

Ryan Visits Racine

Wisconsin Rep. Paul Ryan visits one of the most economically depressed towns in Wisconsin, and residents there let him know what they think of his budget plan.

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Rep. Paul Ryan of Wisconsin (AP Photo/Harry Hamburg)

House Budget Chair Paul Ryan, of Wisconsin, who earlier this month introduced a budget plan that would slash government spending and dismantle the social safety net, uses sinister tones to warn of our country's trajectory if we fail to enact it. He [speaks](#) "of a future in which we will transform our social safety net into a hammock, which lulls able-bodied people into lives of complacency and dependency."

The boyishly handsome Ryan, 41, had the good sense to avoid his insulting hammock imagery when addressing an audience of 600 Friday afternoon in Racine, Wisconsin. The town leads the state in unemployment with a rate of 14.1 percent, and well-paying jobs have declined for years.

During the congressional recess Ryan and other representatives from around the country have been on a tour of town hall meetings across their districts. Many of the attendees have been hostile to the Congress members who voted for Ryan's budget proposal. What's different for Ryan, though, is that the constituents in his unemployment-wracked district get to target the man with the plan himself. Hostile audiences [have called](#) the GOP plan a draconian formula for dissolving Medicare, imposing \$6.2 trillion in cuts mostly in social programs used by low-income families, and handing out tax breaks to corporations and the rich.

About a third of the mostly gray-haired audience in the Cesar Chavez Community Center on Racine's north side praised Ryan's attack on the deficit, apparently unaware that his plan wouldn't [touch](#) it until 2040, shared his concern that the dollar was about to lose value because of inflation that in reality is nonexistent, and decried those who disagreed with Ryan as paid hecklers. But the dissenters were more forceful and shot at Ryan a steady fusillade of questions

and loud comments about his privatized version of Medicare, the continuation of Bush's trillion-dollar tax cuts for the rich, and new cuts in the maximum tax rate for corporations and the wealthy.

"How come you define this budget crisis as a spending crisis alone without looking at the Bush tax cuts for the rich?" demanded one woman. Her question drew a roar of approval. She went on to add that the Congressional Budget Office has estimated that Ryan-Care would shift a huge proportion of medical costs to seniors. The current level of out-of-pocket costs they're required to pay, 25 percent, would rise to a crushing 67 percent by 2030.

"We wouldn't be in this situation without the Bush tax cuts for the rich," asserted another citizen to heavy applause. Although everyone currently over age 55 would be covered by the present government-run Medicare program initiated in 1965, she declared her determination to fight the current form of Medicare for future generations. "I would never say, 'I got mine and forget you!'" she said.

Ryan was unflappable. The questions followed a PowerPoint presentation on his "Path for Progress," in which he defended the 15 percent capital-gains tax rate as necessary to encourage investment and job creation and claimed that such gains are "already taxed twice." He dismissed tax increases as a means of cutting the deficit as "magical fairy dust," claiming that increased taxes on corporations and the rich would generate too little revenue to matter and would also discourage job creation. But the contrast between Ryan's taxation of the richest 1 percent and Obama's proposal is substantial: The top-tier household [would save](#) a whopping \$211,314 annually, according to the Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy. And much of the audience seemed to know it.

But that didn't stop Ryan. He continually portrayed his proposal as a plan to "reform Medicare so it will be there for the next generation" as a "personalized Medicare system." Ryan claimed that his conversion of Medicare into a private-insurer based plan would allow "you to pick your [insurance] plan, and Medicare will pay for your plan." Insurers would be required to accept all seniors without regard to pre-existing conditions, Ryan asserted, although it remains to be seen how serious the Republicans would be in forcing their allies in the insurance industry to swallow this bitter pill.

Ryan tried to make his privatized Medicare plan sound as though it would deliver health care with the same simplicity and more certainty than the existing Medicare plan. "You'll be able to fire a provider if you want," as if that free choice of doctors were not already one of Medicare's most valued features.

Ryan freely admits that the vouchers will not be pegged to medical inflation, typically running 10 percent or more, but to the much lower Consumer Price Index. The seniors in Racine know what this means. "You're going to be behind the eight ball in the second year," barked one senior citizen who argued that the voucher's value would be diminished by fast-rising health-care costs.

In all, Ryan's smoothly delivered proposals seemed hopelessly out of touch with the ghostly, vacant factories and empty storefronts just a few blocks away that embody the district's ongoing

jobs crisis. Perhaps the biggest insult to Racine residents, who have seen their manufacturing way of life decimated, is that Ryan, despite labeling himself an advocate of life-long learning, includes major cuts for job retraining in his budget. For Ryan and his funders, the "other" deficit -- a job deficit afflicting some 33,000 unemployed workers and their families in Ryan's own district -- is a problem barely worth noting.

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