

AFGE President J. David Cox Sr.
Speech in support of Resolution 40
AFL-CIO 2017 Convention
Oct. 24, 2017

Brothers and sisters,
I'm here today to speak STRONGLY in support of Resolution 40,
the Rejection of Privatization of Veterans' Health Care.

AFGE represents about 250,000 employees of the Department of Veterans Affairs.

While about a third of these workers are veterans themselves,
ALL who work at the VA consider it a sacred calling.

Every objective study of the VA concludes that the VA beats the private sector on both quality and cost,
and veterans overwhelmingly support strengthening, not dismantling the VA.

Yet this administration is trying to carry out the agenda of the Koch Brothers to privatize.

They've set up a phony veterans organization,
called Concerned Veterans of America,
and so the privatizers can claim that they've got this big veterans organization supporting what they're
doing.

Ever since the waitlist scandal at the Phoenix VA it's been open season on VA employees.

Very few people know that the scandal was brought to light by AFGE bargaining unit employees –
whistleblowers –
who knew that their bosses were manipulating the data in order to qualify for big bonuses.

Yet that scandal has been used by politicians of both parties to justify not only privatization,
but also the weakening of our civil service protections and collective bargaining rights.

Secretary Shulkin has admitted that VA's only real problem is that it's horribly understaffed –
his own estimate was that there are about 45,000 unfilled openings nationwide.

Shulkin and Trump want to leave the VA understaffed and without resources so that veterans stop
supporting the VA and give in to the idea that they'd be better off with vouchers for
private sector care.

This is a deliberate strategy:
establish the basics of a privatization plan –
they call it Choice –
and they keep throwing more and more money at it and encourage veterans to use it instead of the VA.

At the same time,
they starve the VA of staff and other

resources in order to make it fail.

And of course,
when the VA fails,
the VA workers' union disappears as well.

It's a story we all know too well.

Then they have what they want:

A broken system that has lost public support,
a system with lots of valuable real estate they can sell off,
and a privatization infrastructure that sends all the patients whose treatment is profitable to the private sector with a skeletal VA left to care for the sickest that the private sector doesn't want.

Brothers and sisters,
we need your help in the fight to retain our beloved VA healthcare system.

We cannot allow the Trumps,
the Shulkins,
and the Koch Brothers of this world to get away with their "destroy and privatize" strategy.

Our battle is a lot like the battle to save Social Security from privatization.

In both cases,
the enemies of unions and government take a crown jewel –
a program that has enormous public support –
and bad mouth it to the point where people say
"what the heck,
the government couldn't run it,
let's give it to the private sector."

It was a lie with Social Security,
and it's a lie with VA.

Public Schools,
Social Security
and VA healthcare –
these are our national treasures,
brothers and sisters.

And these are the product of UNION LABOR!

Let's not let our enemies win this one.

Let's save the VA!

Thank you, brothers and sisters.