, of total costs. So bureaucracy is actually much less in the public option health care system.

Question: How many Germans go bankrupt in a year because of medical bills?

Answer: In Germany it is impossible to go bankrupt because of medical bills, since even if you declare bankruptcy, the social solidarity system pays for your medical care. The idea is, if you do have financial problems and a lot of worries for other reasons, you do not need to have another burden in not being able to pay medical bills.¹⁰

Question: If you lose your job or get sick and cannot work, what happens to your health insurance?

Answer: Health insurance continues with no change if you lose a job. Germans simply do not have this worry that they will be without coverage for themselves and their family members.

Question: If the public option is so good, why do some people choose private insurance?

Answer: About 10% of the population is covered under private insurance. Anyone who makes more than \$69,187 per year for at least a three-year period has the option of choosing private insurance.¹¹ People who are civil servants, self-employed or freelance also have this option, even if they do not meet the income requirement. For some people who are still young and healthy and earn high salaries, private health insurance may be (temporarily) cheaper than the public option. Others choose private insurance to ensure that they have certain privileges: a private room in case of hospitalization, payment for homeopathic remedies, or spa cures. Some people also supplement their public insurance with private insurance in order to gain these and other privileges.

Question: What are the problems of the German health care system?

Answer: There is pressure on the health care system because of the relatively high rate of unemployment

8. Ursula Weide, "Law and the German Universal Health Care System: A Contemporary Overview," German Law Journal No. 8 (1 August 2005).

9. Frontline interview with Kurt Lauterbach.

10. Frontline interview with Kurt Lauterbach.

11. Krankenkassentarife website.

in Germany. Hospital personnel, including doctors, have demonstrated and lobbied in recent years to get higher allocations (and doctors have just won increases that average out to 7.8%, varying according to specialization and geographic area). Copayments were introduced a few years ago to try to bring more money into the system. Nonetheless, the German health care system dates back to 1883 and has proven to be both flexible and robust. During the last two decades, Germans have tweaked their system, on average, every three years in order to try to address problems and keep costs under control.

◆ At the end of August, AVA-Berlin sent the following letter to the White House (by traditional airmail):

Dear President Obama,
We are writing to you from Germany on behalf of American Voices Abroad Berlin, a political group here in Berlin that has supported you from the very beginning. We have written you occasionally, always with words of encouragement. Today we write to you to support a strong American plan for health care, a robust public option.

As citizens of the United States who live in Germany, we have benefited greatly from the German health care system, despite its occasional shortcomings. Based on our experiences with this system—which provides high quality, easily accessible, affordable universal coverage at 10.7% of GNP—we strongly support a similarly dependable system for our fellow citizens in the United States. (Please see attached FAQs about health care coverage in Germany.)

What we need is an American plan for health care that is strong enough to be an alternative to the private insurance companies, a plan that would control costs and that would be kept when you change jobs. This public option would provide insurance without preconditions, would not be revoked when you get sick, would have no outrageous deductibles and no lifetime caps. Such a robust public American plan would guarantee affordable care for all Americans

Without such a unified plan, Americans will continue to struggle—region by region, or even family by family—to obtain affordable coverage with which they can feel reasonably secure. Without a comprehensive plan, many gains can be rolled back through administrative fiat depending on which party is in the White House.

Under co-op or piecemeal legislation, Americans are likely to experience health care reform as destabilizing and to find themselves trying to solve problems individually that really need to be addressed systemically.

This is the simple idea behind health care plans in most developed democracies: an umbrella institution that manages coverage for the benefit of patients and their doctors. It might be single-payer, or it might be a hybrid system like in Germany. There are many possible structures, but in any case, it is a dependable public health care system that controls costs and reduces bureaucracy.

A great democracy deserves great health care—and creating a strong public American plan for health care is the greatest domestic challenge that you will ever face. Mr. President, please stay with the public option, and know that when you do, we will be supporting you with our letters, blogs, commentary on news websites, calls to our Representatives and Senators, and conversations with friends and acquaintances.

Sincerely,
Carolyn Prescott and Ann Wertheimer for American Voices Abroad-Berlin

◆ Over the weekend of August 28-30, AVA-Berlin sent out the following Pressemitteilung:

Amerikaner in Berlin starten Kampagne für Gesundheitsreform in den USA

250 in Berlin lebende US-Amerikaner engagieren sich in einer eigenen Kampagne für die umstrittene Gesundheitsreform in den USA. Sie nutzen dabei ihre oft jahrelange Kenntnis des Systems der gesetzlichen Krankenversicherungen in Deutschland und anderen Ländern Westeuropas. „Wir erleben hier, dass ein gutes Gesundheitssystem für alle funktionieren kann“, erklärt Ann Wertheimer, Vorsitzende von American Voices Abroad (AVA)-Berlin. Diese Erkenntnis wollen die Mitglieder von AVA-Berlin Kongressabgeordneten und Senatoren in den USA nahe bringen. In einer groß angelegten Briefaktion informieren AVA-Berlin-Mitglieder Politiker in ihren jeweiligen Bundesstaaten über die Vorzüge, Kosten und Folgen eines Gesundheitssystems wie in Deutschland. AVA-Berlin bietet auch auf seiner Website Informationsmaterial an, das auf US-Kennntnisstand und amerikanische Fragen zugeschnitten ist, etwa eine Übersicht zu den wichtigsten Bestandteilen des deutschen Gesundheitssystems.

“Viele Bürger und Politiker in Amerika wissen schlicht nicht, wie die Realität mit einem Gesundheitssystem gesetzlicher Krankenkassen bei gleichzeitiger Wahlfreiheit aussieht”, sagt AVA-Berlin-Mitglied Carolyn Prescott. “Niemand kann das den Amerikanern im Land besser erklären, als Amerikaner, die jahrelang im Ausland andere Systeme erlebt haben.”

AVA-Berlin Mitglieder senden ihre Informationen gezielt an Lokalzeitungen und Blogs, an Bekannte und Freunde in den USA. Derzeit wird ihre Aktion um eine Anrufrkampagne erweitert. “Ich habe einen Brief an meine Senatorin in Maine geschrieben, eine moderate Republikanerin, die man möglicherweise umstimmen kann”, sagt Kara Krull. “Mein Vater war Arzt in Maine und mein Mann praktiziert heute als Arzt hier in Berlin, wo wir unsere Kinder groß gezogen haben. Man kann uns glauben, dass wir wissen, wovon wir reden.”

“Wer in Deutschland krank wird, macht sich Sorgen, wie man wieder gesund wird. In den Vereinigten Staaten haben Menschen die zusätzliche Sorge, ob sie überhaupt Arzt und Medikamente bezahlen und ihren Job behalten können”, sagt Joan Klakow, seit 1956 in Berlin lebende US-Amerikanerin, die sich bei American Voices Abroad Berlin engagiert. “Darum ist es AVA das wichtigste Anliegen, dass Obama und die Demokraten an der so genannten Public Option festhalten”, sagt Wertheimer, “dem Angebot einer gesetzlichen Krankenkasse.” Denn nur so werde jeder amerikanische Arbeitnehmer seine Krankenversicherung auch dann behalten können, wenn er den Job verliert oder wechselt. Bisher können die Krankenversicherungen ihre Mitglieder in solchen Fällen kündigen. Auch zahlen Frauen im Durchschnitt erheblich höhere Beiträge als Männer. Ganze Familien sind schon wegen Arztrechnungen in finanzielle Schwierigkeiten bis zum Bankrott geraten. “Man kann das Gesundheitssystem funktionaler, sozialer und kostengünstiger organisieren”, sagt Wertheimer, “das erfährt Amerika unter anderem von uns.”

American Voices Abroad-Berlin wurde 2003 gegründet, um gegen den Krieg im Irak zu protestieren. Sie ist aktiv bei Aktionen für Frieden und Menschenrechte, hilft bei der Wahl-Registrierung von US-Wählern im Ausland, veranstaltet Filmabende, Vorträge und einen politischen Salon. Jetzt erhebt AVA-Berlin ihre Stimme für die Gesundheitsreform in den USA, zuletzt mit einem Brief an President Obama.

◆ On December 7, only one U.S. newspaper—the Miami Herald—participated in the worldwide editorial campaign to call for action on climate change at the Copenhagen Climate Conference. ISABEL COLE formulated a letter that was sent on behalf of AVA-Berlin to many of the leading—non-participating—U.S. papers. Here is an excerpt:

As Americans living in Europe, we are following U.S. coverage of the Copenhagen Climate Conference with special interest. Sadly, only one U. S. newspaper participated in the Dec. 7 worldwide editorial campaign to call for action on climate change....

Here in Europe, we are heartened by the widespread awareness of these grave environmental issues, and by the “can do” attitude: here, the necessary switch to clean, sustainable energy is already well underway, creating jobs, fostering a boom in technological innovation, and improving the quality of life.

It saddens us to see the defeatist, “head in the sand” mentality that has prevailed for so long in the U.S. For those “skeptics” out there: sure, hope against hope that global warming is a hoax. But why not take this opportunity to end our dependence on dirty, dwindling fossil fuels whose price will skyrocket in the years to come—putting the U.S. at the mercy of oil dictators?

America need not be left behind as other countries innovate and adapt to environmental realities.

OTHER PEOPLE’S PROJECTS THAT AVA-BERLIN SUPPORTED

◆ AVA-Berlin was happy to publicize the events of the Democrats Abroad Berlin. We were especially pleased to co-sponsor the Inauguration Party at the Goya, which turned out to be the biggest Inauguration Party outside of the U.S. Please see above: SPEECHES DELIVERED, LETTERS WRITTEN AND PETITIONS SIGNED ON BEHALF OF AVA-Berlin, item A, for a copy of ISABEL COLE’S speech on our behalf.

◆ We are pleased to publicize the activities of the Heinrich Böll Stiftung and the Green Party here in Berlin.

◆ AVA-Berlin is always pleased to announce English-language events around the city, especially

those at the Einstein Forum in Potsdam, and the American Academy at Wannsee.

◆ AVA-Berlin supported the Winter Soldier Europe event in March in Freiburg. We sent €200 from our treasury and contributed to PHIL HILL's costs to travel to Freiburg to interpret.

◆ On Saturday, July 4, AVA-Berlin staffed an info table at the Independence Day Festival and Party at the Strandbad Plötzensee in Wedding. Thank you ANN WERTHEIMER, CAROLYN PRESCOTT and JANE HARTMANN.

◆ For the first time American Voices Abroad Berlin co-sponsored the One World Film Festival. On December 2, DAVID MACBRYDE and ANN WERTHEIMER staffed an AVA-Berlin info table at the Arsenal theater and ALAN BENSON moderated the discussion with co-director Judith Ehrlich following the showing of a wonderful documentary: *The Most Dangerous Man in America: Daniel Ellsberg and the Pentagon Papers*, USA 2009, director Judith Ehrlich and Rick Goldsmith. The film has been short-listed for an Oscar and has just received the special jury award at the *International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam*.

Thank you, PAM SELWYN, for establishing and maintaining contact with Natalie Gravenor of EYZ Media. We hope to sponsor another film next year.

OUR OWN AVA-BERLIN PROJECTS

◆ American Voices Abroad-Berlin began its new year (our year begins in mid-December after the annual business meeting) with "AN EVENING WITH AMY GOODMAN" at the Humboldt University. Approximately 400 people listened to ANN WERTHEIMER introduce SUSAN NEIMAN, who in turn introduced AMY. Many thanks to COLIN KING and DAVID SOLOMON, and to the many others who helped with the organizing. Here are KAREN AXELRAD's photos:
www.pbase.com/karenaxe/amy_goodman

Amy Goodman, with her brother David Goodman, has written a wonderful book: *Standing up to the Madness*, with a section about Agustin Aguayo, the conscientious objector who American Voices Abroad Berlin has supported for several years now.

According to another great journalist in the United States, Bill Moyers: "Amy Goodman ... goes where the silence is, she breaks the sound barrier... She believes the media should be a sanctuary for dissent, the Underground Railroad tunneling beneath the plantation." And according to Bill Clinton, Amy Goodman is "hostile, combative, and even disrespectful."

◆ American Voices Abroad Berlin is old enough to have a daughter, our lovely Cafe Americain—a Political Salon!

Cafe Americain is an experiment. We hope to create a political forum which is more structured than a Stammtisch (with themed events, invited speakers, etc.), yet more open and informal than typical speaker events; which enables people to find others on their wavelength while engaging in civil discussion with those not on their wavelength; which promotes the exchange of ideas and information, bringing people together to sow the seeds of new political initiatives, yet is free from organizational pressures.

Our aim is to promote political discussion that gets beyond the rhetoric – be it the rhetoric of the Bush regime, of party politics, or of activism itself! All too often, the pressure to take sides on complex issues leads to dogmatic, divisive discussions which "create more heat than light" and, sadly, causes many concerned people to simply tune out.

We aim to examine US and international political issues in depth and from unexpected perspectives, as well as exploring the border zones between politics and other spheres such as art, science, literature or philosophy – as in our first event with artist Robbie Conal. We welcome suggestions for themes, events and other activities, but ultimately take personal responsibility for shaping the program. We are open to speakers representing all sorts of political views and approaches within the oppositional spectrum, provided that they are interested in substantive and critical discussion. We will not allow the salon to become dominated by any one agenda or initiative, partisan or otherwise, however laudable.

Ideally, Cafe Americain will be a place to challenge ourselves and others, combat the knee-jerk factor, learn from each other and enjoy each other's company despite (or because of) our differences in opinion!

Ultimately, this salon will be no better or worse than its interpersonal dynamics. Thus, while we welcome strong opinions, the gamut of political positions from stodgy to radical, and healthy doses of (constructive) criticism, we will not tolerate disruptive, harassing or otherwise egregiously uncivil behavior and reserve the right to exclude offending individuals. It goes without saying that we will not tolerate hate speech or statements inciting violence.

Why “Cafe Americain”? That’s the “gin joint” Humphrey Bogart runs in Casablanca – with all its associations of heroism, romance, exile, political intrigue, and idealism turned to cynicism turned to idealism!

This year Cafe Americain continued its Civics 101: Reading and Interpreting the U.S. Constitution with COLIN KING at St. George’s bookstore in Prenzlauer Berg. Sign up with ISABEL COLE to be on the special Cafe Americain mailing list: ava@andere-seite.de.

◆ AVA-Berlin movie and theater nights: AVA-Berlin continued its movie nights by inviting AVAers to the ARTBAR on Kronenstrasse on February 9 and 10. This interesting venue (“from coffee to champagne”) screened the premiere showings of “Misconceptions” directed by Ron Satlof and directed by Ted Perkins, who were present for questions on both viewings. “Misconceptions” is “a provocative and hilarious new film that pokes light-hearted fun at the ongoing culture wars between Gays and Christian conservatives.”

On March 25, AVAers saw the 1985 documentary about the gay rights activist “The Times of Harvey Milk” at the Kino Eiszeit.

On July 17, AVAers went to “Dirt” at the English Theatre Berlin, a one-man play about an Iraqi living illegally in New York, about “about racism and the havoc it wreaks on the human spirit.”

◆ On March 9, AVA-Berlin joined DAVID SOLOMON’s Books in Berlin (Goethestr. 69 in Charlottenburg) in hosting “An Evening with Robert Meeropol,” author of *An Execution in the Family: One Son’s Journey*, translated into German as *Als die Regierung beschloss, meine Eltern umzubringen—ein Sohn erzählt*.

OUR OTHER MODEST CONTRIBUTIONS TO CIVIL SOCIETY

◆ The STAMMTISCH took place on all first Thursdays of 2009. In January and February we met at BARCOMI’S, Sophienstrasse 21 in Mitte at 8 pm. We thank CYNTHIA BARCOMI and her staff for their hospitality! We then continued our get-togethers from March through December at SEEROSE, Mehringdamm 47—the quiet room all the way in the back.

◆ We have kept up our contact with BridgeBuildersBerlin via DAVID KNUTSON. BridgeBuilders was instrumental in bringing National Public Radio (NPR, UKW 104.1) to Berlin, for which we are all eternally grateful. BridgeBuilders is working with the Freundeskreis Amerika Haus (thank you, again, DAVID KNUTSON), most recently by organizing a discussion series “America Reloaded” at the Hebbel Theater in conjunction with the Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, on September 21, October 11, and November 16, plus 3 more dates in 2010. See www.america-reloaded.de for further information.

◆ DEMOCRATS ABROAD BERLIN is the unofficial name of the Berlin Chapter of Democrats Abroad Germany, the official section of the Democratic Party Committee Abroad in Berlin. We are happy to work with the Berlin Democrats and with their new local chair, NANCY GREEN, when occasions arise, and we are happy to publicize their events. For example, at the Dems Labor Day picnic, Cafe Americain organized a U.S. Constitution quiz (thank you COLIN KING and ISABEL COLE).