

The abortion vote in Ireland: A blow against reaction

29 May 2018

The overwhelming “Yes” vote in the Irish referendum on abortion rights, by a margin of 1,429,981 votes for to 723,632 votes against, is a landmark victory both for the Irish working class and for the defense of democratic rights internationally. In a country that for centuries has been synonymous with domination by the medieval backwardness of the Roman Catholic Church, where as recently as 20 years ago both contraception and divorce were illegal, two-thirds of those voting in a heavy turnout supported the legalization of abortion. It is a demonstration that, while the official parties of bourgeois Europe are all moving to the right, the working class and sections of the middle class are moving to the left.

Last Friday’s vote is an exact reversal of the 1983 referendum that enacted the Eighth Amendment to the Irish constitution, formally prohibiting abortion by giving the unborn fetus legal rights equal to those of a pregnant woman. That referendum, backed by the Catholic hierarchy and Ireland’s major parties, passed by a two-to-one margin. The referendum to repeal the Eighth Amendment was opposed by the hierarchy, but the bishops avoided a prominent public role because of a series of major scandals that have shattered the Church’s claims to infallibility and moral superiority, involving sexual abuse by priests, enslavement of women in convent enterprises, and the discovery of a mass grave of at least 800 children born “out of wedlock” over many decades in rural Tuam, dumped in the septic tank of a Catholic home for unwed mothers.

The main bourgeois parties—Fine Gael, Fianna Fail, Labour and Sinn Fein—all officially endorsed a “yes” vote, although the two largest, Fine Gael and Fianna Fail, were deeply split. In any case, as observers noted, these parties were not leading the campaign to legalize abortion. They were trailing behind a popular movement that was manifested in a major influx of new voters, the Internet-based crowd-funding of the “yes” campaign, and enthusiastic participation among youth, and particularly

young women.

Vote tabulations found that only one district out of 40, Donegal, on the border with Northern Ireland, reported a majority “no” vote, and that by a narrow margin. Even the most rural and conservative areas, such as Roscommon and Mayo, posted majorities for “yes.” Exit polls revealed that support for abortion rights won a majority among every age group except those over 65 (with 80 percent or more among young people voting “yes”), and among urban, suburban and rural voters. Irish farmers voted by 52.5 percent to defy the Catholic Church, which had branded every “yes” vote a sin requiring confession and repentance.

There are both short-term and long-term social factors at work in the shift in public opinion in Ireland. As one Irish commentator noted, the campaign to repeal the Eighth Amendment was spearheaded by the youth: “[T]his campaign has been largely won by a generation that had good reason to give up on Ireland. It is the generation of 2008, the generation that was handed a massive bank debt, that was told there were no jobs, that had its wages and welfare payments cut, that was informed, in so many words, that it would be greatly appreciated if it would kindly remove itself to somewhere else.”

Real wages plummeted after the 2008 financial crash, which put an end to widespread illusions in Ireland as the “Celtic Tiger,” but have recovered somewhat since 2012. Meanwhile, the cost of living has continued its relentless rise. Dublin, which accounts for one quarter of the country’s population, is now a more expensive place to live than London. Economic inequality in Ireland, as in all the major capitalist countries, has risen to previously unheard-of levels. Not since Anglo-Irish landlords feasted while their peasant tenants starved during the Great Famine of 1847–48 has the gap between the wealthy and the rest of the population been so vast.

But there is another social transformation, of a

longer-term and more profound character, that is manifested in the Irish vote. Once a country consisting overwhelmingly of poor farmers, usually tenants at the mercy of the landlord and priest, Ireland has undergone an industrial development and economic modernization over the past half century. In 1960, only 46 percent of Ireland's 2.8 million population lived in urban areas, while 54 percent were rural. In 2018, 67 percent of Ireland's 4.8 million population lives in urban areas, with only 33 percent rural. The transformation in raw numbers is even more remarkable: Ireland's urban population has risen 150 percent, from 1,288,000 in 1960 to 3,216,000; the rural population has risen by only 5 percent over the same period, from 1,512,000 to 1,584,000.

What the influx of capital investment in factories, offices and research centers means in class terms is unmistakable: the urban working class, once a relatively small minority in Ireland, albeit with a remarkable revolutionary history, is now the largest social force in the country. The rural tenantry and farmers, long dominated by the Catholic Church, have become a minority. And it is the working class, of all classes in modern capitalist society, which is the bedrock for the defense of democratic rights.

Over the past quarter-century, in a series of referendums that have allowed the people to override the bourgeois parties that kowtow to the Church, Ireland has legalized contraception, divorce, gay marriage and now abortion. As the *New York Times* noted Monday, "The culture of silence and deference to religious authority that long dominated Ireland is gone."

It is instructive to contrast the advances in democratic rights recorded in what was once the most backward country in Western Europe with the frontal assault on those rights in the United States, the richest and most powerful capitalist country in the world. Once legislation is enacted by the Irish parliament—already presented in draft form before the referendum—women in small towns and rural areas of Ireland will have greater access to reproductive health care, including abortion, than their counterparts in similar areas of the United States.

In 2014, according to the Guttmacher Institute, there was no abortion provider in 90 percent of US counties, accounting for 39 percent of the women of reproductive age. This included 99 percent of counties in Missouri, 98 percent in the Dakotas and Kentucky, 97 percent in Arkansas and 96 percent in Wisconsin. One-quarter of women who needed abortion services had to travel at least 25 miles to find a clinic. In parts of Texas and the

Great Plains, the distance to be traveled comes to hundreds of miles each way.

The right to abortion is being destroyed by stealth, through a combination of state harassment of clinics, such as requirements that they be affiliated to hospitals (even when the only local hospital is Catholic), and obstacles placed in the way of women, such as the requirement for multiple visits to receive "counseling" before they obtain the procedure. Heavy pressure has been placed on insurance companies, most recently by the Trump administration, not to cover abortion services in any government-linked insurance plan, such as Obamacare. Medicaid will not pay for the procedure, and funding for the largest provider of abortion services, Planned Parenthood, is under systematic attack.

This assault on democratic rights affects primarily women of the working class. Women of higher income and social position have no problem obtaining abortion and other reproductive health services when they need them. That accounts for the indifference with which the well-heeled advocates of the #MeToo campaign treat the destruction of abortion rights in America. While the *New York Times*, the *New Yorker*, the television networks and Hollywood obsess about the supposed crimes against millionaire actresses and television personalities, they have no time for the plight of women workers who are denied this fundamental right to determine what happens within their own bodies.

This indifference carries over to the media coverage of the Irish referendum. It has dropped from the newspaper headlines after one day. It barely registered in the network news broadcasts. The *World Socialist Web Site* sees this issue differently. We hail the actions of the Irish people, who have dealt a blow to reaction. This vote reinforces our conviction that the defense of democratic rights, and of all progressive developments in modern society, requires the mobilization of the strength of the working class as an independent political force.

Patrick Martin

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