

## Out sick

### UT workers misguided in health care protest

To offset the rising insurance costs of hospital fees, doctor's fees and prescriptions, the Texas state legislature has passed a health care insurance plan for on-campus employees of state-supported Universities. This plan will increase employee policy rates for some policy holders by more than 50 percent.



SUNNYE OWENS

**While campus employees will not be stricken by it, the 'burnt orange flu' is a serious matter for University of Texas students.**

This change follows a similar increase in September of 1999 that also saw the elimination of dental plans and other benefits for a number of policy holders. Understandably, on-campus employees at the University of Texas-Austin (UT) are not happy with the state's decision. In reaction to the rise of policy rates, UT's on-campus employees are threatening a university-wide sickout day. This sickout day will be called the "burnt orange flu," and its timing will leave UT students helpless.

More than 6,000 on-campus employees at UT are threatening to leave work Sept. 6-8 if the UT administration does not agree to their demands.

The on-campus employees at UT are being completely childish about this health care insurance increase. Not only will the burnt orange flu hurt the University of Texas, but it will harm the students. With the "flu," on-campus employees are looking to hurt the administration, but by abandoning students when they need employees' help the most, they will hurt only the students.

After the insurance increase employees' average out-of-pocket premiums are expected to rise to \$66 per month, and \$80 for employees with dependents. Although this is a steep increase for health care insurance costs, there is no need for on-campus employees to go on a strike because they have received a concurrent salary

raise. In response to the increase in insurance rates, UT has offered most on-campus employees a \$50 per month salary raise if they make \$30,000 a year or less. If on-campus employees used this \$50 salary increase to compensate for the rise in health care insurance, then that would mean they would only pay \$16 per month on health care insurance. \$192 for a year for health care insurance is cheaper than cable.

While campus employees will not be stricken by it, the burnt orange flu is a serious matter for University of Texas students. Sept. 8, the day planned for the strike, is the first day of Fall 2000 classes. With more than 6,000 on-campus employees missing, many students with schedule, meal plan and other problems will have nowhere to turn for help.

This sickout will literally shut down UT's operations for the duration of the strike, if not longer. Unfortunately, the people who will be most affected by the sickout will be students who have no control over the insurance-rate increase. The on-campus employees are not fully looking at the effects of this "burnt orange flu." It will not effect the culpable legislation that made this decision. It will only effect the blameless students.

Since this health-insurance increase is a state-wide decision, how will it affect Texas A&M? The increase will only affect on-campus employees, not including professors, and the rise in policy will begin July 1 at A&M. Although on-campus employees are probably unhappy with this decision, there is no public talk of a strike.

By planning the strike on the first day of fall classes, UT employees are obviously trying to hurt the university when it needs them the most and are compromising the needs of the students.

This is ironic, considering that, without the students,



KELSEY ROBERTS/THE BATTALION

on-campus employees would not have jobs.

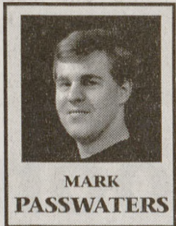
While their worries about rising health care costs are well-founded, UT's on-campus workers need to grow up and call off their strike. A&M students need to realize that

they are lucky that their on-campus employees are mature, intelligent adults who value their student body.

Sunnys Owens is a junior journalism major.

## Incompetence risks nuclear secrets

Most people know the old saying, "Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me." When it comes to the safety of nuclear



MARK PASSWATERS

secrets, it looks like the fool is U.S. Energy Secretary Bill Richardson. His inability to make changes at the Los Alamos Nuclear Laboratory and unwillingness to appear before Congress to answer charges of negligence show the cavalier attitude that seems to pervade the Clinton administration. Richardson's incompetence could have dire effects for the American people.

Los Alamos? With this bunch, it is Lost Alamos.

According to the FBI, "on or about March 28th," two computer hard drives containing top-secret nuclear information vanished from Los Alamos' super-secret "Division X." The loss of the drives was not reported to the FBI until at least 24 days later, when the drives miraculously reappeared behind a coffee maker.

Apparently, "Division X" has become as big a joke as "Planet X" was when Marvin the Martian claimed it for Mars. According to Los Alamos director Dr. John Browne, "Division X" employees were considered to be the "librarians" of secret information and were too busy to sign out the materials they were removing from the area. In fact, there was no sign-out sheet at all. This negligence is astounding, considering Los Alamos employees are in possession of information that could end the lives of millions of people.

While it is readily apparent that Browne and his staff should be disciplined for their reckless attitude toward the information in their possession, the big hits must be reserved for Richardson. His pathetic performance over the past two weeks threatens to give the term "political appointee" an even more nega-

tive connotation than it already has.

Last year, when Richardson took the job as energy secretary, he was faced with restoring the credibility of the Energy Department in the wake of the department "donating" nuclear secrets to the People's Republic of China. "Americans can be reassured our nation's nuclear secrets are safe and secure," Richardson said in the May 26, 1999, issue of USA Today.

Guess again. On May 12, Richardson testified before the Senate Armed Services Committee that the nuclear weapons materials and secrets at Los Alamos were safe and sound. At the time, Richardson knew that the two drives were missing.



BRANDON HENDERSON/THE BATTALION

Two weeks ago, when he was called to testify before the same committee, Richardson stalled for a week, saying he did not have enough information to accurately brief the senators. However, he did have enough information to go on every major Sunday morning news program to proclaim it is not true that Los Alamos would be better protected by Mr. Magoo.

After Richardson stopped dodging Congress and testified, the members of the Armed Services Committee — not surprisingly — hammered him.

"You've lost all credibility," said Sen. Richard Shelby, R-Ala., chair of the Senate Intelligence Committee. "We need strong and consistent leadership at the top," said Sen. John Warner, R-Va., the Armed Services Committee chair, "and it appears that we don't have it."

The harshest criticism for Richardson came from Sen. Robert Byrd, D-W.Va., who said Richardson "was a disgrace" and had "shown the ultimate contempt" for the committee and for Congress itself. Richardson should have responded by suggesting ways to make security tighter, or at least by apologizing for making Los Alamos into a national joke.

Instead, Richardson came up with a weak defense for himself. "I don't think I've shown any contempt for the committee," he proclaimed. He went on to say that he had just been "too busy to prepare" for meeting the committee the week before.

Strangely enough, nobody is crying for Richardson. Maybe it is because it is tough to cry for any man who does not have the brain power to recognize that the loss of critical nuclear information is a major problem. Someone like that should not be in charge of a toll booth, let alone a government agency. A person who puts his own reputation ahead of the needs of this nation has no backbone. That same person, however, did show that he has a tremendous ego by sucking up to the press before facing the heat of Congress.

Richardson either needs to resign (he says he will not) or be fired. Otherwise, the Chinese or anyone else interested in our nuclear secrets may as well pull up with a U-Haul at Los Alamos and take everything at once.

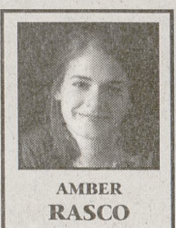
For now, the nation is left with an egotistical buffoon running the Department of Energy, no plan to make secure secret nuclear information, and two computer drives that apparently do not like defec. Twice should be enough for the government to wake up and recognize that stricter security measures for U.S. nuclear secrets, as well as someone with intelligence and conviction to oversee their safekeeping are needed.

This would mean Richardson has to go, and the sooner the better.

Mark Passwaters is a senior electrical engineering major.

## Decrepit schools in need of equal funds, state support

Recently, a coalition of civil rights groups and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) joined together to file a lawsuit against the state of California, demanding basic educational rights for all students as guaranteed in the state's constitution. Apparently, the distribution of school funding is a prejudiced process, and civil rights activists are outraged at the blatant gap between the resources of the schools.



AMBER RASCO

The ACLU is out to prove that the division of wealth is strongly correlated with race. This lawsuit accuses the state of failing to uphold its constitutional obligation to provide the bare essentials necessary for education without regard to race, color or national origin. Mark Rosenbaum, legal director of the ACLU of Southern California, refers to schools like Jefferson High School in Los Angeles as "the shame of California."

These schools are infested with vermin, are covered by leaky roofs, are staffed with uncertified teachers, display massive overcrowding, and suffer from a lack of basic educational materials. The lack of necessary resources like updated textbooks, library and computer access, guidance counselors and lab materials hinders students' learning. Every individual has a right to equal opportunity, but without improvements in high schools, it is impossible.

Such decrepit public high schools are in dire need of more state support, and if necessary, legal action. Something must be done to fix the injustices of California's neglected schools operating in the shadows of well-funded "Beverly Hills, 90210" schools. The ACLU argues that the unequal allotment of state funding for schools is a direct result of racial bias. In reference to the lawsuit, Julie Su, litigation director of the Asian Pacific American Legal Center, said, "The failures this lawsuit addresses are not randomly distributed; they are concentrated in communities of color, in economically struggling communities and immigrant communities. The state's neglect has a clearly discriminatory impact."

Even though the U.S. Constitution prohibits segregation, racists insist on dividing this nation. Due to prevailing attitudes, many people believe that minorities have less potential than Caucasians. Socioeconomic divisions, brought on by discriminatory practices, clearly have an impact on educational quality and funding. As neighbor-

hoods develop over time, neighboring schools can become vastly different. The distribution of race can be closely related to the distribution of wealth, and sadly, minorities have a lesser chance at success because of unfair distribution and stereotypes. It is great to see the ACLU confront such a complex issue. If underprivileged students had the means to prove themselves as bright, capable people, fewer would be forced into having such a poor education.

This suit should not end in California, but send a message to other states. Texas has a good record for fairly funding schools, but there is always room to take preventive steps to improve. Comparing College Station Independent School District (CSISD) to Bryan Independent School District (BISD) illustrates that even in Texas, there is potential for unequal distribution of money. BISD and CSISD receive most of their revenues from local funds and property taxes.

While College Station and Bryan are not vastly different in property value, Bryan, the less affluent community, does not get the same support from local funds and receives more state financial support. College Station is wealthier and more capable of collecting local funds. Also, BISD serves twice as many students as CSISD, allowing CSISD to spend more money per pupil. As expected, Texas feeds more money to BISD to compensate for its economic disadvantage.

Further, the ethnic distribution in B-CS is dramatically different. The 1999-2000 school year statistics show that BISD has a 60 percent minority population while CSISD is approximately 70 percent caucasian. Continual action must be taken in order to keep schools like Bryan High from evolving into a Jefferson High. Texas should work to maintain and improve equal funding. Advocating education, Gov. George W. Bush said, "The purpose of prosperity is to make sure the American dream touches every willing heart. The purpose of prosperity is to leave no one out — to leave no one behind. This noble goal will remain a distinct goal until our nation fulfills a solemn pledge: to educate every child."

California's chapter of the ACLU should be applauded for taking initiative and speaking on behalf of its students. The actions of the ACLU should influence other states to take the appropriate steps to prevent the unequal funding of schools. If states do not step up to the challenge, legal action may be required to give every student a fair chance.

Amber Rasco is a junior journalism major.