

# THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT AT THE CROSSROADS



A PAMPHLET OF

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# AN REABHLOID

JOURNAL OF PEOPLES DEMOCRACY

# AN REABHLOID

AN REABHLOID PAMPHLET

AN REABHLOID (The Revolution) is the political journal of Peoples Democracy. This is the first in a series of pamphlets devoted to the politics of the women's liberation movement being produced by the Women's Department of P.D.

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### THE IRISH WOMEN'S MOVEMENT AT A CROSSROADS

Today the Irish women's movement is at a cross-roads. The situation facing women in the latter part of the 80's is enormously different to that of the early 60's and 70's. Then, the women's movement, along with the socialist, trade union and anti-imperialist movements, were very confident. Today all three are under attack, with a general shift to the right in the political climate. Women have suffered the most attacks, a situation made easier by the demobilisation of the women's movement North and South.

The fundamental questions of strategy which faced women in the early eighties are still burning questions today and, as this article argues, must be resolved through a period of discussion and debate involving the broad feminist movement and the anti-imperialist current.

### FIGHTING AGAINST THE CLOSEDOWN OF THE WOMEN'S CLINICS

Justice Liam Hamilton's High Court verdict, which led to the closing down of pregnancy counselling services run by Open Line and the Well Woman Centre, is a sweeping attack on women at many levels. Detailed analysis of the judgement shows it is a felon-setter's charter, opening the road to widespread censorship and attacks by the far-right on other oppressed groups, such as the gay community.

The most effective strategy for feminists means building a mass defence campaign and seeking active support from all organisations who oppose the Hamilton judgement.

### LESSONS FROM THE DIVORCE DEFEAT

The defeat of the divorce campaign illustrates once again the power of the catholic church and the inability of bourgeois and reformist parties to tackle it. Far from confirming the appropriateness of partition the result reinforces the need to smash it. While criticising the weak role of republicanism and arguing that women must rely on themselves, it demonstrates that an alliance of women, workers and the anti-imperialist movement is vital to this and every progressive struggle.

### DEVELOPMENTS IN THE EUROPEAN WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

The criminal failure of the labour movement to support women adequately produces much frustration among feminists about a 'privileged men's movement' in the trade unions.

Right-wing governments and union leaders are cynically exploiting this feminist resentment of the male-dominated world of work, arguing for a freeze on the wages of 'high-paid' workers. This strategy, supported in Britain by the TUC and Eurocommunist-influenced radical feminists, disastrously takes pressure off the capitalists and deepens divisions in the workers' movement.

# THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT AT THE CROSSROADS

## The Early Movement

The late 60's and early 70's were years of growth and optimism for the women's movement and for Irish women. When the women's movement came onto the streets in these years, it was an inspiration to many thousands of women.

It challenged all the underlying assumptions about women's role in history. It was a visible vibrant force which changed the consciousness of women in all walks of life.

It inevitably came into conflict with all the powers of society: this posed at an early stage the problem of strategy. Its weakness was its failure to understand the nature of Irish society.

The early feminist movement, both in the North and the South, saw Ireland as essentially like any other European country, except that the Church wielded enormous power. They were, however, unable to explain the reason for the crippling hold of the Church.

In the North it was seen as one of the reactionary trappings of an over weaning Stormont parliament, without reference to the reason for Stormont's very existence - partition. In the South it was viewed as a product of Catholic nationalism without reference to the historical roots of Catholic nationalism in the partition settlement.

Economic reasons were also given for the maintenance of backward values and institutions - underdevelopment and the large agricultural sector. Thus the Irish women's movement, like the main political parties, believed that opening up the Irish economy in the Sixties to foreign multinationals would, through modernisation, greatly diminish the power of the Catholic Church and bring Ireland into a new era of liberal democratic values and prosperity.

The Irish middle class openly embraced this strategy and the women's movement coming largely from the ranks of this class, had no alternative perspective for winning rights for Irish women. The Southern movement failed to see that despite nominal independence Ireland doesn't have the revenue of imperialist countries, or have to respond to demands for democratic rights such as equal pay and contraception.

They were unable to understand why the campaign for even limited contraception rights was such an uphill battle. There was no state funding for the implementation of the 1979 Health Family

Planning legislation and the women's movement was unable to affect the situation.

In fact, the opening up of the economy didn't change the relationship of Ireland to Britain, and imperialism, in general it exacerbated our dependency and underdevelopment. There has been a constant drain of capital and revenue to the imperialist centres without any development for Irish industry. This policy has resulted in a huge public debt, massive unemployment and an accelerating erosion of democratic rights (Criminal Justice Bill, Extradition Act, Section 31, Constitutional Prohibitions on Divorce and Abortion).

Parallel to this expectation of 'normal' European development in the 26 counties was the reformist strategy of 'enlightenment' in the 6 counties. The Stormont Parliament, dominated as it was by the medieval ethos of Ulster Unionism, who, for example, were against the opening of public parks on Sundays (!), was as restrictive to women in the 6 counties as the Catholic Church dominated 26 counties. Thus divorce was severely restricted, abortion illegal, nursery facilities for working women non-existent and there were many other similarities in terms of social and economic problems - low wage levels, type of jobs available, Church dominated schools and medical establishment.

The middle class and reformist strategy has to bring these 'anomalies' between the position of women in the 6 counties and Britain to public attention and thus win 'equal rights' with British women.

Thus the Northern women's movement's strategy was pressure and exposure of women's problems to the more 'enlightened' sections of the British establishment. In doing this, and organising as the British movement did, feminism would grow and develop along British lines.

## The Failure of the Reformist Strategy

The early movement failed to develop as expected and by the end of the 70's it was in decline and had become diffuse. The fragmentation of the movement into specialist areas such as Rape Crisis Centres, Women's Refuges, Health Centres, and so on, occurred without an essential political debate for Irish feminism: How could the women's movement confront forces ranged against it (partition, the Church, imperialism)?

Yet without a strategic view the 'carnival of reaction' following partition (with especially harsh consequences for women) that James Connolly had predicted, would go unchecked. Each unstable partitioned state was dependent on the Church for ideological cover; this copperfastened the 2nd class status of women in Irish society.

This straitjacket of Church, State control over women's lives cannot be broken out of in a piecemeal fashion, or within each State. To attack the Church without attacking the State, to attack the State without attacking partition, is to disarm the women's movement.

## The Anti-Imperialist Feminist Current

This difficulty was understood by a small but significant layer of socialist feminists in the early movement who, on paper, had a strong anti-imperialism, anti-partition stance.

But to develop a movement needs more than correct ideas. If it can identify its enemies on paper, it must also work out how to build alliances in a struggle against them. The historic division between feminists and anti-imperialists held back the development of a wide ranging debate on this until the Armagh Women Political Prisoners campaign, built by the Belfast Women Against Imperialism Group (WAI) took off in the late 70s.

The WAI Group faced up to the problem of the isolation of Irish feminism from the worker's and anti-imperialist movements by building an anti-imperialist feminist group.

Thus it concretely built alliances with those fighting partition and in so doing brought home the relevance of feminism to those women fighting for a United Ireland.

The Campaign in Support of the Armagh Women Political Prisoners split the feminist movement. A debate on the relevance of republicanism to feminism raged in all sections of the women's, anti-imperialist movements, in the Press, and spilled over into the British women's movement.

Out of the debate emerged a new direction - the organisation of women inside the anti-imperialist movement which coincided with increased activity of feminists in the workers' movement. The strength of this new activity in the mass organisations is now reflected

in women's committees in unions, the recognition of women's role in community and tenant struggles, the Sinn Fein Women's Department.

There was also a push towards the development of a 32 County feminist movement: not necessarily with an agreed perspective, but at least to co-ordinate campaigns and publicity. Some extremely successful national, 32 county conferences were held in the late 70's, early 80's; yet the fragmentation of the movement on a day to day level continued to be the pattern.

The failure of the anti-imperialist current to overcome its own divisions and assume a position of leadership of the women's movement meant that it too fragmented under the pressure of the larger strike. It did not reappear as an organised current. While this does not undermine the importance of the developments in different areas, particularly the opening of the Falls Road Women's Centre, it left a gap in the leadership of the fragmented feminist forces.

#### Fighting the Right Wing Offensive

Hence the movement was poorly placed to fight the right-wing offensive. As the recession deepened this offensive gained momentum.

Despite winning limited gains in specific areas, state-funding of projects and limited legislative reform in the North under direct rule, the women's movement found itself in a weaker position in the early 80's than at its inception in the early 60's. The recession strengthened the hold of right-wing forces in society and feminism took on the anti-amendment campaign without any 32 county movement or strong leadership behind it.

The ease with which the radical current was pushed aside during the campaign is evidence of this weakness. They were unable to make an effective challenge for the leadership of the Campaign, in part due to their sectarian approach to united action and because of their failure to fight for alliances with the workers' movement and the anti-imperialist movement.

Their left posturing facilitated the reformists and pro-imperialists of the Labour Party and Fine Gael and left them virtually unopposed as the leadership of the campaign.

Thus women were forced to rely on doctors, lawyers, politicians and numerous respectable experts to defend their rights. The 2 amendments and the Joanne Hayes case have shown that this great body of respected establishment opinion cannot and will not stand up to the Church, which is the power behind the attacks on women.

The earlier period of the women's movement also witnessed a section of the movement relying on bourgeois women. When an element of the movement joined the mainstream establishment parties as the way forward, the rest of the Women's Liberation Movement felt this

was wrong, but criticised it for the wrong reasons. The criticisms were variously that they were becoming involved in male hierarchical, patriarchal parties etc. Some of this is obviously true. The real criticism, however, was that they were joining parties that were anti-democratic from their inception and were tied to and dependent on the Church, committed to working within each partitioned statelet. Thus they would not challenge the Church's role in making the legal and constitutional basis of the states identical to Church dogma.

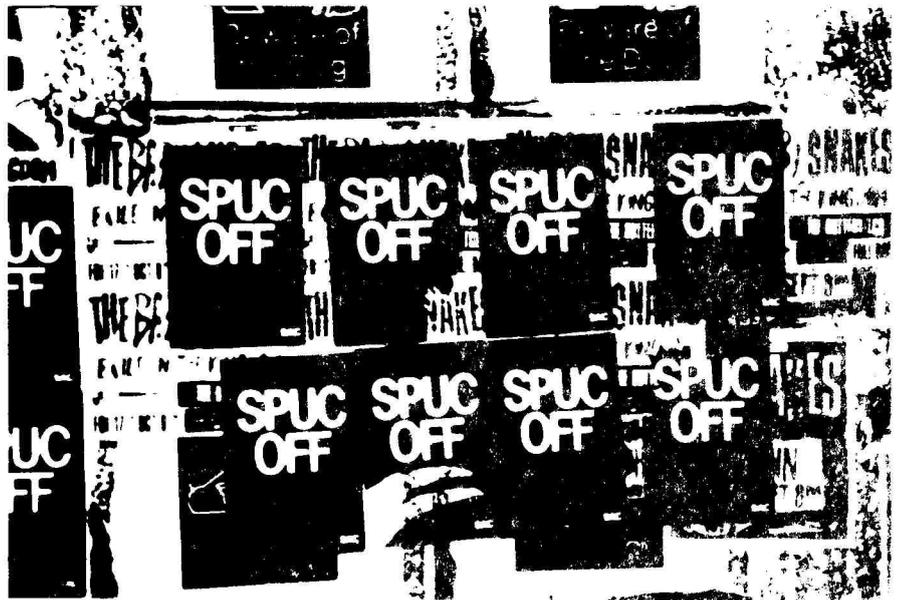
Today the oppression of women is much sharper and more severe than in the period when the original women's movement developed. The cuts in social welfare, unemployment and the general worsening of people's basic living standards have forced tens of thousands of women to a position where their backs are against the wall. Of the three main sectors of the oppressed in Ireland - the working class, the anti-imperialist movement and women - the latter have suffered the most setbacks. In this political climate the right wing, the 'moral majority' led by SPUC (Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child), backed by the Church and right wing establishment, have mounted a series of vicious attacks on the already limited rights of women in the 26 counties.

- on Catholic moral grounds
- the witch hunt against women in the Joanne Hayes tribunal
- the right wing campaign in the media against 'unmarried mothers'
- the new ethics code for teachers, doctors and nurses
- the anti-gay hysteria being orchestrated against persons with AIDS.

The defeat of the divorce referendum and the SPUC campaign to shut down the abortion referral services of the women's clinics are the main attacks being carried out by reactionary right wing forces.

The response from the women's movement to these attacks has been very partial and limited. The activity during the Eileen Flynn case mainly centered around raising funds for the legal costs.

The feminists who had mobilized in solidarity with Joanne Hayes ceased their pickets of the tribunal hearings when threatened with contempt of court. This was a mistake and the outcome of the case was a victory for the State and the 'heavy gang' and a blow against all women. Not surprisingly the Tralee women's group, who had organised so courageously in defence of Joanne were demoralised with the whitewash job of the Tribunal and the group has since collapsed. Feminist input into the pro-divorce campaign was miniscule.



#### SPUC Attacks on Women's Rights

The first major gain for SPUC and the Right has the copperfastening of an anti-abortion clause into the Constitution with the passage of the Eighth Amendment in 1983. This laid the ground for a more generalised offensive against women and the Right sought to make their victory more concrete by establishing precedents.

Examples include:

- the dismissal of teacher Eileen Flynn

#### What Future Growth for Feminism?

It is evident therefore that the women's movement has to take stock of its position and the issues it faces. P.D. in the past has argued that because of the effect of partition and imperialist domination on Irish women's lives there will not be any mass movement developing in Ireland as it did in Britain and elsewhere in Europe. This is because the economic, social and political preconditions for that mass movement differ from those in the advan-



ced capitalist countries.

The Irish feminist movement is small fragmented and weak. So it is crucial for this small and isolated layer to turn outward to the struggles of the working class and to the struggle for a United Ireland. Without such an orientation it will ultimately fragment, effectively disappear from the arena of national (32 county) politics.

This means relating to the struggles of women in the Working Class, in the Trade Unions, in local communities and the important role that women are playing in the anti-imperialist struggle. Because of the predominantly petit-bourgeois nature of the women's movement and its politically heterogeneous character it is hampered from making a clear analysis of women's position in Irish society. Thus the role that revolutionary women play in the movement is centrally important.

Revolutionary leadership becomes not just a goal for the future but almost a day to day problem of development. This has been witnessed in the Contraception Campaign, in the Defend the Women's Clinics Campaign and in the Strip Search Campaign and in the only feminist initiative organised during the divorce referendum. In these and

others anti-imperialist women have played the leading role.

These women have understood the fundamental link between the struggle for women's liberation and anti-imperialist struggle and see the indivisibility of all struggles for democratic rights. However, a weakness of Republican women is that they have not adequately understood the need and importance for the autonomous women's movement.

#### Reform or Revolution

Thus if the vicious attacks on women's rights in the 1980's show anything they show the need for women to fight the system of partition upholding the Church's power. Not only will establishment and reformist parties not challenge the Church, they will lead women up the blind alley of fighting for reform within each partitioned statelet. In the long run, this would only demoralise women struggling on different issues, social, economic, political, and prevent the development of a 32 county leadership of the women's movement.

The development of such a 32 county leadership is not something that will

happen when the women's movement develops, it is a precondition for the further development of that movement.

This leadership will not come from any one group of women. It will only begin to emerge if an open and democratic debate is engaged in by all those fighting to build an anti-imperialist women's movement.

Any attempt to get to grips with how we build such a movement must start by recognising that despite progress in both the anti-imperialist and the feminist movements, the historic divisions between them still obstruct the struggle to build a strong leadership. As a contribution to this process P.D. is preparing a seminar at the end of 1987 to study our history and that of other women in imperialist dominated countries. In particular we will be looking at the role of women inside these revolutionary struggles.

A seminar of this nature is long overdue. We hope that it will revitalise a debate that has largely been ignored since the hunger strike. Perhaps the most important lesson to emerge from recent defeats of the women's movement is that we can afford to ignore it no longer. ■



# DEFEND THE CLINICS

The High Court judgement against the pregnancy counselling service of the Well Woman Centre and Open Line Counselling marks a watershed in the attacks on women's rights. The fundamental right of freedom of information and choice has been denied by the judgement, the whole thrust of which is to create a climate of fear and intimidation amongst women. Women's rights are completely ignored in the judgement. In his summation Justice Hamilton stated that the ruling did not have to have regard for the equal right to life of the mother. Page after page reiterates the rights of the unborn over women's rights. Abortion is seen as evil and wrong in every regard, 'it is contrary to national policy, public morality, contrary to law, both common and statute law' and to the Constitution. The life of the unborn is seen as 'a sacred trust to which all organs of government must lend their support'. The idea that abortion is murder runs through the whole judgement with the aim being to protect the foetus as a living human from the absolute first moment of its conception. It states: 'consequently the right to life of the foetus, the unborn, is afforded statutory protection from the date of its conception'.

Because of the emphasis in the judgement on the rights of the foetus over women's

rights against women who have abortions becomes a real possibility. Under the Offences Against The Person's Act 1861 a woman attempting to abort herself faces life imprisonment and anyone helping her to procure an abortion 5 years. The Act, which is reaffirmed in the Hamilton Ruling, represents the most anti-abortion legislation to be found anywhere in the civilized world. The 1861 Act is a piece of old British legislation and is an example of how the old colonial oppressive system has not been dismantled, but just taken over. It is a prime example of how the failure to break with imperialism effects women's lives.

The judgement raises very serious questions with regard to freedom of information and speech. The right of information is seen as a qualified right - in this case qualified by the rights of the unborn. The foetus now has a veto over what women can discuss. Page 42 states: 'the qualified right to privacy, the rights of association and freedom of expression and the right to disseminate information cannot be invoked to interfere with such a fundamental right as the right to life of the unborn which is acknowledged by the Constitution of Ireland'. Not surprisingly, Kadar Asmal, President of the Irish Council for Civil Liberties

has described the ruling as a 'witch-hunters charter'. It gives a green light for felon setting and entrapment by bigots such as SPUC. It is the most significant victory for the 'moral majority' to date.

Proscribing the right of women to freely discuss all aspects of their lives undermines solidarity between women and creates the conditions where individual women can be intimidated and further isolated. The High Court judgement if implemented literally could mean a distressed pregnant woman could not get information on abortion from her closest friend without creating a 'criminal conspiracy'. The judgement has implications far beyond pregnancy counselling in that it sets the precedent for a broader denial of information and an extension of censorship to other areas. This has always been the intention of the far right. By attacking the least protected and established rights - those of women - it lays the basis for further attacks on the democratic rights of all the oppressed sectors of society. The judgement has given SPUC new targets to chase, it implies that gay persons seeking friendships through adverts in the personal columns of newspapers could be conspir-



ing to corrupt public morals. On the question of whether the clinics were corrupting public morals Justice Hamilton left it up to a jury court to decide the issue. SPUC are not yet in a position to launch such a trial or it would quickly turn into an Inquisition against all women and would show SPUC up as the reactionary bigots they are and turn the tide of public opinion firmly against them.

### The Campaign - Strategy and Tasks

The tasks facing the campaign flow from the analysis we make of the present period. The defeat suffered in the 1983 Amendment campaign, the divorce defeat and the generalized attacks on the status of women means, as women, we are on the defensive. The working class and anti-imperialist movement have also been pushed back but unlike the Women's Movement neither have suffered any major defeats. However, the defeats inflicted on the Woman's Movement are not due to any great strengthening of the institutions of power in the Irish society. The massive unemployment, poverty and repression has led to a loss of belief by a section of the population in the viability of the present system. The intensity of the political, economic and social crisis has undermined the power of Church and State. This is the background against which the defense of the clinics is being conducted. Therefore the methods of struggle and the slogans we adopt are crucial if we are to regain the initiative and stop the SPUC offensive.

### Single Issue Campaign

The campaign must be a single issue mass action campaign in defence of the full clinics services. It must be broad based and non-exclusive in character. No one, no organization is excluded as long as they support the aims of the campaign. It must be organized along democratic lines. The campaign slogans and orientation must seize upon the weakest link in the enemies' chain of defence. The weakest link in the chain is the denial of information to women - in this case information on abortion. It is around the question of freedom of information that we can best challenge all the political forces in Irish society. Bourgeois democracy prides itself on freedom of information and speech, the Free State Constitution acknowledges these rights yet they are denied to Women. We must not adopt the approach of overloading the struggle before it gets off the ground. People's Democracy, like the majority of activists in the campaign is in favour of women having the right to choose abortion in Ireland but that cannot be the basis of the campaign. Rather, we seek to win this round of the struggle against SPUC and re-establish the referral services of the clinics. It is only by pushing back this latest offensive and making the judgement against the clinics unworkable that we can create the conditions in which a broader struggle for women's rights is possible. Through the clinics campaign, we will, as in the abortion amendment campaign,



*Defend the Clinics, campaign supporters outside the Four Courts*

win many new people over to a right to choose position.

### Building the United Front

It is vital for us to have a clear understanding of what is meant by a broad campaign. Some arguments as put forward in the campaign would limit participation down to the rank and file activists and exclude the organizations of the trade union movement or other representative although reformist organizations. These should never be counterposed.

Of course it would be the best thing in the world if we were able to rally women and the ranks of the working class around our campaign and skip over the reformist organizations such as Dublin Trades Council, the Irish Council for Civil Liberties and sectors of the reformist/bourgeois women's movement. Unfortunately there are no short cuts. Refusing to pressurise these organizations for their support allows them to continue posing as the leadership of the women's and workers' movement without fighting for their members' interests, for the working class people they claim to represent. Part of the struggle of the clinics campaign is surely to begin the task of building a new leadership for the women's movement. By ignoring the present leaderships of the women's and trade union movement and calling for a rank and file campaign on the clinics is in reality accepting the status quo. This campaign is the acid test which will be the divide between those who support women's rights and those who don't. All who claim support for women's or democratic rights should not be let off the hook. Ignoring the 'present leaderships' does exactly this. By adopting a united front approach we can win this round of the struggle.

Our best allies in the United Front will be found in the ranks of the workers' and anti-imperialist movement. They are in the front line in the struggle against oppression and readily identify with us. The tremendous solidarity displayed by anti-imperialist women in the Six Counties with the clinics campaign should be an inspiration to us all.

### Building a New Leadership for the Women's Movement

A notable feature of the campaign is that it has the effect of regrouping the core of the Women's Movement which has been atomized in recent years. For these women the Hamilton Judgement was the last straw. It is understandable that for many women the 'Defend the Clinics' campaign itself is perceived almost as a relaunch of the Women's Movement. In one sense it is just that. The clinics campaign can be a springboard for relaunching the Women's Movement on a sounder basis. But a relaunch of the Women's Movement cannot be contained within a single issue campaign such as the 'Defend the Clinics Campaign'. If the debate on the broad issues of the women's movement are raised within the campaign they tend to be counterposed to the single issue and mixed nature of the campaign. The restructuring of the Women's Movement can only be accomplished by coming to grips with past failures and setbacks. For this a period of discussion and debate is essential. This must happen alongside the clinics campaign and will only be possible in so far as the clinics campaign is successful. It is our task to make the High Court Ruling unworkable and regain the initiative from SPUC and the right.

Through this process a real leadership for the Women's Movement will be built, one which is based among working class and anti-imperialist women. ■

# LESSONS FROM THE DIVORCE DEFEAT

When Archbishop McNamara compared the possible introduction of divorce to the Chernobyl nuclear disaster he let everyone know what the Catholic church regarded as the stakes in the divorce referendum. For many women it was scarcely an exaggeration. For all women it is a big setback and one also for the struggle for a united Ireland for the struggle for a united Ireland and the struggle of the working class against austerity.

The result of the referendum (63% to 37% against the introduction of divorce) shows above all the complete incapacity of bourgeois forces in Ireland to deliver basic democratic rights to Irish women. It demonstrated in particular their incapacity to stand up to the church.

Was the result inevitable, or could the limited measures proposed in the referendum have been won under a different campaign leadership? This article argues that not only could the vote have been won but that a major ideological and political victory could have been scored against the Catholic church and right wing reactionary forces in Ireland.

In the media and in political circles the result has been widely proclaimed as a massive defeat. It is certainly a major gain for the right and gives them the green light to go on a full scale attack against women and other oppressed groups. But the result also shows that there is a substantial minority in Ireland who refuse to accept Catholic church diktats and if organised could have a big impact in challenging the right wing offensive.

The anger and alienation felt by many who voted 'Yes' must be given a focus and used constructively otherwise it will turn into real demoralisation and despair.

## THE CAMPAIGN

The Government announced its intention in early May to hold a referendum to remove the constitutional ban on divorce before the Dail recess in late June. Throughout the campaign Fine Gael did almost nothing to get the referendum passed - unwilling to risk a confrontation in their own ranks and amongst their traditional supporters in rural areas. But they could hardly have believed that a short campaign would mean the anti-divorce forces following their example and doing nothing. It appears that the decision to hold the referendum like this had more to do with narrow political self-interest than in dealing with the problem of marital breakdown. A victory in the referendum, which the opinion polls predicted, would have increased the Government's popularity in the run-up to the next general election and would have promoted Garrett's 'constitutional crusade'.

The other Coalition party, the Labour party, was only slightly less opportunistic. They did canvass in some areas; in those where they had lost electoral support and in particular in the Dublin region. However in Dick Spring's constituency in Kerry they failed to mount any campaign at all.

It was left mainly to the Divorce Action Group (DAG), the group fighting for divorce rights, to mobilise support and win the vote. DAG had been in existence for several years and it

was in a good position to lead a national campaign. Numerous opinion polls had shown approximately 60 - 70% of the electorate in favour of divorce yet DAG failed to turn this support into votes.

It has explained this failure as due to the vicious campaign of distortion and fear ran by the Anti-Divorce campaign and to their own lack of organisation. In fact the success of the anti-divorce campaign and the failure of DAG are symptoms of the underlying political weakness of the pro-divorce campaign. DAG refused to address itself to the forces who could have won the campaign - the working class in general and women and youth in particular. The anti-divorce campaign did, by playing on the fears of thousands of women that they would have no means of financial support if divorced by their husbands (ignoring the as many as 70,000 women already deserted). It appealed to youth by ridiculing a referendum on divorce when what was really needed was work. A reactionary and unpopular Government dedicated to cutting welfare and jobs was relied upon to rebut these arguments!

The launching rally of the campaign in liberty hall gave a good indication of the politics of the people heading up DAG and the shape the pro-divorce campaign would take. The platform consisted of speakers from all the Leinster House parties. Missing from the platform were speakers from the women's, workers and anti-imperialist movements. The Labour party speakers welcomed the restrictive nature of the proposed amendment and emphasised that Labour would only support restrictive divorce legislation. This theme was supported by Fine Gael and the Progressive Democrats. Throughout the campaign they argued that divorce legislation must be restrictive to protect the family. The Divorce Action group unfortunately accepted this argument right from the start.

## THE ARGUMENT

The whole debate on the family was handed over to the right-wing sectarian forces in the Anti-Divorce campaign. The pro-divorce lobby never challenged the idealised view of the family put forward by the right. The notion of the family as a loving caring unit is very far from reality for many Irish families. The increase in the separation rate and marital breakdown and the growth in the number of women facing violence in the home are all evidence of the serious crisis which the family is going through. This crisis is also reflected in the number of battered children and the increase in the number of children born to single women. The most recent evidence showing the reality as opposed to the myth of the Irish family was provided by the most recent issue of 'Magill' magazine which carried a report showing that in 1 in 4 families there is child sexual abuse. The idea of the family as a relationship which institutionalises women's oppression was completely absent from the campaign.

DAG didn't argue for divorce as a civil right - its propaganda was a mirror image of Labour and Fine Gael's. They argued for divorce on compassionate grounds which had the effect of making women appear as victims and separated people as failures. Divorce as a civil right respecting the independence

and freedom of the individual was hardly referred to. Demanding the right for women and men to take control over their lives would surely have encouraged more to vote yes. Projecting separated people as unfortunates and failures needing compassion had the effect of strengthening the anti-divorce campaign arguments - the hard-pressed taxpayer would be called on yet again to support these unfortunates.

### THE CHURCH

But fundamentally the liberals in the pro-divorce lobby refused to challenge the Catholic church's powerful intervention into the anti-divorce campaign. The insertion of the clause whereby marriages had to have failed for 5 years was a concessionary sop to the Bishops. The government hoped that such restrictions would prevent the church hierarchy from actively opposing the referendum. The government was only prepared to counter the church in the most cautious and cowardly way since Fine Gael and the capitalist class they represent depends on the church to maintain social control and order in society. The anti-divorce campaign supported by the church ran a vicious campaign - every argument was used to intimidate and frighten people. The pulpits became political platforms and the few clergy who supported the referendum were silenced. The divorce campaign, like the 1984 anti-amendment campaign, shows the tremendous power which the church still holds in Ireland and it shows that this power will not gradually fade away. It will have to be consistently confronted and fought against - something which the 'two nationalists' of the Labour and Workers parties refuse to accept.

The notion put forward by the revisionists of the Workers party and their allies is that with the opening up of the Irish economy to multi-national capitalist industry and the subsequent development of a large working class Ireland had gradually since the 60's become a modern bourgeois democracy. This has been shown by the divorce referendum to be utter nonsense.

Prionsais De Rossa of the Workers party, speaking at the DAG launching rally, welcomed the referendum claiming that our ability to hold the referendum showed the extent

to which we were now truly a democracy like other European bourgeois democracies. Yet Ireland in the only country in Europe where the church exerts such a tremendous influence. He made no effort to explain this. The reality is that the power and influence of organised religion is a feature of all countries which have been dominated by imperialism. In Ireland the Catholic church's specific power lies in its historic political association with the struggle of the Irish people to free themselves from centuries of British rule. But its power is also dependent upon imperialism and partition. The completely opportunistic and hypocritical assertion by the church of being on the side of the people has given it a central ideological and political place in the life of the 26 counties. It has been 'on the side of the people' when it stood to gain some concessions for the church but when the establishment came under threat it then changed. This history has permitted it to dominate state policies for a long time and to have its social and moral teachings written into the Free State constitution.

### THE 1937 CONSTITUTION

In some respects an analogy can be drawn with the events surrounding the 1937 constitution. Margaret Ward in her book 'Unmanageable Revolutionaries' pointed out that the result of the referendum held on enacting the constitution showed a lukewarm acceptance of it. In fact voting patterns in 1937 were similar to the recent divorce results with approximately 35% voting against the constitution. She argued that if Cumann na Mban had mobilised its residual support the outcome could have been a decisive defeat for De Valera.

The striking common feature of 1937 and today is that the same social forces are united in their opposition to democratic rights for women - the church, the catholic nationalists of Fianna Fail and the traditionalist right of Fine Gael. The campaigns of the two periods experienced similar obstacles - for example in the schism between the Feminist and Republican movements was seen in the divorce campaign as it was in the 1937 anti-constitution campaign.



Leixlip: Christ versus civil rights



### THE LEADERSHIP NEEDED

If we return to our original question, could the campaign have been won by a different leadership, we must ask where this alternative was. The proclaimed leadership of the working class, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, declared their support for the amendment and produced a leaflet for their members encouraging them to vote 'Yes'. Donal Nevin however declared that they did not seek to 'confront' the Catholic church. Having surrendered to the opposition right away the movement refused in reality to mount an active campaign. The potential power of the union movement was not mobilised, the bureaucracy which leads it were afraid to do so.

No such timidity affected Fianna Fail. While officially declaring a neutrality it in practice made no bones about its position. In a further retreat into Catholic nationalism it stood quite clearly for the maintenance and strengthening of Church-State relations. While Fine Gael has sought to protect the family and Free State capitalism through modernising legislation, basing itself on the liberal middle class, Fianna Fail as the states most successful party has understood that the best protection is in reinforcing the Catholic church and Catholic nationalism - the traditional social and ideological props of the Free State capitalist class.

Fianna Fail's identification of republicanism with catholic nationalism made it more imperative that the Republican movement provided a loud and consistently secular republican voice to combat this. By and large however they failed. Their 'Yes' campaign was low key and localised with no national impact. It asked those of its supporters who opposed divorce to at least not vote 'No'. Instead it should have strongly declared that consistent republicanism demanded that they vote 'Yes'. That the Republican movement's approach failed is shown by the fact that in the border counties where it has significant support many of its supporters voted 'No'. It missed a unique opportunity to demonstrate to the Irish working class and especially to women that the struggle for a United Ireland is indivisible from the struggle for women's rights and the rights of all the oppressed.

The movement clearly did not understand the importance of it identifying with this particular struggle for democratic rights, exposing the hypocrisy of the Coalition parties and the reactionary stance of the Fianna Fail 'Republicans'. By identifying itself with all struggles for democratic rights it can begin to create a situation where in turn these struggles are identified with it. Until then it will not be in a position to rally all the oppressed behind its banner and will fail to make the alliances with the only forces that can achieve national freedom - the working class and the oppressed.

One initiative was taken by a number of anti-imperialist feminists involving members of Peoples Democracy.

A public meeting was organised in order to bring into the campaign an anti-imperialist, feminist voice and to publically call for all republicans, socialists and feminists to actively mobilise for a 'Yes' vote.

Unfortunately this was only a small event which could only point the way for larger forces to follow. That they did not points up perhaps the most immediate and fundamental lesson to be learned from the referendum failure - that women can only rely on themselves. Just as Ireland must free itself and the working class can only be free through its own struggle so women can only guarantee their own liberation through their own activity.

### THE FALLOUT

'MOST MEDIA ATTENTION IN THE North and Britain has focussed on the damage that the 'No' vote has done to the Anglo-Irish agreement. The unionists led by Paisley have used the result to claim that the agreement is on its last legs because it shows the South's unwillingness to make concessions to Protestants and thus encourage a united Ireland. That the Northern fundamentalist Protestant also opposed divorce is quietly ignored.

Nevertheless the vote significantly damages the credibility of Fitzgerald's 'Constitutional, his support for a 'new Ireland' and the democratic gloss on the thoughtfully reactionary Hillsborough deal. Not only has it failed to deliver anything substantial to Nationalist workers in the North, it has failed the cause of democracy in the South.

The marxist analysis of Peoples Democracy is confirmed in that those who deny the struggle for national liberation are incapable of delivering on civil rights. This is one of the messages that anti-imperialists must drive home both North and South following the referendum.

The most immediate fallout from the referendum defeat is the continued offensive of the right. Their next target is the Clinics which provide pregnancy counselling and abortion referral facilities. At present they are taking court action against the Well Women Centre in Dublin. All those who voted 'Yes' must now rally to the defense of the clinics - including DAG who must be convinced that divorce is not an issue separate from the rest of the struggles confronting women. The campaign to defend the clinics must be open to all who for whatever reason support them staying open. This however cannot be the political basis of the clinics campaign. It is high time a clear line was drawn and a restatement was made of the principles which the women's movement have stood for. Thus we must be quite clear that it is the right of women to control their own fertility, their own bodies and their own lives which is the nub of the issue in the clinics campaign. The right wing has denied the right of women to abortion in their own country, now they intend to stop women exercising their choice elsewhere. It is on this issue which all those claiming to stand for women's rights and freedom generally must take a stand on. In particular the anti-imperialist movement must take the initiative in defending the clinics and in attempting to win over and mobilise the people who voted yes in the referendum. We must learn the lesson that avoiding the real arguments and issues as happened in the divorce campaign will not lead to victory. Peoples Democracy will play its part in trying to advance the clear political lead which is now necessary following the divorce defeat and will be launching a propaganda campaign demanding the separating of church and state. A special responsibility also rests on the Republican movement to put Ard Fheis policies on these issues into practice.

As we have said already however above all, women must rely on themselves first and foremost!



The Fourth International and the Women's Liberation Movement

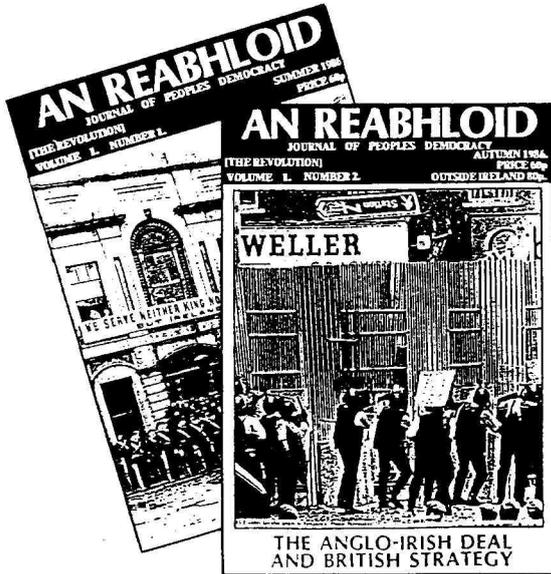
1. The Fourth International has supported the autonomous Women's Liberation Movement since its rise.
2. The Fourth International sees the value of such a movement to identify its own oppression and to pressurise the labour movement from without.
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# DEVELOPMENTS IN THE EUROPEAN WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

## Changing Structure of the Workforce

During the sixties and seventies equality legislation was introduced by various European governments in line with the changing social/economic position of women. These laws, however, have not protected women from the effects of the economic crisis in the capitalist countries and women today are more exploited.

However, it's not like the 1930's when women were pushed out of the workplace altogether. On the contrary, the number of women wage earners has increased, but many are employed in part-time, casual and temporary work and mainly in the public sector and service industries. During the last twenty years there has been an increase in this type of work. It is low paid and largely non-unionised. Married women and single parents, tied to domestic responsibilities, are forced to take these kind of jobs and they are preferred by employers who see them as a more flexible - that is more manageable - workforce.

Women, therefore, are faced with a paradox. The desire and need for paid employment by women is rising while their status in the labour market is falling. Women form a greater percentage of the low-paid than men.

This situation is aggravated by cuts in social welfare - for example the reduction of childcare and hospital provision. These increase women's burdens at home, making it even more difficult to enter the labour market on an equal basis with men.

## Trade Union Response

Unfortunately, the trade union leaders have let this situation go on. To fight against it it's necessary that women be on an equal footing with men as workers. The following demands have been proposed:

- \* fights for women's jobs must be supported
- \* a 6 hour day with no loss of pay
- \* part-time workers should be unionised
- \* union meetings to be held in work time & women encouraged to be stewards

- \* maternity/paternity leave for all
- \* equal pay and a guaranteed minimum wage
- \* guaranteed income for people with dependents
- \* no sexual/racial harrasment at work
- \* positive action in training and recruitment
- \* free daycare for all children to age 5

## The War of Ideas against Women

The failure of the trade union leaders to challenge governments on unemployment has led to an increase in racism, sexism and anti-gay hysteria. Working people 'softened-up' through fear of

being unemployed are more ready to put the blame on 'foreigners', gays and women as the latters 'real place is in the home'!

Politicians like Reagan and Thatcher are determined to reduce public expenditure, to 'turn the clock back' to pre-welfare days. To do this they need to place the family centre-stage. A family, where the mother cares for the children, the sick and the old unpaid; a family which is 'stable' and can control the increasing social conflict caused by unemployment; a family responsible for imposing street moral codes on the children. This is the type of family proposed by the Special Family Policy Group set up by Thatcher in Britain. Caring for the family is women's primary role.

They are told this is their most important job, reinforcing the idea that they are only secondary, or marginal, in



the workforce. This then justifies the cut-backs; the reduction and privatisation of social services, of nursery facilities; the reduction of maternity leave and the restriction on unemployment benefits.

### Fertility Control

To fulfill the aim of keeping women subordinate the right winged forces internationally have been trying systematically to remove abortion and reproductive rights. In Britain, for example, the 1967 Act has been challenged since its introduction. There have been battles in the majority of European cities around abortion legislation.

Reagan gave full backing to the Pro-Life Movement during his last election campaign. - A whole 'Pro-Life', pro motherhood alternative has been promoted, playing on the legitimate doubts women have expressed about the Pill and reproductive technology.

Much of the activity of the women's movement through the seventies and up to the present has focussed on defending this basic 'right to choose'. Women know that to control their lives they need control over their fertility.

### Containing the Women's Liberation Movt.

The women's liberation movement, like the labour movement, is being prevented from making further progress by monetarist governments and has to spend much of its energy nowadays defending those few rights which have been won.

Meanwhile the political establishment seeks to absorb the impetus of the early days of the Movement, whose challenging ideas reflected the deep social changes women were undergoing.

Women have increasingly been able to enter the fields of higher education and the Media. Social services which cater especially for women's needs, such as battered wives' refuges and women's centres, have received state funding. The effect has been to undermine the independence of these projects and incorporate them into the system.

Women's departments and ministries have been set up in countries like Ireland and France to advise the government how to contain women's demands. In Europe overall there has been an increase in the number of women in parliament and local councils, partly by means of quotas and positive action. Government posts in health and social services are being reserved for women while feminist organisations receive funding from labour councils. The danger, however, is that women entering a political 'career' may lose touch with women in the unions and the community who they are supposed to represent.

### Policy of the Eurocommunists

The left of the labour movement has been slow to respond to the demands of women for equality. This has left

the way open for the Eurocommunists who have influenced the radical feminists and the socialist-feminist wing of the Women's Liberation Movement since the mid-seventies. They claim the labour movement is a 'men's movement' with no interest in women's rights and that women are disadvantaged in pay and opportunities because of the 'privileged' male workers. They ignore the restrictions placed on the labour movement as a whole by governments. An example from Britain shows where this disastrous policy leads. Following a 'feminist incomes policy' argument the TUC resolved on a minimum wage for all workers tied to a wages freeze on the 'high-paid' workers!

This policy turns worker against worker and drives down the living standards of the labour movement as a whole. It presents no challenge to the government, whose policies are responsible for unemployment, low pay, etc.

### The Feminization of Poverty

Governments are aware of radical feminist resentment towards the male-dominated world of work so they use this to encourage women to 'rediscover' the 'world of women' - the world of the home. The radical feminist call for recognition and appraisal of what women do at home has been taken up by governments like the Christian Democrats in Germany who issued a policy document encouraging women to 'see the world from a women's viewpoint ... to forego advantages ... to make do with scarcer means ... caring for people's needs.' In other words: to surrender their rights.

The right, and the 'Moral Majority' have no interest in progress for women as a sex. But they are prepared to use the grievances of the women's movement to advance their own policies. To remain truly liberationist, to guard against adapting to backward government policy, feminists must see their oppression in its social context and ally themselves with the labour movement.

### New Forces and the Recomposition of the Women's Liberation Movement

The women's movement throughout Europe has undergone a transformation since the early seventies when there were structured national feminist networks. These have now declined although the ideas of the Women's Liberation Movement remain influential. Despite this women have organized massively around political issues like abortion and nuclear disarmament.

They have fought for increased political representation and have promoted the self-organization of women within these organisations as a means of securing women's interests.

Large numbers of feminists have entered organized politics, unions and social democratic parties. They have taken with them the debates and forms of organization of the Women's Liberation Movement - raising issues like abortion and sexual harassment.

Overall the labour movement has gained from this as the trend has been for women to vote increasingly in favour of left parties and within those parties to advance radical policy. In Britain, for example, the Labour Party Women's Conference has been adopting radical policies on issues like Ireland, NATO, the Falklands War etc. in opposition to the bureaucracy.

In the unions women have played a vital role in the battle against austerity and to defend jobs. In Britain they formed a national movement - Women against Pit Closures - to defend the Miner's strike.

In Germany, the SPD has been forced, through the 'Women's Lists', to increase the number of women on its national leadership while in the Greens there are autonomous women's caucuses and currently an all women leadership in their Parliamentary fraction.

Black and immigrant women are organizing in Britain and in Germany and their insights on issues like colonial exploitation, the police and abortion enrich the understanding of the Women's Liberation Movement overall. ■





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