

The New York Times and Obama's cave-in on contraceptives

Kate Randall
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Within a day of the Obama administration's reversal last week of a ruling requiring religiously affiliated employers to provide contraceptives as part of their medical coverage, the *New York Times* rushed in to provide political cover for Obama's cave-in to reactionary religious elements.

On January 20, Obama announced a decision that would have required employers, including church-affiliated universities, schools, hospitals and charities, to provide free access to contraceptives as part of their employee health insurance plans. As a concession from the start, churches themselves were to be exempt from the rule.

Only three weeks later, on February 10, Obama capitulated to a volley of right-wing agitation and reversed the decision. He now said that religiously affiliated institutions would no longer be compelled to offer contraceptives as part of their health coverage for female employees, and that this would instead be provided and funded by the insurance companies.

Obama's cave-in represented a blow against the fundamental democratic principle of separation of church and state laid down in the First Amendment to the US Constitution. In defending his climbdown, Obama parroted the line of the religious right and declared that he was motivated by his Christian faith and a desire to protect "religious liberty."

He was evidently oblivious of the contradiction between a genuine defense of religious freedom, which includes freedom *from* religion, and the use of the White House as a platform to promote Christianity.

On Saturday, February 11, the *Times* published a front page lead article as well as an editorial aimed at obscuring the reactionary content of Obama's capitulation to the Church. Employing various tortured arguments, the *Times* asserted that Obama had stood his ground on the right of women to have free access to birth control.

The front page article, "Obama Adjusts a Rule Covering Contraceptives," begins by asserting that Obama's decision "to soften a rule requiring religious-affiliated organizations to pay for insurance plans that offer free birth control was never really driven by a desire to mollify Roman Catholic bishops, who were strongly opposed to the plan."

Obama was not caving to the Catholic clergy, according to the *Times*, he was merely responding to appeals from "Catholic allies of the White House seen as the religious left." Thus, the *Times* would have us believe, Obama's move was not another shift to the right, but rather an "adjustment" of his general leftward trajectory.

Drawing on information obviously provided by White House insiders, the *Times* recounts how Obama from the start faced "rising anger from Catholic Democrats, liberal columnists and left-leaning religious leaders" who pressed for a compromise, but that a group of advisers "sold the president on a stricter rule."

The *Times* account indicates that Obama was prepared all along to exempt religiously affiliated institutions along the lines of a deal worked out in the state of Hawaii. It seems that the course decided on was to announce the "stricter rule" on January 20, on the

eve of the State of the Union Address, so as to curry favor with Obama's liberal and feminist supporters, and then use the year before the new rule took effect to work out a backroom agreement with the Church to weaken it.

The *Times* editorial published the same day, "The Freedom to Choose Birth Control," is, if anything, an even more blatant falsification of the issue, providing an apologia for Obama's appeasement of the religious right and a cover for his abandonment of core democratic principles.

The editors proclaim: "In response to a phony crisis over 'religious liberty' engendered by the right, President Obama seems to have stood his ground on an essential principle—free access to birth control for any woman." This opening sentence is false on a number of counts. First, if it was indeed a phony crisis, what justification could there be for any accommodation to the crisis-mongers?

The *Times* notes cynically that "it was dismaying to see the president lend any credence to the misbegotten notion that providing access to contraceptives violated the freedom of any religious institution." But, in the end, such a shameful surrender to opponents of the First Amendment matters little to the *Times*. "By refusing to back down on Friday," the editorial states, "Mr. Obama took an action that will help reduce the number of unwanted pregnancies, abortions and medical complications from pregnancy."

The newspaper goes on to indicate that far from quieting the theocratic, anti-birth control lobby, Obama's reversal has emboldened it. It cites the introduction of a bill by Republican Senator Marco Rubio of Florida that would "allow any employer to refuse to cover birth control by claiming to have a religious objection."

What the *Times* leaves out is the clear fact that Obama's cave-in on the fundamental issue of church and state opens the way precisely for such attacks on democratic rights and the rights of workers, in particular, under the cover of religion.

The editorial also notes that it will be "objectionable if it turns out that nonreligious employers are subsidizing the exemption of religious employers"—i.e., if insurance companies pass on the costs of providing free access to contraceptives by raising premiums, an eventuality that is not precluded by any mechanism in the health care rule.

Of course, as the *Times* is well aware, this is precisely what the insurance companies will do.

One point is conveniently left unmentioned in the *Times* piece: the overwhelming support within the population—including a majority of Catholics—for free access to contraceptives. This is not surprising, however, as the concern of the newspaper's editors lies not with those working class families, women and poor people who stand to suffer most from any inroad into the availability of contraceptives.

The *Times'* duplicitous response to Obama's capitulation to right-wing religious forces and the Catholic Church underscores the absence of any genuine commitment from any section of the political establishment to the defense of democratic rights.



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