

Anti-abortionists told to SPUC OFF!

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Ireland is a conservative country. Since the founding of the southern state 70 years ago, church has been intertwined with state. The majority of its citizens belong to the Catholic Church. Catholic ethos is enshrined in the constitution, in the laws, in the education system. Catholic tentacles make there way into most areas of public policy.

Yet Ireland is changing. Where previously the church was an almost unquestioned authority on moral issues in Ireland, now the positions many Irish people hold on social issues are in direct conflict with the church. The most recent example of this were the abortion referenda held on November 26th, 1992.

The sea change that has occurred in Ireland on the highly emotive issue of abortion reflects a change in the fabric of Irish society. As anarchists we are committed to a basic change in the present system. This will only occur when the working class no longer accept the legitimacy of capitalism. It is frequently argued, usually by those with a blinkered knowledge of history that, it is impossible for society to change in such a fundamental way.

Yet societies do evolve. People do break from the dogmas of the past. Humanity isn't caught in a stuck groove. One of the questions socialists must be able to answer is how do ideas change. It is by looking at the examples that history throws up that we can find the answer. So what did happen in Ireland in 1992? Who were the key players? Who was influential and who wasn't and lastly what are the implications of the abortion result.

why a referendum? ...the background

In February 1992, the Attorney General, in accordance with the Constitution, placed an injunction on a 14 year old alleged rape victim. The purpose of the injunction was to prevent her from travelling to Britain in order to obtain an abortion. Irish people were appalled. Protests sprang up immediately. For two weeks there were near continuous demonstrations at the Dáil. Internationally the case received huge coverage, with foreign news crews flooding into the country.

Fianna Fáil, the party in power, had just gone through a leadership change and the last thing they wanted was to be saddled with another abortion controversy. The Attorney General's ruling was upheld in the High Court. At a march organised by the Dublin Abortion Information Campaign (DAIC), 10,000 people chanted 'for a womens' right to choose'.

Faced with this mounting anger the government took the unprecedented steps of offering to pay any court costs, enabling Ms X to travel to England. In doing so it interpreted the Constitution a new way and changed Irish law in regard to abortion.

Where previously abortion was completely illegal now it seemed that abortions could be performed here if there was a threat to the life of the mother, including the threat of suicide. However in any other case, it would still be possible to obtain injunctions in order to prevent a women travelling. The "pro-life" movement was up in arms about abortion on hallowed Irish soil. The government did not want to face the embarrassment of further injunctions.

It was faced with two possible solutions to the thorny problem it faced. Either to resolve it though legislation, which would entail introducing abortion in some form into Ireland. Or to hold a referendum, thus avoiding the necessity of stating their own position on the issue. As politicians they did not want to alienate the "pro-life" movement, which is influential in rural areas. Neither did the party want to isolate the mass of new liberal working class voters that they are currently wooing as their traditional rural base dwindles.

Their attempt to sit on the fence resulted in a referendum wording which neither side liked very much. The electorate were asked to vote in three separate referenda. The first two were straightforward and dealt with the right to travel and the right to abortion information. The third dealt with the so-called 'substantive' issue of abortion. The wording allowed for abortion in this country where "the life as opposed to the health" of the women was threatened "excluding the threat of suicide".

Fianna Fail... the peoples' party

Immediately previous to the "X" case a shift in power had occurred within FF ranks. Charles Haughey was replaced as leader and Taoiseach by Albert Reynolds. Traditionally FF strength had been in rural Irish communities. Now however nearly a third of the population lives in the greater Dublin area with many more in large cities and towns. Enormous movement from the countryside has meant that support in urban areas is crucial to any party wanting to form a government.

In order to survive, FF has to be able to capture the more liberal ground that Labour and elements of FG held. Previously the "pro-life" campaign was very influential within FF by virtue of its ability to ensure electoral death for any TD which refused to support it's demands. For this reason in 1983 it was able to force the government to call an anti-abortion referendum.

Times have changed however. The support of the "pro-life" movement for FF is not worth the possible expense of losing liberal voters. The Maastricht treaty contained a protocol copperfastening the Irish ban on abortion. During this referendum, FF succeeded in seizing the middle ground, portraying both the "pro-life" and pro-choice groups as extremists. They attempted to do the same thing in the abortion referendum. However while the FF government may have put the referenda on the table, the FF party did not take part in any campaign to ensure their wording was passed. An MRBI poll (Irish Times 13/11/91) held before the referendum indicated that only 50% of FF supporters were in favour of the Governments wording on the substantive issue.

The rest of Dáil

FF silence was only matched by the hush from the opposition benches. The Progressive Democrats who were FF partners in coalition, despite claiming to oppose the government's wording, still voted for it in the Dáil. FG kept their mouths tightly shut, and Labour weren't much more vocal..

As the Irish Times editorial bemoaned on November 13th " It is a bitter paradox that with this enthusiasm for women's representation and for the garnering of the womens vote, the same parties have all but abandoned womens interests in the referendums to be held on the same day as the election. Where is the Progressive Democrats' campaign against the Fianna Fail-sponsored wording on the so-called "substantive issue"? Where is the resistance to this women-threatening measure promised by the tribunes of the Labour Party and Democratic Left? Where are the liberals – and indeed the prominent women of Fine Gael (John Bruton sits on the fence), as the days tick by to the setting once again of another constitutional, legal and social snare whose victims by definition, will be women?

Of the smaller parties, Democratic Left, seeking to draw a distinction between itself and the Labour Party had announced that they were actually in favour of abortion in some circumstances and would be campaigning for a No vote on the substantive issue. However this campaigning was limited to the production of leaflets and as DL does not have a grass roots organization few of these saw the light of day. The Workers Party most recent conference had passed policy in favour of a womens right to choose, however this did not appear before the General Election.

The Green Party is deeply split on the question of abortion. To such an extent that in Dublin North East two members one “pro-life” (David Healy), one pro-choice (Saidbh O’ Neil) stood for election. The party were incapable of being any more progressive than the Irish Bishops. As one party member explained to Workers Solidarity, “with two such fundamental opposing positions being proposed, the only consensus the Greens could reach would to be to split, and that in situation the environment is more important than womens rights.”

Dublin Abortion Information Campaign

When the “X” case occurred the only group campaigning on abortion was the Dublin Abortion Information Campaign (DAIC). This was an activist campaign, formed in November 1990. It’s main strategy then was to break the law by distributing abortion information, thereby highlighting the situation in Ireland, and hopefully making the law unworkable. When the “X” case broke, DAIC organised a march of 10,000 people to oppose the injunction.

Soon after the “X” case DAIC adopted a Right to Choose position and made this the main focus of their arguments around the case. People with divergent political ideas from the Workers Solidarity Movement, students, members of the Labour Party, the Irish Workers Group, Red Action and other activists came together to distribute information, canvass, put sleaflets in letterboxes, organise meetings and marches.

In the months that followed there were various different attempts to set up more broad based campaigns. DIAC continued its separate existence, co-operating with other groups on the ground where possible. Before the referendum, DAIC targeted different areas of the city for door-to-door leafleting and postering.

HERE COMES REAC

The Repeal the Eight Amendment Campaign (REAC) was formed early in March on the basis of campaigning for a removal of the 1983 anti-abortion Amendment, for the provision of non-restrictive nformation and for the right to travel. It drew its membership from people who had been involved in 1983 campaign and had been dormant since that defeat, from the existing abortion information campaigns and from members of the feminist movement with an orientation towards community politics (who also organised within the Womens Coalition). It intended to be a broad based national campaign.

Meanwhile the more middle class elements of the feminist movement set about setting up a group based around the service organisations (Well Women Centres, Doctors For Information, etc). They saw their role almost solely as a lobby group around the various political parties.

REAC was primarily based in Dublin, Cork, Waterford and Galway. From the beginning the campaign was split between the feminists who favoured lobbying, and socialists and activists

who emphasised campaigning on the ground. Of course it was said that the two approaches were not incompatible, but in practice REAC activity was centred around press conferences and letters to the Irish Times, at the expense of workplace and door to door leafleting and local organising..

Public meetings and marches were not supported and not built for and, surprise surprise, not successful. A good example of this is that a REAC public meeting held in Dublin's Liberty Hall, on the 20th October, just over a month from the vote was attended by just over 70 people.

As often happens the divisiveness within the campaign was blamed on personal differences rather than politics. Eventually it became a waste of time and effort for activists to remain in REAC. The Dublin group collapsed, with most activists joining DAIC. The Galway REAC changed its name and went its own way.

In the month before the referenda, everybody who was anybody met to form the Alliance for Choice. The role of the Alliance was to make available posters and leaflets, and to co-ordinate press conferences. At last we had our umbrella.

The Alliance however was hugely top heavy with a lot of affiliates who did meetings but didn't do much work. Most of the postering, leafleting and canvassing in Dublin was still done by DAIC and, to a lesser extent, the Womens Coalition. This only a few weeks before the vote. With the exception of Cork Galway and Waterford few groups existed around the country.

The main problem affecting REAC, Frontline and the Alliance was their faith in the power of 'leaders of opinion' to win the battle for us, and as seen above Irish liberals had gone to ground. Letters were written to the Irish Times who came out in our favour. Press conferences were repeatedly held, none getting more than a few minor mentions. The committee produced detailed briefing documents, holding meetings with organisations varying from the Council For the Status of Women to Fianna Fáil womens committees.

Yet in the end, the target audience, the progressives with power, refused to be pushed. For the most part the voice of the pro-choice movement in Ireland was not heard by the Irish people. REAC acted as a flea on the back of the liberals but the liberals weren't scratching.

The “pro-life” Movement

The impotence of the pro-choice movement was matched by the confusion within the “pro-life” movement. Not only were they abandoned by Fianna Fáil but the movement was split on a number of fronts. Firstly between those who wanted to campaign for a No vote in all three referenda and those who preferred the more acceptable face of allowing a Yes vote on Travel (their argument being that as you couldn't actually stop women from travelling the amendment was impractical). Indeed, an article by a “pro-life” professor in the Irish Times warned that a “No vote might be seen as triumph for pro-abortion lobby”.

The Catholic bishops collectively released a statement saying that Catholics could legitimately vote either way to the substantive question. Although a few bishops then broke ranks and called for a No vote, the “pro-life” movements mainstay argument that they represented the true wishes of Irish people had been undermined. Even on the question of abortion Information on which all elements agreed in opposing (SPUC had pursued clinics and student union to the courts to prevent them distributing information), the “pro-life” campaign didn't even come close to matching the intensity and ferocity of the 1983 campaign. With the setting up of a new Pro- Life group-

ing proclaiming itself as the organisation of the “pro-life” working class youth, a further split occurred.

Youth Defence modelled itself on the tactics of Operation Rescue type groups in the U.S. On marches they chanted “we don’t need no birth control, hey Taoiseach leave the kids alone”. They leafleted on Saturdays in the city centres with gruesome pictures of supposed abortions. They picketed TDs houses, including those of Nuala Fennell and Eamonn Gilmore.. They rang in death threats to Radio Dublin when they wouldn’t carry interviews with them. Pro-choice campaigners, in one incident were attacked with pick axe handles, and snooker cues resulting in broken bones. Youth Defence marches were ‘stewarded’ by hired heavies (complete with wrapped knuckles).

The music paper Hot Press in its November edition ran an expose on Youth Defence, following which the editor, Niall Stokes, had a concrete block thrown through the back window of his car. The “pro-life” movement which had been careful building up an acceptable middle class image were horrified and attempted to disown the organisation. However mud sticks, and Youth Defence became a graphic example of the threat of fundamentalism.

Other Forces

One of the key arguments used against the Government’s wording was that it proposed a distinction between the mother’s life and the mother’s health. Doctors were drafted in from both sides to either argue that a pregnancy never threatens the life of the mother or that in some instances it did. While of course the life/health distinction is appalling, to some people faced with highly qualified professionals arguing both sides of the coin it became a difficult one to become convinced of either way. Doctors who publicly support abortion felt they faced the treat of their surgeries being targeted by “pro-life” groups . Despite this one organisation of doctors did arise, Doctors for Information.

Doctors for Information (and Democratic Left) were warned off being involved with REAC (REAC supposedly was too radical and dangerous). Both organisations withdrew from speaking on REAC platforms, despite the fact that these were the only public meetings being held on abortion in Ireland.

The ATGWU and SIPTU ran a joint campaign within their own unions calling for a Yes Yes No vote. The Irish Congress of Trade Unions released press statements opposing the government wording on abortion and produced over 150,000 leaflets arguing their case. Unfortunately years of centralised bargaining have left the unions with little activist core to draw on, most of these leaflets never made it out of their wrapping paper.

The results

In the end the electorate voted Yes to Travel, Yes to Information and No to the substantive issue. What did this mean? Considering that no “pro-life” group called for a Yes Yes No vote and Yes Yes No won, it’s likely that the majority of the vote on the substantive issue was for liberal reasons.

However it was impossible for many commentators to say this. On one hand political parties such as FF and FG contain both sides of the argument within their ranks. A politician would run the risk of alienating half of his party if he claimed victory for one side over another. On the other side many liberal commentators were unable to identify themselves as pro-choice. Instead

of calling a spade a spade they stumbled over awkward phraseology. Rather than accepting this as a win for the pro-choice side it was for 'those forces with a pro-women perspective'. It was a victory that dared not speak its name.

Previous to the referendum the Irish Times was warning "if the politicians who so vociferously criticised the FF wording do not revert to the issue...it will pass". Yet the politicians did ignore the referendum and the wording did not pass. It is the view of many liberals that politics is for high profile players only, politicians, judges, journalists, professionals and bishops. The Irish people are only capable of looking on.

In the last 12 months the Irish people have changed politically. They voted for a woman's right to information on abortion, they voted against a distinction between a woman's life and a woman's health. This time last year the popularly held opinion among those fighting for abortion rights in Ireland was that we'd be lucky not to lose abortion information never mind a referendum on abortion itself. We were on the run. Yet in one year the tables have turned and the "pro-life" campaign is on the losing end of things. So what caused the change?

In general, the structure of Irish society has changed in the last few years. Emigration has slowed down, with many young people returning to Ireland believing it better to be unemployed at home rather than in London or Manchester. An IMS poll reported in the Sunday Independent on February 23rd showed clear differences in attitudes to issues such as abortion and divorce along age lines. While 74% of those between 18–34 thought the Eighth Amendment should be revised, the figures were 60% for those between 50–64 and 50% for those over 65. Many emigrants are returning from more secular countries and their attitudes on these issues reflect their experiences abroad.

A second difference in Ireland is the movement of people from rural communities to more urban areas. Within urban communities, there are larger numbers of social interactions and a greater variety of ideas. The power of the church is much decreased. People aren't as bound by the ties of tradition. Of course, as socialists these are factors that are completely out of our control.

However once changes like these begin to happen in society it is up to us to utilise them, just as it was at the beginning of the industrial revolution for early socialists to organise within the emergent working class. As revolutionaries, we know that the time isn't always ripe for our ideas, but we also know that times change. The Irish situation proves this case in point. However once people start becoming more receptive to different concepts, it's important for our ideas of how society can be better run to be there. This is why the WSM organises through good times and bad. When the good times start, we'll be ready.

The third and very important factor was the "X" case. This not only horrified many people but also for the first time identified a pregnant woman as more than just an incubator for a foetus. The reality of what it means to deny women the right to abortion was made clear.

For the future, the "pro-life" movement are correct when they say this is the thin end of the wedge. Though it is certain that the politicians will try to fudge the issue yet again when they deal with legislation later this year, the ground on which they walk is not as firm as it used to be. The pro-choice movement will have to learn not to put their faith in the laps of the political parties but rather in the ability of the Irish people to listen, to understand and to agree with our arguments. It is the many we have to convince, not the few.

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1993

Retrieved on 10th October 2021 from struggle.ws
Published in *Workers Solidarity* No. 38 – Spring 1993.

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