

Women's Liberation Through Socialist Revolution! Smash Anti-Abortion Reaction!

The right of American women to choose whether or not to have children is under siege. The reactionary July 3rd United States Supreme Court ruling which upheld a Missouri law prohibiting the performance of abortions in publicly-funded medical facilities, represents an ominous step toward outlawing abortion altogether in the U.S. The *Webster v. Reproductive Health Services* decision did not overturn the historic 1973 *Roe v. Wade* ruling which upheld the right to abortion, but, as Justice Harry A. Blackmun noted in his dissent:

"The plurality opinion is filled with winks and nods and knowing glances to those who would do away with *Roe* explicitly, but turns a stone face to anyone in search of what the plurality conceives as the scope of a woman's right under the due process clause to terminate a pregnancy free from the coercive and brooding influence of the State...

"...the signs are evident and very ominous."

The *Webster* decision is only one point on the Reaganite Supreme Court majority's right-wing agenda. The ruling was accompanied by a series of decisions effectively removing the right of women and minorities to legal protection against racial or sexual discrimination. At the same time, the court upheld the "right" of white males to seek redress for so-called reverse discrimination where women or blacks got jobs through affirmative action programs.

In Canada last summer there were two well publicized cases where men obtained temporary court injunctions to deny their former lovers abortions. In July, Barbara Dodd was denied an abortion for a week on these grounds, before an appeals court overturned the original injunction. (In a pathetic postscript, Dodd was reconciled to her boyfriend and renounced her decision at a press conference organized by the anti-abortion fanatics.) The other case involved a heroic Quebec woman, Chantal Daigle, who was dragged through the courts for a month in a legal wrangle with her former boyfriend over her right to an abortion. Eventually the Supreme Court of Canada ruled in her favor; however, before they did, Daigle publicly announced that she had already obtained an abortion. Daigle's courage and dignity throughout the whole humiliating ordeal inspired a groundswell of popular support for her which vented the judiciary from citing her with contempt.

In the U.S., the Supreme Court is expected to broaden its attack on women's rights with rulings on the constitutionality of compulsory parental notification before minors can have abortions. Last year there were over a million teenage pregnancies in the U.S.—including some 30,000 amongst youths 14 or younger.

Anyone old enough to get pregnant is old enough to decide whether or not to consult her parents about an abortion. Young women who consulted their parents about having intercourse in the first place will presumably continue to take them into their confidence. Paren-

tal notification legislation is aimed at restricting the right of young people to be sexually active. It represents a gross infringement on their right to privacy in medical treatment—not just to terminate pregnancy, but also to have access to birth control and treatment of sexually transmitted disease.

Access to abortion is already severely limited. The Alan Guttmacher Institute, which studies abortion statistics, recently reported that 82 percent of the 3,116 counties in the United States now have no doctors, clinics or hospitals that perform abortions, an increase of 4 percent since 1980. There are only about a half-dozen doctors in the entire state of Montana that still perform abortions and, in Duluth, in Northern Minnesota, there is only one clinic to serve 24 surrounding counties—and the doctor must be flown in from Minneapolis because no Duluth doctor will do the procedure.

The decision to let each state determine the availability of abortion virtually guarantees that in many states women who can not afford private medical treatment will not be able to obtain abortions. Yet the Supreme Court ruling has galvanized pro-choice sentiment against the reactionary anti-abortion offensive. This was reflected by the 11 October vote of the House of Representatives to restore federal funding for abortion in cases of rape or incest (subsequently vetoed by George Bush). That same week, Florida Governor Bob Martinez's attempts to introduce new restrictions on the availability of abortion were rebuffed. "Lawmakers said their action reflected what they were hearing from their constituents: a growing backlash against the recent United States Supreme Court ruling that opened the way for stricter abortion laws" (*New York Times*, 12 October).

Safe abortions will always be available for those who can pay; but for teenagers, poor and working-class women who cannot afford the high fees charged by private doctors, the denial of access to abortion can be a matter of life and death. It would mean a return to the dangerous back-alley abortions of the past.

'Right-to-Lifers': Anti-Choice Reaction In the Service of Capital

The anti-abortion campaign is part of a larger reactionary bourgeois offensive to take back rights won by working people and the oppressed over the past five decades. The Republicans, who led this drive, recognized the importance of establishing an electoral base among lower income voters, many of whom were Catholic and traditionally voted Democrat. The imperialist jingoism of the Reagan White House had a certain appeal to this constituency; but it was opposition to "secular humanism," and the defense of "traditional family values" which cemented the alliance between the Republican right and the religious fundamentalists.

Like most movements of social reaction, the revival

of the religious right did not originate with the bourgeoisie. It had its roots in the hysterical reaction of the most ignorant and backward elements of the petty bourgeoisie and the white working class to the social changes of the past quarter century. Yet regardless of their origins, such movements can be extremely useful to the ruling class. Every form of false consciousness, every bigoted notion and obscurantist prejudice which inhibits a rational understanding of society, ultimately serves as a prop for the existing social order. Workers who believe that their increasing difficulty in making ends meet is all part of god's master plan, and that the local abortion clinic is the work of the devil, are far less dangerous to their bosses—and to the state—than those who understand that their declining standard of living is a product of an irrational economic system which puts profit ahead of human need.

In the vanguard of the "pro-family" forces' most recent attacks is "Operation Rescue," an organization devoted to putting obstacles in the path of women seeking abortion. This sinister collection of bible-thumping bigots gained national attention when it staged a series of attempts during the 1988 Democratic National Convention to block access to abortion clinics. The movement of "family"-oriented social reaction not only wants to outlaw abortion, it also opposes equal rights for women, gay rights, sex education, birth control for teenagers, and publication of sexually-explicit materials ("pornography"). For the twisted moralists of the religious right, *all* sexual activity is sinful unless it occurs between married adults and is intended to beget children. Marxists, by contrast, believe that people have the right to do what they want in their personal/sexual lives and oppose all attempts by the state to regulate sexual morality. The right to the "pursuit of happiness" must include the individual's right to engage in the sexual activities of his/her choice, subject only to the informed consent of the other party(ies).

Naturally, the anti-abortion movement overlaps significantly with those who advocate school prayer and the teaching of so-called "creation science." "Pro-lifers" instinctively recognize that they have a natural enemy in scientific and medical progress. This is dramatically confirmed in their frenzied—and unfortunately so far effective—opposition to the RU 486 pill, developed in France, which enables women to terminate their pregnancies in the privacy of their own homes. Some 2,000 French women use this pill every month. If it were available in America, it could make abortion clinics virtually obsolete.

Roussel-Uclaf, the French company distributing the pill, has not attempted to retail the drug outside France. Its North American affiliate, Hoechst-Roussel, in deference to the clout of the anti-abortion constituency, as well as pressure from the federal government, has refused to even seek regulatory approval. For the moment, North American women only have access to the drug on the black market.

The Erosion of the Nuclear Family

The high-sounding talk about the "sanctity of life" spouted by the anti-choice bigots is only a religious/

ideological disguise for what is really at issue: the erosion of the nuclear family over the past several decades. For much of this century, it was possible for ascendant American imperialism to preserve the "traditional" nuclear family: dad went to work, while mom stayed home and raised the kids. In the proletariat the man was a wage slave and the woman was, as Frederick Engels said, "the slave of a slave," doubly oppressed—first as a member of the working class, and then as a woman.

Trapped and isolated at home, the wife/mother in the traditional nuclear family is responsible for providing psychological and emotional support for the alienated male wage laborer, and a secure and loving environment for their children. But for most women, the home is a prison, not a haven. Marxists have always encouraged female participation in the work force. As housewives, proletarian women are *part* of the working class, but they are atomized and powerless. Only insofar as they participate in production do they participate directly in the class struggle—the only means by which the fundamental conditions of their lives can be changed.

The dilemma of many contemporary working households is that while wage levels have declined to the point that the single-income working-class family is a thing of the past, capitalist society has not provided any replacement for the nuclear family or its traditional division of labor. More and more women today hold permanent, full-time jobs. Freed from the isolation of the home and their dependency on a husband-breadwinner, many women have at least been able to escape oppressive or unhappy marriages. This is reflected in an increase in the rate of divorce. Moreover, for educated, professional women, it is no longer *necessary* to get married; the wide-spread use of contraception and access to abortion have made it possible for greater numbers of women to pursue careers.

This loosening of women's dependency on men has provoked a frightened reaction by a resurgent religious right which intuitively understands that the patterns of authority and obedience instilled in the family are essential to the preservation of the larger social hierarchy. Hysteria about the demise of the family is the basis for the campaign waged since the mid-1970s by the right-wing fundamentalists in Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority, and similar movements, to turn back the tide—to get women out of the workplace and back into the home.

In this society, the woman question also intersects that of race. Black (and other minority) working-class women are triply oppressed—as workers, as blacks and as women. Lack of equal educational opportunity and discriminatory hiring practices have meant generations of chronic unemployment in black neighborhoods, and the resultant poverty has greatly accelerated the breakdown of the black family. Black children are growing up in one-parent, poverty-stricken homes in unprecedented numbers. In 1950, nine percent of black homes were headed by one parent; in 1970 it had risen to a third. Today *half* of all black families with children are headed by a single parent, usually the mother. The culture of poverty at the bottom of racist America, into which ever

greater numbers of black children are born, is a vicious trap with no way out except for a lucky few.

Bourgeois Feminism and the Fake-Left

Last April, the National Organization for Women (NOW), a bourgeois women's organization, sponsored a huge march in Washington in defense of abortion rights. Since the march, NOW's membership has jumped by 40,000 and is now over 200,000. This has caught the attention of various opportunist left organizations, who are always looking for new bandwagons to climb onto. In an article headlined "Will NOW fritter away this opportunity?" in the August issue of *Socialist Worker*, the International Socialist Organization (ISO) declared that: "Socialists and other supporters of abortion rights should welcome the news of NOW's surging membership...." The supposedly Marxist ISO sees its role as nudging NOW to the left, and is thus offering helpful recommendations like, "If alliances are to be made, they should be made with anti-racists and with trade unionists" rather than the bourgeois politicians and ecology freaks NOW is currently pursuing.

Socialist Action (SA), an ostensibly Trotskyist paper published by a group of the same name, has for some months been featuring speeches and interviews with various bourgeois feminists (including NOW leaders) who are blandly described as "leaders of the women's movement." Indeed Socialist Action members have been joining NOW in an attempt to pressure it from inside. They report that some women in NOW are "suspicious" of their motives and ask, "If you don't think that we can get equality anyway, what are you doing in a group like the National Organization for Women (NOW), which is fighting for equality within the system?" (SA, July 1989). SA responds that, "We need mass independent feminist organizations like the National Organization for Women," and claims that SA has "an important contribution to make to the abortion rights movement and to the National Organization for Women"! At the same time, SA timidly ventures that NOW's "single-issue focus in the electoral arena" is a "dangerous flaw."

Despite the wishful thinking of the opportunist left, NOW is not the reincarnation of the radical women's movement of the late 1960s. NOW's whole purpose is to channel women's anger into bourgeois electoralism and pressure politics. NOW is a *bourgeois* organization, with an explicitly pro-capitalist ideology and leadership. The opportunists of SA and ISO, who hope to win members and influence among women in the pro-choice movement by adaptation to NOW's program and leadership, cannot admit this simple truth.

While it is perfectly principled for socialists to join demonstrations initiated by NOW against reactionary attacks on the right to abortion, it is something else to promote illusions in its bourgeois leadership. The job of Leninists in the women's movement is to help the working class and the oppressed to understand that their real interests are *counterposed* to those of the capitalist class. Proletarian women do not need NOW, or any other vehicles of the racist, sexist Democratic Party—they need a movement committed to fight for their interests:

a communist women's movement, linked to a revolutionary workers party.

NOW is an organization with a history of explicit anti-communism. In 1977, after years of thankless donkey-work as the "best builders" for Steinem et al, the reformist Socialist Workers Party, (SWP—from which SA is descended) was red-baited out of NOW at its tenth national convention with the following motion:

"...this conference protests attempts by the SWP to use NOW as a vehicle to place before the public the agenda of their organization and to exploit the feminist movement. We bitterly resent and will not tolerate any group's attempt to deflect us from the pursuit of our feminist goals."

The SWP women were reportedly horrified when their bourgeois "sisters" gave them the boot. In the unlikely event that SA or the ISO make any headway retailing their brand of "socialism" in NOW, they can expect similar treatment.

NOW and the Politics of Women's Liberation

These days, NOW's leadership is concentrating on prospects in the bourgeois electoral arena. In a column in the July issue of *Ms.*, Gloria Steinem wrote: "now is the time to translate pro-choice energy into votes and voter turnout...there is a lot of free-floating anger out there, and it should be channeled into political action." By "political action" Steinem and NOW president Molly Yard mean electing more liberal Democrats to Congress and state legislatures. But the *Webster* decision itself underscores the futility of this approach. The Democratic Party has controlled both houses of Congress for most of the past two decades—yet every one of the conservative justices who ruled in *Webster* was confirmed in this period. Moreover, it was the last Democratic administration, under Jimmy Carter, which took away Medicaid funding for abortion.

While the Republicans have been more forthright in the campaign against abortion rights, it is important for activists to remember that the Democrats and Republicans are *partners* in administering U.S. capitalism. They have *no* fundamental differences. Reliance on the Democrats to fight for the oppressed is a prescription for defeat. The only way that women, blacks or workers have ever won anything is through *social struggle* against the interests of capital—not by the grace of either of the twin parties of racism and imperialist war.

NOW's leadership is currently pushing Malthusian environmentalism. NOW president Yard recently remarked: "There is a direct connection between the environment, population explosion and the need to stabilize population growth....We must have a two-child family worldwide, and to achieve it we must have family planning and birth control." However, the problem is not that too many people are being born, but that the production and distribution of food and other necessities under capitalism is determined entirely by the profit motive.

NOW reflects the concerns of its college-educated, professional and semi-professional membership, paying little attention to the burning issues affecting working women. Working-class women in America need

access to well-paid, dignified jobs; they need good, affordable housing; they need free, comprehensive health care which not only covers abortion but also pre-natal and post-natal care; birth control and all medical costs; and free, 24-hour child-care centers. Because it accepts the continued existence of racist, class-divided capitalist society, which is rooted in social inequality and oppression, NOW offers little to the majority of women.

Feminists, who limit their perspectives to trying to advance women's interests within capitalist society, inevitably come up with the wrong answers for many of the problems they seek to address. For example, the "take back the night" mobilizations (an attempt to deal with the very real dangers to women walking down American streets) end up demanding more cops. But increasing the number of racist, trigger-happy thugs for the bourgeoisie on the streets is no solution. Marxists understand that only by tackling the problem at its root—the dog-eat-dog system which creates a permanent under-class with nothing to look forward to and nothing to lose—can the growing social pathology within American society be eliminated.

Or take the question of child support. Both feminists and Marxists favor making divorce easier to obtain, but most feminists have also supported draconian legislation for police enforcement of child-support court decrees. This can be traced to an acceptance of the inevitability of the nuclear family as the basic social unit. Marxists uphold the socialist principle that the care and feeding of the next generation must be seen as a social responsibility; and we therefore advocate that the costs of child support should be borne by the state.

Feminism and the Family

While the bourgeois state attempts to promote the family both ideologically and through state intervention, the workings of the market tend to undermine it by driving down the family wage to the level of an individual subsistence wage. When survival requires two wage-earners, the working-class family faces a host of problems to which those of the professional petty-bourgeoisie are largely immune. Meals are not prepared, domestic chores are left undone, and children cannot be cared for after school. Juvenile crime and family tensions increase. Right-wing demagogues seek to tap this anxiety by preaching a return to traditional "family values" and directing this inchoate anger against "women's liberation" in general, and abortion clinics in particular.

Middle-class feminists who see marriage and child-rearing as a personal rather than a social and economic matter, cannot understand why the issue of the family is so volatile in the working class. As long as the cause of women's emancipation is associated in the public mind with the aspirations of relatively privileged career women like Gloria Steinem and Betty Friedan, the religious right will continue to be the principal benefactor of the current crisis of the family. Some liberal feminists sense this and have sought to address it with talk of a

"family agenda," to assure working-class women that feminism is no enemy of the nuclear family.

Marxism versus Feminism

The oppression of women cannot be combated by pragmatic adaptations to the current political mood. Marxists, guided by a historical materialist understanding, have always argued that the question of the family stands at the heart of women's oppression in capitalist society. The sexual division of labor within the family, which confines the woman to a subordinate role, is undeniably much older than capitalist society. But the modern nuclear family (which replaced the older extended family with the rise of the bourgeoisie), preserved the essential male and female roles upon which all family forms are based.

While the economic changes of the last several decades have seriously eroded the nuclear family, capitalism has not and cannot create the conditions for its replacement. The family can only be transcended through socialization of the functions now carried on within the domestic orbit—principally housework and child-raising. Only on a secure material foundation can decisions about sexual partners and/or child-bearing become a matter of choice for all, not just for a privileged minority. But an economic system driven by the necessity to maximize private profit is organically *incapable* of allocating sufficient material resources to provide these services for everyone.

The pervasive sexism of capitalist society places real obstacles in the path of every woman, including aspiring career women. Resistance to the idea of female equality may be more hypocritically concealed in corporate boardrooms or academic departments than it is on the factory floor, but it remains very real. Legal guarantees against job discrimination, programs to promote hiring of women, and legislation enforcing equal pay for equal work, are therefore of great importance for the upwardly mobile woman.

These issues, which have been paramount on the NOW agenda for the last fifteen years, were highlighted in the (unsuccessful) campaign for the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). As advocates of sexual equality, Marxists support passage of legislation like the ERA, while warning against the illusion that it is possible to end women's oppression without overturning capitalist property relations.

It is the class struggle, and not any "battle between the sexes," which will ultimately determine the future of humanity. And only the working class, with its diverse sexual and racial composition, has both the social power and the objective interest to eliminate the material basis of all forms of social oppression through the socialist reconstruction of society.

The fight for women's emancipation therefore cannot be separated from the struggle for a new social order governed not by private profit, but by human need—that is, the struggle for socialism. Such a struggle is incompatible with the fundamental premise of feminism in both its liberal and radical varieties, namely, that the emancipation of women is essentially the task of

“women themselves.” Women belong to different social classes, and thus have different social interests. The more privileged strata lack not only the social power—but also the objective interest—in a radical transformation of the existing social order.

Women workers have a special interest in combating the poison of male chauvinism which pervades society. The working class cannot fight for the socialist future without championing the interests of women and all the oppressed, and it is within the context of the *class struggle* that the fight for women’s equality acquires its full power and scope.

The U.S. Supreme Court’s green light to the anti-abortion bigots brings to the forefront the defense of abortion rights. The main arena in which this struggle must be fought is not the courtroom or legislature, but the streets. Mobilizing the power of organized labor is key to winning this battle. The organization and deployment of union defense guards, backed by the power of the workers movement at the point of production, could soon send Operation Rescue and the rest of the “right-to-life” fanatics scurrying back to the safety of their bible classes. This requires a struggle for a new, class-struggle leader-

ship in the unions, committed to rallying the workers and oppressed for the defensive struggles of today, and in so doing, cutting across existing racial, sexual and ethnic divisions, thus laying the basis for the revolutionary offensives of tomorrow.

- ***Free abortion on demand! For union defense guards to protect abortion clinics!***
- ***Free quality health care for all! Free birth control on demand! Free quality 24-hour child-care facilities!***
- ***Immediate divorce on the request of either partner—full, state-funded child support!***
- ***Government out of the bedrooms! Full democratic rights for gays! No state intervention in sexual relations between consenting individuals! Decriminalize prostitution!***
- ***For a state stipend available to all young people, to allow them economic independence from the family!***
- ***Women’s liberation through socialist revolution!***