

Reproductive Rights & the “Partial-Birth” Abortion Ban

On November 5, 2003, for the first time since the passage of *Roe v. Wade* in 1973, a President signed a bill that bans an abortion procedure. George W. Bush, in signing the so-called, “‘Partial-Birth’ Abortion Act”, has endangered the health of American women by limiting a doctor’s ability to make informed medical decisions as to what form of treatment is most appropriate for her/his patient - at the risk of a prison sentence.

Almost immediately after the signing of the bill, federal injunctions were obtained by abortion providers (pending a Supreme Court determination of the law’s constitutionality) halting the application of the legislation. Since the legislation did not contain a maternal health exemption it is reasonable to hope that the Supreme Court will simply strike it down. If, however, it (or legislation similar to it) is applied in the end, the purposefully vague use of the politically-loaded and non-medical term, ‘partial-birth abortion’ will have far-reaching consequences and prevent the performance of many second-trimester procedures as well.

This Act is sobering evidence of a larger campaign to systematically eliminate the gains that the feminist movement has made towards reproductive rights for women; this patriarchal retrenchment has reduced access to comprehensive sex education in our public school system, campaigned against universal access to (and choice in) contraception, denied government support for poor women who choose to raise children, moved to prevent the application of a safe medical abortion method (RU-486), cut millions of dollars from essential family planning and disease prevention agencies world-wide, and used a variety of means to control the fertility of women of color.

As socialist feminists, we condemn this backlash.

Reproductive rights are essential to women’s equality. If women do not have sovereignty over their bodies they are not able to participate equally in society-at-large and they stand to suffer the indignity of being reduced to reproductive vessels. The burden of pregnancy is one that only women must bear and even in the 21st century, child-rearing is still labor that is disproportionately relegated to the female of the sex. Patriarchal structures seek to exploit these facts to relegate women to a second-class citizenship where men control women’s fertility - and thus, their lives.

The pro-choice movement must be congratulated for concentrating on the task of bringing the public focus back to the real subject of this debate: the woman and her right to control her body and future. The pro-choice movement has powerfully articulated

the horror of passing legislation which will harm some of the most vulnerable people imaginable: the happily pregnant woman who receives the terrible news late in her pregnancy that her fetus has a major medical problem, the child incest survivor who is unable to receive medical treatment until she can be removed from a harmful familial situation, and the woman whose health or life is compromised due to a pregnancy.

As socialist feminists, we must expose how this legislation negatively impacts some other vulnerable groups of American women, who in fact, may in greater numbers represent the potential victims of this legislation: (a) working-class and poor women who often receive second-trimester abortions (and more rarely third-trimester abortions) because they lack immediate funds for an earlier procedure, lack health insurance and fail to receive timely care and medical advice, and/or lack the ability to immediately

travel to a county where they can access abortion services (87% of US counties have no abortion provider; source: NARAL Pro-Choice America, 2003); and (b) young women in states with parental notification or consent laws who must either make preparations to travel to another state or circumvent the law by going through the lengthy process of obtaining a judicial bypass from a judge.

We must find a way to articulate the reality of all of these women’s lives if we are to not only successfully fight this most recent attack - but if we are to build a move-

ment which stands for reproductive freedom for all American women.

The organized pro-choice movement has responded by mobilizing to fight back and all socialists, feminists, and progressively-minded persons must answer their call. The March for Women’s Lives (www.marchforwomen.org) is being organized by the American Civil Liberties Union, Black Women’s Health Imperative, Planned Parenthood Federation, NARAL Pro-Choice America, National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health, the National Organization of Women, and the Feminist Majority Foundation and will bring hundreds of thousands of committed activists to Washington, DC on April 25, 2004. This action is strongly endorsed by the Young Democratic Socialists of America. We are heartened to see these organizations coming together in sisterhood at such a crucial moment, to organize what will undoubtedly be an historic event.

