

US political establishment escalates attack on abortion rights

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In the month and a half since taking control of the US House of Representatives, Republican lawmakers have introduced a raft of legislation specifically aimed at rolling back the democratic rights of working women.

Three federal level bills would cut funds for family planning services and raise restrictions that would bar millions of low-income women from access to abortion and health care services. Statehouses throughout the country are pursuing similar policies.

Although initiated by the section of the political establishment who are most closely aligned with the religious right, the attacks are of a piece with the Obama administration's campaign against access to basic health care and are being folded into an austerity budget that targets basic social programs across the board.

The first bill, HR 3, or the "No Taxpayer Funding for Abortion Act," extends the reach of the Hyde Amendment, reauthorized last year as part of the Democratic-sponsored health care bill. This piece of legislation is a decades' old "rider" bill originally passed in 1976 as a backlash against the *Roe v. Wade* decision legalizing abortion. Attached as an additional provision of Department of Health and Human Service appropriations, which primarily affected Medicaid, the Hyde Amendment eliminated public funding for abortion.

HR 3 goes further by removing tax incentives for individuals or businesses receiving credits on insurance plans that cover abortions. The law would directly impact the vast majority of small business- and individually paid health insurance plans, including 87 percent of private plans.

At a recent press conference, Republican House Speaker John Boehner hailed HR 3 as a "commonsense" law that is "the will of the people" that "ought to be the will of the land." Boehner described its passage as one of the House's highest priorities.

When it was introduced January 20, the bill included a provocative clause that would restrict credits on abortion coverage to cases in which a rape victim was put in grave danger of death or for pregnancies resulting from "forcible"

rape. This would essentially change the existing legal definition of rape to exclude statutory or date rape, further narrowing the number of women who escape the provisions of the Hyde Amendment. This provision was subsequently withdrawn, but the bill retains the brunt of its force against access to women's health care.

In reality, the federal government has never provided significant funding for abortion. Claims that it has are voiced as a measure of winning the support of the most reactionary and backward sections of American society.

The Hyde Amendment as it stands restricts access to reproductive health clinics that provide contraceptives, preventative health screenings, treatment for sexually transmitted diseases, prenatal care, and many other basic health services such as flu shots. Such clinics are the sole providers of basic women's health care in many areas, and predominantly serve low-income patients.

The Hyde Amendment was offered by the Democrats as a substitution in the health care overhaul bill for the Stupak-Pitts Amendment in order to insure the vote of Michigan Representative Bart Stupak, co-author of the Stupak-Pitts Amendment, which would have permanently eliminated all abortion funding. This move was framed by the Obama administration and the mainstream media as cooperative, bipartisan and wholly necessary to passage of the health care legislation. On the contrary, passage of the Hyde Amendment codified the oppression of millions of working class women and their families.

The second act recently introduced in the House is HR 358 or the "Protect Life Act," which would allow hospitals to refuse abortion care to patients even in cases where an emergency abortion is needed to save a woman's life. Currently, hospitals receiving Medicare or Medicaid funds, virtually every hospital in the United States, are prohibited from refusing emergency care to anyone regardless of citizenship, legal status, or ability to pay. By allowing hospitals to refuse emergency care for specific procedures, HR 358 would alter this precedent significantly.

The third of the bills introduced by the Republican House,

is HR 217, the “Abortion Provider Prohibition Act.” This act, which has 165 co-sponsors, would eliminate all federal funding currently allocated under the Title X Family Planning Program for organizations that provide abortions, even if the funds are not used to perform abortions.

HR 217 targets non-profit family planning agencies, the largest of which is Planned Parenthood, with 850 facilities in the US. Planned Parenthood provides abortions, accounting for about 10 percent of its services. It also offers cancer screening, STD testing, contraceptives, and other family planning services to over 3 million women every year, the vast majority of whom are low-income and uninsured.

The efforts to restrict abortion access at the federal level are matched by reactionary measures at the state level. Ohio, for example, has a pending law that would limit abortions to the few weeks before a fetal heartbeat is detected. A Kentucky law would require a woman to review her ultrasound with a doctor 24 hours before receiving an abortion. The legislature in West Virginia—the state with the highest increase in the teen pregnancy rate in the country—has introduced bills revoking funding for both abortion and contraceptive access.

So-called “personhood” bills are pending in North Dakota, Texas, Iowa and Oklahoma. The North Dakota legislation, which redefines a person as “an individual member of the species homo sapiens at every stage of development,” passed in the state House by 68-25. North Dakota has only one abortion provider.

An astonishingly retrograde measure introduced in South Dakota would make killing in “defense of the unborn” a legally justified defense for homicide. The bill, HB 1171, passed the state House’s judiciary committee, expanded language defining justifiable homicide to include killing “in the lawful defense of ... his or her husband, wife, parent, child, master, mistress, or servant, or the unborn child of any such enumerated person.”

The threat of intimidation extends not only to the women seeking an abortion, but to the doctors and nurses who provide them as well. After a public outcry erupted against the state bill, the general House voted to temporarily table it, considering instead other restrictive provisions.

South Dakota, like many states, has few service providers for women’s health. The state has no single abortion clinic; Planned Parenthood sends one provider in once a week to serve patients.

At the same time, the population of the state has repeatedly indicated its support for the right of a woman to receive an abortion, including twice rejecting ballot measures that would have outlawed the procedure. A majority of the American population supports the right to abortion.

The democratic will of the people, however, finds as little

expression in the pursuit of laws attacking fundamental democratic rights as it does in the budget cutting that targets other basic social conditions. Indeed, the amplified ideological campaign against abortion rights corresponds to the austerity policies that are being carried out across the country.

Moreover, such policies must be seen within the context of the systematic attacks on the democratic rights of the working class and rising militarism that the American political establishment sees as necessary to enforce the rollback of living standards. The Republican Party in particular is seeking to fracture the working class politically by cultivating a disoriented base for further attacks on the population. For this reason, although many current anti-abortion laws are unlikely to pass or stand against legal challenges, the bills must serve as a warning to the working class.

Planned Parenthood has been the subject of attacks from Live Action, a right-wing activist organization. Live Action recently posted several undercover videos to YouTube of Planned Parenthood employees offering advice to a “pimp” on the sex trafficking of underage girls. This mimics a similar smear campaign launched in 2010 against the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) which eventually resulted in a loss of ACORN’s public funding. Representative Mike Pence of Indiana, sponsor of the congressional HR 217, is already calling for the elimination of Planned Parenthood’s funding in response to the Live Action videos.

While the attacks on abortion and health care have elicited condemnations from Democratic-aligned liberal groups, including Planned Parenthood and the American Civil Liberties Union, the Obama administration and Democratic Party have been tight-lipped. Far from rejecting such backward measures, Democrats have responded by urging their Republican counterparts to refocus their attention on budget cutting as a whole.



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