

# Massive march on Washington for women's rights

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Many hundreds of thousands of people demonstrated in Washington, D.C., last Sunday in favor of abortion rights and women's health issues in the face of a series of attacks by the Bush administration. March organizers estimated the crowd at 1.15 million, which would make Sunday's protest one of the largest in US history.

More than 800 buses from nearly every state filled the parking lot of Washington's Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Stadium, one of several staging areas for the event. Many more buses lined streets adjacent to the Washington Mall, where demonstrators assembled for the march past the White House and on to the Capitol.

Marchers carried signs reading "Keep Abortion Legal," "My Body, My Choice" and "Fight the Radical Right." Chants included "Keep your laws off my body!" and "Never again!"

Celebrity speakers and marchers included actors Whoopi Goldberg, Kathleen Turner, Cybill Shepherd and Ashley Judd, as well as singers Ani DiFranco, Moby and the Indigo Girls. The heads of the seven main sponsoring organizations—the National Organization for Women, Planned Parenthood, the National Abortion Rights Action League, the Black Women's Health Imperative, the American Civil Liberties Union, the Feminist Majority, and the National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health—all spoke, among many others.

The large turnout reflects the deep-seated anger of millions of Americans over the attacks on democratic rights in general, and over the Bush administration's efforts to roll back the clock on women's rights in particular. The political perspective of the march organizers, however, was to funnel this growing opposition into support for the Democratic Party.

Prominent Democrats such as New York's Senator

Hillary Rodham Clinton and former presidential candidate Howard Dean were given the platform to call for a vote for Massachusetts Senator John Kerry, the party's presumptive presidential nominee. Clinton told the crowd, "All the people are here today not only to march on behalf of women's lives but to take that energy into the election in November."

Although Kerry claims to support the right to an abortion, he did not attend the march. Since he locked up his party's nomination, he has been careful not to be seen as too closely associated with any popular protest movement, as he focuses his attention on winning the support of the corporate financiers and media moguls whom he sees as key to winning the presidency.

Yet, the Democrats have an abysmal record when it comes to protecting women's rights against Republican attacks. Only last month, Democrats provided the margin of passage for the latest reactionary measure, the so-called "Unborn Victims of Violence Act," which President Bush signed into law on April 1. In the House of Representatives, 47 Democrats voted for the bill, as well as 13 in the Senate.

The bill undermines abortion rights by defining the fetus as a living being separate from the mother from the "time of conception," thus giving separate standing to an unborn child as a victim in cases of harm to a woman who is pregnant. While the act specifically exempts abortion from being considered a crime, if the logic of the law were to be applied to abortion, it would automatically be considered murder.

Less than six months ago, Bush signed the misnamed Partial-Birth Abortion Ban Act of 2003. Again, congressional Democrats provided critical votes for passage, with 16 voting yes in the Senate, including such reputed "liberals" as minority leader Tom Daschle and the ranking Democrat on the judiciary committee,

Patrick Leahy. The bill passed the Senate by a 64-to-34 margin. In addition, 63 Democrats in the House voted for the measure.

The new federal law is the first to ban a specific kind of abortion procedure, known as dilation and extraction, which the bill's sponsors renamed "partial-birth abortion" in order to give the method a ghoulish caste. The very rare procedure is almost always performed when the mother's life or health is endangered by the pregnancy, and no alternative methods are considered safer.

Similar state legislation has already been ruled unconstitutional. Abortion rights lawyers filed legal action against the act soon after Bush signed it.

From nearly the day that he took office, Bush has established a record against reproductive rights. One of his early actions was to order a ban on funding of family-planning groups around the world that offered or counseled women on abortion. He also issued an executive order prohibiting federal funding of potentially valuable stem cell research, even though the embryos used were incapable of developing into human life.

The attack on women's rights—in particular, the right to abortion—is part of a broader attack on civil liberties in which the Democrats have been fully complicit.

Former President Bill Clinton initiated many of the current attacks on democratic rights with the 1996 passage of the Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act, which severely restricts the right of appeal for death row inmates and has provided the basis for imprisonment and prosecution of many terrorism suspects following the 9/11 terror attacks.

Expanding on the Clinton-era measures, the Bush administration seized on the events of September 11, 2001, to push through the USA Patriot Act. Again, this legislation had the overwhelming support of the Democratic Party, passing by a vote of 98 to 1 in the Senate. Senator Kerry has reaffirmed his support for the Patriot Act, which he says needs to be strengthened in order to prosecute the "war on terror" more effectively.

Women in America face a very real threat to their reproductive rights. Before the *Roe v. Wade* decision by the US Supreme Court in 1973 legalizing abortion, legitimate doctors performing abortions could be charged with murder, and often were. Under the circumstances, many women sought out "back-alley"

abortion doctors at great jeopardy to their lives. The illegalization of abortion in the US would undoubtedly result in the deaths of countless women.

These are the conditions the Christian ultra-right fanatics on whom Bush bases himself seek to restore today. These forces habitually vilify abortion providers and women seeking abortions as murderers. In response to Sunday's massive rally, Bush advisor Karen Hughes issued a statement that went even further, seeking to place pro-choice proponents in the camp of terrorism:

"I think that after September 11, the American people are valuing life more and we need policies to value the dignity and worth of every life," Hughes said. "President Bush has worked to say, let's be reasonable, let's work to value life, let's reduce the number of abortions, let's increase adoptions. And I think those are the kinds of policies the American people can support, particularly at a time when we're facing an enemy and, really, the fundamental issue between us and the terror network we fight is that we value every life."

Democrats in Congress have provided the key votes in pushing through Bush's anti-abortion initiatives, as well as supporting the administration's onslaught on civil liberties in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, and cannot be counted on to protect women's right to choose.

The right to abortion cannot be defended as simply a women's issue—or a single protest issue—separated from a struggle to mobilize working people independently of the entire political establishment, Democratic and Republican alike, which upholds a system of vast social inequality in America. This concentration of wealth in the hands of a tiny minority is the breeding ground for attacks on all basic democratic rights—including the unrestricted right of women to abortion on demand.



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