

"I have traveled all over the world... but nobody has ever treated me like this"

WSWS interviews Dr Warren Hern

Kaye Tucker
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Dr Warren Hern, who was detained last week at Sydney airport by Australian immigration officials after travelling to Australia to attend a four-day conference, is a former president of the International Society of Abortion Doctors. The World Socialist Web Site spoke by telephone to Dr Hern in Brisbane, a few days before he returned to the US.

Kaye Tucker: Could you explain what happened to you on arrival at Sydney airport?

Warren Hern: When I arrived Immigration Department officials took me into an interrogation room and asked me where I was going and why I was here, who I would be speaking to, and who would I be associating with. They went on and on. It was really very disturbing because I had no indication that this was going to happen. They didn't give me an explanation for a long time, almost an hour.

I simply said I was a physician-scientist and was here to talk to some friends and colleagues about some professional and scientific matters and go running on the beach and look at the birds. It didn't seem so insidious to me. I asked them why they wanted to know.

They said they knew I was going to the conference on abortion. They knew my itinerary. This was very alarming to me because I had only been in Australia for 15 minutes when they snagged me. There had been no opportunity to talk about it. How did they know my itinerary? That's police state tactics.

Then they presented me with a document that was unsigned, and undated. It was on blank paper with no stationery markings, with all these accusations and statements. They said they wanted me to sign this "undertaking". I said "undertaking" in my country means you are going to be buried. They wanted me to sign this document saying that I would not break Australian laws and incite civil discord.

Well, who decides? What if someone accuses me of doing these things? Will I be thrown in prison, or will I be given a lawyer? How long will I be in prison, what will happen to me?

They couldn't tell me. They couldn't answer any of these questions. They couldn't tell me what would happen if I refused to sign this, whether I would be thrown in prison. They wouldn't tell me what would happen if I did sign the letter and someone accused me of inciting social disorder. How long would I be detained, would I be expelled, what would happen? They couldn't answer.

I asked who made these accusations? Who wrote this statement?

They wouldn't tell me. They got a woman, Tatum, on the phone, a police liaison officer in the Immigration Department responsible for following suspicious people or something and even she couldn't answer my questions. I said, if you can't answer any of my questions, why should I answer yours?

I asked who decides what is reasonable and they said the Minister. I said that sounds like a dictatorship to me, if ever I heard one. This is police state tactics and it is completely out of the question. You are running a police state operation here.

There were several officers in the room, a large man and a couple of women and different people around at other times. They weren't physically rough with me but I found it very threatening.

I mean, I didn't do anything, so I refused to sign. It would be signing away my rights. This doesn't meet my idea of a free society. They didn't know what to do. They were completely unprepared for somebody refusing to sign.

I later learned that two colleagues had signed. Dr Tiller signed the letter and had to forfeit his passport on arrival in Australia. He also had to present all kinds of personal financial information to the Immigration Department, which I thought was outrageous. This is extraordinary procedure and there was no way I was going to co-operate.

When I refused to sign the officials didn't know what to do. They had to consult someone in Canberra about what to do with me. Finally, after another hour went by and I had missed my connecting plane, I expected I would be expelled from the country. I expected to be put back on the plane. I thought that this was the nicest thing that would happen to me.

Finally they said I could stay but I couldn't talk about the subject of late term abortion. I said, 'what is late term abortion?' They said they didn't know and I said I didn't know either. I've never seen these terms in medical literature and they don't make any sense. 'How am I supposed to follow your rules when you don't even know what you are talking about?' They were stuck.

KT: How would you characterise your treatment at the hands of the Immigration Department?

WH: I think they restricted my civil liberties when they took me into custody. They said I was not in custody but when I asked what would happen if I tried to leave, they replied that they would have to take me into custody. So what is the difference if you put the shackles on now or later? I can't leave, I am held against my will

and it is an outrage. I was really furious and alarmed.

I have traveled all over the world, to military dictatorships in South America and in Communist countries. I've been in unstable countries all over the place, in Latin America and Africa and the Middle East and Eastern Europe, and nobody has ever treated me like this. You have some serious fascists running the Immigration Department and the Australian people need to understand that.

KT: The WWSWS considers that your detention and the attempt to gag you represent a serious attack on democratic rights. What is your attitude to the right to freely travel?

WH: In general I think people should be able to travel, as long as they are not advocating some violent activity. I think every country has the right to protect its own borders and decide who can be in the country but I think that the decision to keep somebody out is very serious and has to be only for the most serious grounds. But when it comes to matters of free speech, well this is the 20th century. We have to be able to talk to each other. To deny someone entry on the grounds of what they might or might not think or say is a complete abrogation of human rights.

KT: It is now clear that Australian anti-abortion groups called on the government to refuse entry to you and other doctors attending the abortion conference in Queensland.

WH: I think that it is a scandal that the government allowed itself to be used in this totalitarian manner.

KT: Do you think there was any co-ordination between the anti-abortion groups in America and your detention and harassment by the Immigration Department here in Australia?

WH: I have no idea. Both Dr Tiller and I are well known in the United States as doctors who do abortions. I have been very visible on this issue for more than 25 years. They know who I am. I can't imagine that the anti-abortion people in the United States don't have connections with their Australian allies. That would be beyond reason.

KT: What influence do the anti-abortion groups have on political life in the US?

WH: They have a big influence. The Republican Party in the United States clearly decided over 25 years ago to use the abortion issue to get power. And it has been very successful for them from the beginning.

There was a clear, naked appropriation of this radically conservative Christian fundamentalist movement into the Republican Party. There was nothing covert about it. The anti-abortion movement is the face of fascism in America, no question about it. They decided to join with the Republican Party to get power and the Republican Party decided to exploit the anti-abortion movement and many fanatic people in order to get votes.

One of the starting points was when Robert Dole, who became the Senate Majority leader and a Republican candidate for president at one point, was running for election in 1974. He was losing to a doctor who was an obstetrician-gynecologist, Dr Roy. Dr Roy had delivered thousands and thousands of babies and had done a few abortions for therapeutic reasons. Robert Dole accused him of being an "abortionist". That finished off Dr Roy and Robert Dole won the election, whereas a week before the election he was way behind.

From that point on, the Republican Party very consciously

appropriated the abortion issue and that allowed them to win control of the United States Senate in 1980 and the presidency. The anti-abortion groups are running the Republican Party and the Congress. To call some of them fascist is a polite euphemism.

The right wing is gaining power and I think there is every reason to believe they will capture the presidency next year and control the government. They will undoubtedly try and overturn Roe versus Wade [the 1973 US Supreme Court decision legalising abortion]. Of course we don't feel protected by this decision at the moment anyway. I think the United States is going very far to the right and I don't see anything there to change that.

KT: What have your experiences been with the anti-abortion groups in America?

WH: They will stop at absolutely nothing to impose their views on people and to get power. Unfortunately I see the same tactic happening here in Australia.

In the United States it has been highly violent. They have assassinated doctors and issued hit lists of doctors they want eliminated, and I am on the list.

They are much worse than the Mafia. The Mafia has the decency to keep its hit list private; the anti-abortion people have a press conference and announce their hit list! They are very dangerous.

They shot at my clinic. There were five shots fired into my office in 1988 and they have made several attempts on my life and numerous death threats. They actually shot Dr Tiller. He has been under death threats for a long time. Many others have been shot.

KT: What do you think about the US health system and the situation facing the working class and poor?

WH: In the case of abortion, you can have a safe abortion if you can afford it.

The Reagan administration elevated social Darwinism to the level of public policy. The radical right-wing in American politics basically say it is survival of the fittest.

The purpose of the government is to allow the rich to get richer. This is a very dangerous process and pattern in the United States, as far as I am concerned. The issue of social justice has really gone begging and the Clinton administration has really adapted to this.



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