



# Pro-Choice Pro-Socialism

Abortion rights—the struggle worldwide



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# A socialist perspective on abortion

by Anne Engelhardt, CWI

On 14 February this year, tens of thousands of women and men came onto the streets of Italy. They were on an angry protest against the lengths to which the authorities are going to attack women's right to choose when and whether to have children.

The demonstrations erupted after police officers in Naples barged into a hospital just hours after a woman had undergone a termination. They interrogated her about the circumstances of the abortion which had actually been perfectly legal. They even confiscated the aborted foetus! A protest of women who gathered at the hospital was brutally attacked by armed police and one woman was taken into custody. The ensuing protests and others held nationally have indicated the widespread opposition to the political right that is using the current heated debate over abortion rights in the course of the current campaign for the general election in April.



(See separate article on Italy)

Silvio Berlusconi, leading the right forces, has backed the Vatican's call for a moratorium against abortion worldwide. A particularly fanatical Catholic politician, Giuliano Ferrara, has set up a separate anti-abortion party specially for this election, hoping to garner the maximum number of votes with emotionally charged scare stories about infanticide. But it is not only in Italy that the vital issue of a woman's right to choose has come under attack. The low level of struggle and the abysmal attitude of leaders of former workers' parties is mainly to blame. We as socialists want to give our view of the essentially private issue which has now become a political football in the hands of reactionary forces.

## Whose choice?

Working class and poor women worldwide face numerous obstacles and limitations in their lives. Getting a good education, economic independence, a proper job and full childcare are things that are often only affordable by the upper class. Poverty amongst women is widespread. 70% of the world's poor are women. Two thirds of the children who do not receive an education are girls. In Saudi Arabia only 5% of the work-force is female, making the majority of women totally dependent on male family members. In 'advanced' Germany, 90% of workers in the low wage sector are women.

Choices for most women are extremely restricted in relation to whether and what to study, whether and with whom to have a relationship, whether to use contraception and which form, whether to stay at home with children or go to work and what if any childcare to utilise. Decisions are not taken by women freely for themselves but are determined by the cost of fulfilling their wishes. Even the question whether a woman wants to have children or not is dependent, not simply by her free will, but by the social conditions in which she lives.

In the informative book, *Abortion - A Worldwide Perspective*, the authors, Colin Francome and Marcel Vekemans, give the example of Nepal. Only one third of women there use

contraception and, of these, less than one in three uses methods like the pill or condoms. One reason they give is that most women in Nepal are not given any sex education and are not taught about contraception. For every 100,000 people there is only one doctor and 22 nurses. Medical care and advice is obviously not often available.

Vietnam is cited by the World Health Organisation as having one of the highest abortion rates in the world. "Every minute, 398 women become pregnant, 180 pregnancies being unplanned, and one woman dies from the complications of pregnancy". In Yemen, only 22% of all births are attended by skilled doctors or nurses, which helps explain the high level of infant mortality in this country.

In many large countries such as India and the former Soviet Union, abortion is far too often used as the 'easiest' method of controlling family size. In China the state has actually intruded into women's lives to the extent of insisting that after the birth of one child, all pregnancies should be terminated. No socialist can welcome these practices. Having an abortion is not the preferable way of dealing with the issue of whether or not to have children. In some countries like Nicaragua, Poland and Algeria it is not officially an option. Where it is available, it is restricted by all sorts of laws and moralising, especially from religious organisations. But even where abortion is freely available, terminating a pregnancy is not an easy decision for any woman. But the worst aspect of the 'right to choose' debate, in the view of socialists, is that, for working and poor women there is no option but to go through with the operation, even in illegal and unsafe conditions, rather than bring up children in poverty and stressful conditions. Many who would like to give birth, are constrained from doing so by their circumstances.

In some countries, including the former Soviet Union, abortion has long been a crude method of family planning, where effective contraception has not been an available option. In others, it is dictated by the state to hold down the population levels. But terminating a pregnancy is not an easy decision for a woman to make. Even where abortion is freely available and safe, it can be difficult. Still the most decisive factors are cost and availability of the basic necessities for bringing children up properly - food, shelter, clothing, education, health and child care provision and a safe environment - free from danger and violence.

### **'No church, no state; women must decide their fate!'**

This slogan has long been the battle-cry of pro-choice demonstrations in Britain and elsewhere. Recently it was hurled at participations of an anti-abortion meeting in Westminster, London. It is 40 years since abortion was legalised in Britain. Now new debates in the country's parliament are turning on the question of making the law more restrictive.

In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many countries made important changes to the laws on abortion rights, often legalising it for the first time ever. Some of them restricted their laws again later and most of them still do not allow free abortion on a simple request by a woman.



However the important changes in abortion rights did not just come about through 'enlightenment'! They were achieved as a result of big mass movements in periods of heightened class struggle worldwide.

Protest movements of women at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s demanded that abortion be legalised. Women in France, for example, conducted a big campaign; dozens of famous actresses, intellectuals and artists openly talked to the press about having had their pregnancies terminated.

Around the same time, a similar campaign was conducted in Germany where the stories were carried in the famous magazine, "Stern". There, the legalisation of abortion in 1972 in neighbouring East Germany put pressure on the West German government to liberalise the

legal framework on abortion. A law was passed for termination on request under 12 weeks. One year later it was overturned by the Constitutional Court to make abortion legal only in the case of rape, incest or certain social problems. Even today, abortion on request is not allowed. The only difference is that women who are found to have had 'illegal' abortions will not be pursued through the courts. Nevertheless they are made to feel like criminals and in most cases, health insurance does not cover abortions.

In fact, even today, Canada is the only country where no abortion law exists and a termination is normally treated like any other medical procedure. The health service covers abortions carried out in hospitals. This means women in remote rural areas can still face problems. They have difficulty getting access to an abortion in some provinces which refuse payment for abortions in clinics.

### **Stop back-street abortions!**

Fifty nine per cent of the world's population live in countries where abortion is illegal and only allowed under certain circumstances such as there is a risk to the mother's life through pregnancy or in cases of rape or incest. Obviously, in these countries the mortality rate amongst women is way above average, because of illegal, and therefore mostly unskilled, abortions. Skilled doctors who could do the operations are afraid of being punished. Although women wanting abortions fear punishment too, they still search for a solution, trying to abort themselves or visiting doubtful 'experts'. They run a high risk of suffering serious injuries or even dying because of bungled and dangerous procedures.

In Romania, after the retightening of abortion laws there in 1966, the mortality rate of women increased rapidly as a result of backstreet abortions. They reached a figure of ten times higher than in other countries of Europe. In 1989 the law was eased again and the mortality rate decreased rapidly back to the previous average.

In South Africa the abortion law was liberalised in 1997. As a result, between 1996 and the year 2000, the abortion mortality rate decreased by more than 90%.

In Brazil, where the law on abortion was tightened by the Supreme Court in 2004, no fewer than 250,000 women are admitted to hospital each year because of abortion complications. This is in the context of only 140 abortions being legally registered!

Women who need abortions in countries where they are not allowed, will often scrape money together and travel abroad. According to Francome and Vekemans, even in 1913, more than 5,000 women from Britain are estimated to have travelled to Paris to have abortions. Much later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, after specialist clinics for abortion were set up in the Netherlands in 1971, about 12,000 women from Belgium and 9,000 women from France travelled to them each year (France's law was tightened after the First World War and eased in 1975, after the many protests of the preceding decade).

These authors show that the number of Irish women travelling to Britain to have an abortion increased from just 261 in 1970 to 6,400 in the year 2000. Abortion in Southern Ireland is still only allowed under special circumstances, for instance if the life of the mother is in danger. Even then, doctors or nurses are allowed to refuse, on 'conscientious' grounds (of religious belief), to give the required medical help.

### **Abortion on demand**

When Britain's law was changed in 1967, abortion on request was allowed within 28 weeks of conception. This was reduced in 1990 to 24 weeks. Today it is this right which is under attack, with many emotional appeals to women not to 'kill' fetuses which, at 24 weeks, are more often, with advanced technology, able to survive outside the mother's womb. (The predominantly religious and right-wing campaigners, with little regard for the future life of either

mother or child, disregard the evidence that children born so prematurely have a very low chance of a healthy life and a much higher chance of severe disability if not death before the age of one). Nevertheless, as far as the number of weeks allowed for abortions to be performed English law is still one of the most liberal worldwide. In Scotland no upper limit exists.

The Abortion Act of 1967 was introduced as one of many reforms gained through struggle in the years of economic boom. More and more women became employed and with the improvement of their living standards, they gained confidence. They were not only successful, along with male trade unionists as well as female, in the fight for the right to abortion, but also for the right to equal pay and for legalisation against sex discrimination. (Advances were also made, through campaigns like that led by CWI members, towards getting the widespread scourge of domestic violence recognised and addressed.)

However, abortion in Britain is still available only with the agreement of two doctors, even in the case of rape. The final decision about the termination is made by a doctor, sometimes by the husband or by the courts, but not the woman.

Abortion should be available on demand, if a woman has already decided she wants it; her decision over what to do should be fully respected. If she needs the advice of a doctor, he or she should only explain the medical aspects of the pregnancy and should not try to influence her for ethnical or religious reasons.

### **Revolutionary change**

The first time in history that women gained the right to free abortion on demand was following the Russian Revolution of 1917. This was because through the October Revolution in Russia, the first workers' state in history was founded, and it gave the first indication of what a society in which workers have the power could look like. With the introduction of public and free kindergartens for all and canteens which 80% of the population used for lunch, a huge step was made towards getting unpaid domestic work done collectively. However, economic backwardness and poverty in Russia were a big obstacle to equalising and improving the lives of women.

Francome and Vekemans cite a 1929 report from Russia about the mortality rate of women having abortions showing it was "less than one-tenth of 1%". This was compared with 4% in Germany at the same time.

"The Soviets publicised their results and in 1929 sent a delegate to the first congress of the World League for Sexual Reform in London...British doctors took a great interest and on a number of occasions visited the country to observe the procedures. One such doctor was L Haden Guest, who reported in the Lancet (5 December 1931) that in a Russian series of 40.000 abortions there were only two deaths." (Page 30 )

By 1936, however, under the growing influence of Stalinism, the generous abortion law was repealed. Instead, abortion was punished with prison; women were forced back into family chores and given incentives for producing new workers. They received special awards for the seventh child and every subsequent child! In 1956 abortion was legalised again but only up to 12 weeks. Thereafter, unfortunately, with good contraception methods not being made available, abortion became the most common family planning method

### **The church and elections**

A pregnant woman is the only person who should make the decision about having a termination. However the issue of abortion is being used by the Catholic Church and conservative politicians to play with the emotions of women and men and win support for reactionary ideas. The abortion debate always stirs up strong feelings and this emotional atmosphere is being used in elections to get votes for the ultra-conservative wing.

The church fears losing its influence in society, so it needs an emotional debate about issues like abortion and same-sex marriage to prevent the erosion of the traditional family. This is

happening when economic crises are deepening and causing widespread fear in the working class of losing jobs and means of survival. Conservative politicians need the church to gain votes as well as the church needing these politicians to back them.

Because they have no solutions to the crisis in the economy, the ruling class feels in danger of a revolt from below. On top of their imposition of social cuts, cuts in health care, childcare and the privatisation of public companies, they are producing a reactionary atmosphere against the rights of wage-earners and especially against women.

In Spain, the general election campaign has been accompanied by the Catholic Church protesting against same-sex union and abortion rights. The Austrian newspaper, Die Presse, wrote on 10 January, 2008: "We see the 'two Spains' that were opposed in the civil war of 1936-1939 confronting each other again. On the one side the church and conservative, centralist forces; on the other side socialists, secularists and federalists. ... In this atmosphere, the latest law about reparations for the victims of the dictatorship have divided Spain. The Church fears the danger of rehabilitation of the forces that assassinated priests before the civil war."

In Latin America, even popular left politicians have taken a reactionary position to gain votes not just from the left but even from the conservatives in society.

#### **Nicaragua: "I want to be excommunicated"**

After the civil code adopted by the Catholic Church in 1983, abortion is one of the few things that leads to immediate excommunication of all persons involved.

In 2003 a nine year old girl, 'Rosa', was sexually assaulted while she was in Costa Rica with her parents, working on a coffee plantation. After three month her parents found out that she was pregnant and in an effort to save her life brought her back to Nicaragua in the hope of better medical care.

They had already fought with a hospital in Costa Rica that wanted the daughter to stay there against her will and that of her parents. The case became public. The parents announced they wanted the child to have an abortion because they did not want to lose her. She was gravely ill as a result of the rape and the pregnancy but could not be given medication because of being pregnant. However, the minister of health and also several bishops of the Catholic Church spoke against it.

Eventually, three doctors carried out the operation and took the child to a secret place to recover. The MINSA-commission (Department of Health) responsible for the case said that they wanted to bring it to court. The Church excommunicated doctors responsible and the parents.

Women's organisations started a campaign called: "I want to be excommunicated". Over 26,000 people signed this appeal. Even well-known members of the Church declared that actually the rapist should be excommunicated and the prosecution stopped the enquiry on 4 March, 2003

Unfortunately, instead of easing the abortion law, in 2006 the Nicaraguan president, Enrique Bolaños, signed a law that made abortion illegal in all circumstances.

Daniel Ortega, president of Nicaragua, came to prominence as the leader of the anti-imperialist Sandinistas and was a defender of Nicaragua's limited abortion rights and a critic of the Catholic Church when he first headed the left-wing Nicaraguan government in the 1980s after the civil war.

However, during the last election campaign in November 2006, he supported the new restrictive abortion law that forbids abortion even when the mother's life is in danger through her pregnancy. That means abortion is now illegal in Nicaragua in every case.

Ortega won the election in January 2007 with 38 % of the votes. But, when his party -the FSLN (Sandinista National Liberation Front) - lost ground in the election of 1990 and made a pact with the right-wing PLC (Constitutional Liberal Party), many, including prominent members left the party.

Various corruption affairs and even a scandal about Ortega having abused his step-daughter for eleven years, meant he lost his leftist profile and his chances of gaining another election success.

For the 2006 election campaign, he tried to have a mixed profile, combining his history as a revolutionary and today's face of a Catholic believer in "love peace and harmony". The British Broadcasting Corporation news reported (in November 2006): "Mr Ortega led Nicaragua from 1979 to 1990, but says he has changed from the leader who seized property from the wealthy during the 1979 Sandinista revolution."

At the beginning of 2008, the Pope and the Catholic Church as a whole put forward the idea of a world-wide moratorium against abortion. In a letter to the United Nations, supporters of the organisation 'Pro Life', the Catholic church and several scientists complained about abortion as an instrument of 'new eugenics' that selects disabled and even female persons not to be born. China, North Korea and India are denounced for forcing women to abort. Certainly we are against any right of the state to influence or even force women to make a decision as to whether to have a pregnancy terminated or not. As the Israeli civil rights leader, Shulamit Aloni, said: "A women's body is her own body. It is not there to serve the army, the state or the nation." The moratorium is against any kind of abortion at all. They put life against life, but in the end prefer the life of an unborn foetus, instead of the mother's life.

*"In a book called 'Moral Problems for Catholic Nurses' (1935) ...it was stated that men often had to die in wars and similarly: 'A parallel case is the situation of a woman in a difficult labor, when her life and that of her unborn child are in extreme danger. In this situation it is the mother's duty to die rather than to consent to the killing of her child...Better that a thousand mothers should die than one foetus is unjustly killed.'* Francome and Vekemans

### **Free access to all medical care including abortion and contraception!**

AIDS and the need for access to free contraception play a crucial role in this discussion around abortion and the right of the church to decide whether everyone has a right to live. In Africa the mortality rate of women because of unsafe abortion is the highest in the world. Often, abortion is used as another way of contraception, because contraception is not available or sex education that explains how contraception should be used in the right way. For the year 2000, the UN estimated 42 million unsafe abortions took place with around 30,000 resulting into the woman's death. Nevertheless the major problem in Africa is still AIDS.

Sixty four per cent of the population in sub-Saharan Africa is infected by HIV/AIDS. The main reasons that the epidemic could spread that much are highly connected. It is the poverty, the problematic access to contraception, unsafe abortions - where women get contaminated by infected blood - and rape, especially high during civil wars such as those in Algeria or Congo.

*"On 4 March, 1998, the rape attacks led the Algerian government to ask the religious authorities to declare a 'fatwa' allowing women raped in a political situation to have abortions. Four days later, on International Women's Day, thousands of women demonstrated for a change in the law. This was agreed two months later".* Francome and Vekemans

Today, according to the World Health Organisation (WHO), out of the diminishing number of abortions worldwide, just under half – 20 million are under illegal and therefore unsafe conditions and with poorly trained or totally unskilled staff. 40% of them lead to severe medical problems. In the neo-colonial world, 16 in every thousand women have unsafe abortions. In the industrialised states it is two in every thousand. 20 to 40 % suffer infections or irreparable damages. In 2000, all together 67,700 women died in neo-colonial countries and 300 in industrial states after botched abortions.

The mortality rate amongst fertile woman, not just from abortions but also from genital diseases, could be decreased rapidly if contraception like pills and condoms was freely available for everyone.

### **Childhood mortality**

The arguments against abortion and the demand for a worldwide moratorium are obviously hypocritical, especially given the actual number of children dying worldwide. It is estimated that one billion people in the world suffer from hunger and malnutrition. 75% of the 24,000 people who die because of hunger every day are children under the age of five.

Every day in the year 2006, according to UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund), there were 26,000 children dying from malaria, measles, dysentery and AIDS.

As long as the present capitalist system continues to exist, pharmaceutical companies will be able to file patents and establish monopoly control over the production of retroviral and contraceptive preparations and other medicines urgently needed in the neo-colonial world. They will continue to sell them for high prices, instead of giving them for free which could save at least an estimated 10,000 lives a day.

Under capitalist market relations, vast amounts of food are wasted every day to keep the market prices high instead of making it available for everyone. The insanity of capitalism is the legacy of imperialism, dictatorial governments and civil war. The solution to all this destruction of human lives, energy and material is a system of socialist planning with public ownership of all major industries and genuine democratic control.

### **Rights under fire; women fight back**

Some upper class women mistakenly celebrate the 'liberation' of women, because more of them can get managerial jobs, become Chief Executive Officers of big companies and even reach the position of prime minister. However, if we dig a bit below the surface, we see that neither women nor the working class as a whole are truly free. Not only is a woman's right to choose in relation to abortion in danger, because of the planned sharpening of the laws in the USA, in Britain and elsewhere. But neo-liberalism – the real face of today's capitalism - accounts for privatisation and cuts in healthcare, as with the attacks on Britain's National Health Service and the increasing size of the low wage sector - a poverty-trap especially for women. The decline of kindergartens and the privatisation and increasing cost of education have a dramatic impact on the lives of women and their choices about having children.

The main reason why abortion is a current debate is the falling back over a lengthy period of struggle and on the part of the working class and labor movement.

After the collapse of Stalinism, the capitalists argued that there was no alternative to capitalism and that it can solve all problems through the market and through workers taking individual responsibility for their fate.

The most recent proof that this does not work could be seen in Germany where Nokia has just closed a factory. Altogether 4,300 people are losing their jobs and most of them are women.

Almost all the leaders of workers' organisations like trade unions and workers' parties moved to the right. The employer-employee partnership of union leaders paralysed struggles and lead a big layer of workers into a resigned attitude. The absence of struggle from below and big

workers' organisations that we could use to fight back against every single cut in our rights makes it easier for the ruling class to move to cut back every achievement of previous workers' movements.

Because of the economic crisis, the pressure on employers to search for more sources for profit is increasing. The new Nokia factory will be built in Rumania, where the workers will get ten times lower pay than in Germany and even less than a Romanian average wage.

However, when the closure was announced the Nokia workers started spontaneous strike action without consulting their paralysing union leadership. Two shifts did not go to work and one shift blocked a service road for two hours.

We see similar struggles among the shop workers at Tesco in Czestochowa, Poland.

This giant company is expanding in several countries such as Hungary, the Czech Republic and Taiwan where wages are low, and profits for the employers are therefore much higher. The mainly female shop workers at Tesco in Poland did not get a pay rise for nine years. They are threatening strike action.

Latin America is perhaps the continent where the most developed consciousness exists amongst workers about the question of where war, poverty, exploitation and oppression actually come from and how to defeat the capitalist system which is responsible.

In Bolivia the debate about the constituent assembly influences most the consciousness of the indigenous population. That can be seen during the debates about the demands of the delegates of the 'Union of female MPs of Bolivia' that met with the women members of the constituent assembly, in January 2007. They elected a co-ordinator for the constitutional debates and demanded the right of reproductive choice.

The current debate about abortion shows that it is not easy to carry out in a Catholic country like Bolivia. The commission 'Rights, Duties, Guarantees' wrote in their report: "The right to life starts with conception". Women's organisations rejected this formulation, saying it has a religious and conservative overtones.

### **Fight for socialism**

History shows that in every Revolution were the workers took actions to overcome the ruling rotten system, to build up socialism – it was always linked with the fight for liberty for women.

As seen in the Russian Revolution of 1917, workers were able to build a society that had real democracy and tried to equalise the rights for women and men, eliminate injustices against all oppressed nationalities and minorities in society including homosexuals. In Germany after the November revolution in 1918, women were allowed to vote for the first time. When, in 1936, during the Spanish revolution, the first steps made in Catalonia to bring factories and companies under the democratic control of the workers, abortion was allowed in the first three months of pregnancy. This meant that, after Russia, it was one of the first countries in the world to have a liberalised abortion law.

As socialists we stand in the tradition of the workers' movement and in the tradition of the Russian revolution that was the first successful workers' revolution in history.

We are aiming for a society where men and women are really equal - not just on paper. With industries publicly owned and democratically planned through elected committees of men and women, massive investment in labor-saving devices, including domestic appliances could immediately transform the lives of working women.

In a democratically planned economy and society, women will really be able to choose how to live. The unpaid domestic work and child care which fall mainly on the shoulders of women today will be done collectively through public and free services. Abortion also can be decreased by free affordable contraception and full sex education at any age.

As long as factories are in the hands of bosses and stockholders, women and men will not have equal rights. Women are needed by the capitalists to produce new workers, provide their own childcare and do domestic work and also as a cheaper worker, for low paid or unskilled work.

We must end forever these conditions of life for women world-wide through the fight to build new revolutionary mass workers' parties and the struggle for a socialist society.

"Abortion - A Worldwide Perspective" by Colin Francome and Marcel Vekemans, was published in 2007 by Middlesex University Press ([www.murpress.co.uk](http://www.murpress.co.uk)). It is a helpful book with good examples and much well researched information. It covers 82 countries and 90% of the female population of the world.

## Poland: Over 15 years of anti-abortion laws

*by Paul Newbery, Grupa na rzecz Międzynarodówki Robotniczej (CWI Poland)*

In the early 1990s, the restoration of capitalism in Poland led, not only to attacks on living standards and massive job losses, but also to brutal attacks on women's rights. Those attacks still continue today. Above all, it is working class women who suffer the most.

In 1993 the Catholic-nationalist forces organised around the post-Solidarity parties introduced an anti-abortion law which is one of the most restrictive in Europe. This law allows abortion only if the woman's life or health is at risk, if the foetus is deformed or suffers from an incurable disease, or if the pregnancy is a result of a criminal act such as rape or incest.

However, in practice even when women qualify for an abortion within the restrictions of the law, they are often prevented from realising their rights. Over the 15 years of the existence of the anti-abortion law a climate of fear has developed in the medical profession. Doctors often refuse abortions to women who have a lawful right to one because the doctors fear that they will be punished or due to their own religious prejudices. Women are often refused prenatal tests although they have the legal right to them, whilst many doctors claim that it is better that a woman does not know that she is carrying a deformed child until she gives birth. In the case of rape, the public prosecutors often delay or refuse to issue a certificate confirming that the woman is entitled to an abortion.

When Alicja Tysiac became pregnant for the third time, doctors warned that if she went ahead with the pregnancy her sight could become damaged or she could even lose her sight completely. However, no doctor was prepared to approve an abortion for her. As a result of giving birth to her child Alicja's sight deteriorated. She can now see no further than 1 metre and is unfit for work. Alicja took legal action against the Polish government at the Court for Human Rights in Strasbourg. The court ruled in her favour, arguing that her rights had been violated.

Agata Lamczak was less fortunate. Her pregnancy prevented proper treatment of ulcerous inflammation of the large intestine and weakened her organism. The doctor told her mother that "Agata is too interested in her own arse instead of being interested in something else". Agata died as a result of the doctors' refusal to terminate her pregnancy.

For many doctors, the life of the unborn child is more valuable than the life of the woman. This was summed up by an 'expert' who recently advised a parliamentary commission that legally a woman should be considered to be an "environment for the development of the child".

The situation in Poland is even more tragic due to the poor access to contraception and lack of information and sexual education. Contraceptive pills are available only on prescription, but are not refunded by the state. Due to underfunding in the health service and long waiting lists, women usually have to visit gynaecologists privately. Usually they have to make one visit every month in order to get the next month's pills. This makes the pill extremely expensive and puts it out of the reach of most working-class women.

Similarly, there is a growing abortion underground in Poland as well as 'abortion tourism'. However, with the cost of a safe illegal abortion at two or three times the salary of a school teacher, only wealthy women can choose this solution. Working-class women are most often forced to give birth to an unwanted child or choose a cheap but dangerous back-street abortion.

There are no official statistics on the scale of the phenomenon or how many women have died as a result, since the government prefers to pretend that the problem does not exist. However, estimates put the number of illegal abortions in Poland at around 80,000 per year.

Just over 18 months ago, the right-wing League of Polish Families attempted to change the constitution in order to introduce a total ban on abortion. In the campaign to defend women's rights and stop this ban, Polish miners from the trade union August 80 joined forces with women's rights campaigners and took to the streets. This time the right-wing was defeated and lost the vote in parliament. However, women's rights campaigners and the labor movement must be vigilant to prevent further attacks, and when the time is right, should fight back to regain the rights that capitalism has stolen from them

## USA: Abortion and US election

*by Dani Indovino, Socialist Alternative (CWI in the US)*

It's American election season again! What does that mean for many women's rights activists? The fight for abortion rights. Since before the US Supreme Court decision to legalise it in the 1972, abortion has been a divisive and emotional issue for both women and men across the country. Every election cycle, it seems that someone stirs the abortion pot, trying to make Americans lose sight of who they are voting for in favour of preserving their own values. Some pro-choice groups use the threat of an aging Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg as reason to adhere to lesser-evilism. Some women's groups organise large demonstrations of women in hopes of channelling them into the Democratic Party. However, once in office, the Democrats won't answer to their own promises and often stand by as women's rights are rolled back.

Gonzalez v. Carhart was handed down from the Supreme Court in 2007. The case stated that the federal ban on late term abortions was constitutional, even without a provision for the health of the woman. This decision was a major step back for women's rights. Not only did it show that doctors and health care providers were not given the final say in these decisions, it also, for the first time, allowed a federal regulation on abortion. Carhart was the latest of a systematic chipping away of the rights granted in Roe v. Wade, and now leaves abortion rights a shell of their former selves.

Democrats will not stop these attacks on women's rights. When given the chance to block the appointment of Justices that decided Carhart, only 25 Democrats voted for the filibuster (a parliamentary process that can block a vote from happening), most of whom were doing so to win last minute votes in their electoral campaigns. Democrats didn't stand up to the late term abortion ban in the first place, either, allowing it to pass in the Senate and the House.

The only way to build a strong base of women's rights, including affordable and comprehensive access to abortion, is a mass movement of women and workers that pressure from below. The two corporate parties are not going to roll back the existing attacks on women's rights. Politicians use social issues such as abortion in an attempt to divide the working class and divert its power away from its main task of organising for a higher standard of living and more access to choices of all kinds for all working people.

## Australia: No favours for working women under labor

*by Denise Dudley, Socialist Party Melbourne (CWI Australia)*

Australia is one of only two advanced capitalist countries in the world not to provide a government funded paid maternity leave scheme for women. The other is the United States. Only around a quarter of women workers in Australia have access to paid maternity leave and this is mostly because of trade union negotiated agreements at an enterprise level.

Some public employees are offered only two weeks paid maternity leave and many state based awards only offer around six weeks paid leave. While this may vary from state to state, it is appalling to see that a full time worker can legally be given as little as two weeks paid leave to have a baby and adapt to all the changes that this brings to someone's life.

To compound the problem, Australia also has one of the highest rates of casualisation in the world, at over 27%. It is not surprising that the majority of casual workers are also women. That is, the majority of working women do not receive any maternity leave whatsoever! This also means many women workers never receive basic entitlements that full time workers receive such as sick pay, and holiday pay or job security.

The eleven and a half year reign of conservative Prime Minister, John Howard made sure the issue of paid maternity leave was off the political agenda. Howard argued that such a plan would be too expensive. Apart from putting dollars before the well being of women and working families, his arguments also stemmed from his belief that women should be subordinate to men in society and that working men should be responsible for supporting their partners - not the state. Howard saw the 'nuclear family' as the cornerstone of capitalist society.

In order to divert attention away from the issue Howard was forced to introduce some changes to family tax benefits. He passed these changes off as reforms but in reality they were counter reforms that disadvantaged many low-paid women if they chose to return to work.

There is a great deal of hope amongst workers that the new Labor government of Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard will treat working women much better. In fact in recent weeks Labor has put the issue of paid maternity leave back on their agenda. This comes as it was quietly dumped before last year's national conference.

While Labor said they remained committed to parental leave (unpaid), its historically explicit support for publicly funded paid maternity leave was removed from its platform. But during the election campaign Labor were under some pressure from women's groups to revive the issue. They have now announced a 'productivity commission' inquiry into paid maternity leave to make recommendations as to what may be appropriate. As yet, there is no timeline for the end of this inquiry but it is not expected until next year at the earliest.

Labor has made it very clear that they will not implement anything that will be bad for business. They also want to ensure that those employers that currently offer some paid maternity leave will be not be encouraged to start relying on the government to take over the funding of these arrangements.

This leaves little confidence that there will be any serious attempt by Labor to implement a publicly funded paid maternity leave scheme in the short term. In fact this self proclaimed 'fiscal conservative' government will move to reduce public spending in the next period as they try to avoid the backlash from a world economic downturn.

The Socialist Party believes that all women should have the right to choose if and when they want to have children without worrying about how they will be economically affected. Women should also be able to choose if and when they return to work.

It is clear that the difference between Howard and Rudd is more of style rather than substance and we can not expect Labor to voluntarily give us anything. As with every advance in workers' wages or conditions nothing will be handed over without a fight. Paid maternity leave will only be won by waging a united campaign that involves women's groups, trade unions, community groups and progressive political parties.

It is only by also fighting for system change will we be able to ensure that these reforms are permanent and thus result in real choice and equality for working women.

## Brazil: P-SOL and abortion rights

by Alessandra Lacerda, *Socialismo Revolucionario (CWI Brazil)*

*“The proletariat can never be emancipated without first achieving the emancipation of women”*  
V.I. Lenin

According to the statistics from the Ministry of Health, in 2007 more than 2,000 legal abortions were performed by the Sistema Unico de Santa (SUS – the Brazilian public health system). But it is widely acknowledged that thousands of women had used backstreet abortions to avoid arrest. The health system receives an average of 250,000 women every year with complications resulting from backstreet abortions.

These backstreet abortions are a crime against women, the majority of whom are young, poor and black, but their cries for help are being ignored. This has to be changed.

In every circumstance a woman should be guaranteed to have the right to choose what they do with their body. But the media and macho society regard a woman's body as a reproductive machine, or as an object of consumption. Even if a pregnancy is not wanted by the mother, it has to be carried out, because in this way, a woman is performing her social duty, chosen for her by a maternal mythology. In a country with little preventative medicine, and also high unemployment where many want for dignified conditions of life, the legality of abortion is treated only as a moral and religious topic

For every 100,000 abortions carried out in backstreet clinics in Brazil, 100 women die. This does not include the number of women who have illegal abortions at home. The home abortions are performed with little medicine, knitting needles and other household instruments. This information is not part of the national statistics. The Alan Guttmacher Institute provided a dossier evaluating the number of back street abortions in the year 2000. The result indicated a variation between 700,000 and 1 million performed. This is outrageous and unacceptable.

### **Backstreet abortions**

The data from the SUS proves that 85% of women that go to hospital with haemorrhage from abortions have had backstreet abortions. Even the 15% of abortions considered natural could have been avoided with better public health service for women. Poverty, inequality, social exclusion, unwanted pregnancies and other factors all contribute to these abortions.

It is impossible to have a discussion about abortion without also discussing class. It is evident that working-class women suffer more because of a lack of interest from the public health system and the moral arguments from the Christian sections of the capitalist state. The pressure against women goes beyond social classes, but working class women suffer a double oppression.

### **Legalisation of abortion**

Against this background the president of PSoL (the Party of Socialism and Liberty founded in 2004 which the CWI Brazil participates in), Helena Heloisa positions herself clearly against the legalisation of abortion. In the party's National Congress last year it was noted that the party had shifted to the right and that the issue can be used as an example of this and also reveals some of the contradictions within the party. A resolution defending the legalisation of abortion was voted in. Heloisa, who has origins in the Christian right and calls herself a Christian Trotskyist, has put herself in a contradictory situation, and has tried to avoid discussing this issue.

At the national women's meeting of PSOL and later on the first National Congress of the party the resolution was carried even though Helena was against it.

Not satisfied with this result, Heloisa behaved as if the resolution was not party policy, and publicly opposed abortion, uniting herself with the most reactionary elements of society: the Catholic Church, the right wing, and the Association of Mothers against Abortion, etc.

Simultaneously, Psol and other left-wing groups are organising themselves to fight for the right to legal abortions, and have formed the legalisation of abortion committee, which is a big step forward.

There are many complications in the struggle for women's rights in Brazil. Lula, the Brazilian president, his neo-liberal government and the rightward shift of his party, the Workers' Party (PT) and the confusion among their supporters form a major aspect of these complications. Historically the PT was seen as a party for the working class but Lula has accepted the logic of capitalism. Feminists and socialists must address this complex situation as part of the struggle to defend abortion.

Within PSOL, we need to continue to fight these attacks, strengthening the support for abortion rights, as approved by the majority of the first National Congress, even with Heloisa being publically against it.

## Italy: Women's rights under attack

*by Linda Schütz, Lotta (CWI Italy)*

This year is the 30th anniversary of the passing of Italy's abortion Law 194 which was the result of mass struggles of the workers' and women's movements.

The law is relatively progressive allowing abortion in the first twelve weeks of pregnancy. After this, abortions can be carried out if there is a risk to the health of the woman or foetal abnormality. The law does not stipulate any time limit, but prohibits abortion from the time the foetus can survive independently. It is up to the doctor to decide when this is.

### **Abortion under attack**

Since 1982 the abortion rate in Italy has fallen by 45% but the law has come under constant attack from the right and the Catholic Church in particular, which wants a complete ban on abortion. The Pope and his representatives constantly speak out about the 'right to life' and the church is increasingly interfering in Italian political and social issues.

Now with an election campaign under way, the reactionary climate is worsening. On 12 February armed police raided a clinic in Naples after an anonymous phone caller said that an illegal abortion had taken place. In the clinic the police interrogated a 39-year-old woman who had only just had an abortion and sequestered the aborted foetus as possible evidence!

This incident resulted in tens of thousands of women and men immediately taking to the streets throughout Italy. The majority of Italians are in favour of keeping the abortion law as it is. According to a survey reported in the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera* (6.1.08), 73% say that it is not right to prohibit abortion. Even amongst those who say they go to mass at least once a week - that is to say the most religious - a majority (53%) say that it would not be appropriate to ban abortion.

More protests are planned for 8 March and if the right-wing win the election in April, even bigger protests are possible.

### **Further attacks possible**

Abortion is rapidly becoming an election issue. A pro-life election list will be standing and Silvio Berlusconi, leader of the right-wing 'People of liberty' list which is ahead in the opinion polls, has spoken in favour of a United Nations moratorium on abortion.

If Berlusconi's list wins the election, we could see further attacks on a woman's right to choose. The previous Berlusconi government introduced Law 40 in 2004 which reduces women's access to fertility treatment. This law aims to protect the right of the foetus in several ways. Only a maximum of three embryos are allowed and all three must be implanted. Until this month, when a new ruling was made, pre-implantation diagnosis for embryos was banned.

The result of this law has been an increase in multiple pregnancies that can seriously put at risk the health of the mother and the development of the pregnancy. It has also led to an increase in abortions because of foetal abnormality!

Of course, wealthy couples can travel abroad. Four Italian couples a day, for example, travel to Barcelona for fertility treatment and fertility 'tourism' is becoming a growing business.

One example of the power of the Catholic Church in Italy is what has happened to the abortion pill RU-486. This is a safe and simple non-surgical method of abortion in the early stages of pregnancy which has been on the market for over 10 years. It was only in the last few months that the centre-left government agreed to RU-486 being made available in Italy. But if the right-wing wins the election this could be under threat.

The right to abortion is also threatened by the fact that half of doctors in Italy will not carry out abortions, declaring themselves conscientious objectors.

### **The right to choose**

The right to choose when and whether to have children is also undermined by economic attacks. In Italy wages are amongst the lowest in Europe. There are five million precarious workers with temporary contracts sometimes lasting for only three months. There have been cases of women being bullied into having an abortion by employers.

One example is the story of Franca (*La Repubblica* 26.04.07) an accountant in a small food business in the province of Naples. The first time she became pregnant at the age of 25 she was on a temporary contract and her partner was unemployed. She had to decide between the job and a child and decided to have an abortion. Five years later she got a fixed contract but with it a blank resignation letter which she was forced to sign in case she got pregnant! This is not an uncommon practice.

In addition to the situation in the labor market, there is the lack of childcare and the difficult housing situation. As a result of all this the birth rate in Italy is one of the lowest in the world. A banner on a demonstration defending abortion rights in 2006 read: "Precarious working is the contraceptive of the future".

### **Contraception and sex education**

Contraception and the morning after pill are available in Italy but it is very difficult to get access to family planning centres. Only one third of the family planning centres that should be there by law actually exist. These are rarely open or lack personnel. There are waiting lists that make the centres completely useless for things like the morning after pill. The average waiting time for a gynaecological visit is 20 days! In Bologna and Palermo it is more than two months. Underfunding means that there is no one to answer the phone and staff are not properly trained.

Many of the unplanned pregnancies are amongst teenagers and more than half the users (55%) of the morning after pill are less than 20 years old. In addition there were more than 4,000 abortions carried out in 2005 on very young women. There has also been an increase in sexually transmitted diseases. Sex education in schools does not exist resulting in a lack of awareness about the need

for safe sex. One girl wrote in the Forum of the MTV programme Loveline: "I do not use anything.... I don't think of diseases, I believe that no person is so nasty not to tell if he had something..."

### **The need for a socialist society**

The situation in Italy clearly shows how the right to choose cannot be reduced to access to contraception and abortion. An important question is how work and having children can be combined. The level of pay, the type of contract and level of security and working conditions (working hours, paid maternity and paternity leave etc) are also very important. Free and good childcare with places for every child and flexible opening hours would make it easier to combine work and children.

The problems at work, rising prices, cutbacks in services all show that the struggle for women's rights is closely connected to struggles of all workers on industrial, social and environmental issues and for the struggle against a system based on competition, profit and private ownership.

Our goal is different, a socialist society without a hierarchy in the family and in society and free from the interference of the Church in social issues. A society where the work that women do unpaid in the home can be organised collectively through public services. A society without a basis for sexism, the sex trade or violence against women. A society where women truly have the right to choose.

### **Contacting the CWI**

The Committee for a Workers' international has affiliated parties and organisations in more than 35 countries, on all continents. The way to contact our comrades differs from country to country. Some you can contact directly. For others, it is easier to do it via the CWI office in London, just e-mail to the International Office of the CWI: [cwi@worldsoc.co.uk](mailto:cwi@worldsoc.co.uk) or contact us at PO Box 3688, London, E11 1YE, Britain. Telephone: + 44 (0)20 8988 8760. Fax: + 44 (0)20 8988 8793. Visit our website at: <http://www.socialistworld.net>

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