

The Susan G. Komen Foundation debacle and the US establishment

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The announcement this week by the Susan G. Komen Foundation that it would cut off funding to Planned Parenthood unleashed a popular backlash, with hundreds of thousands expressing their outrage via social networking sites. Komen abruptly reversed its decision on Friday, but not before the move had exposed the advocacy group's capitulation to extreme-right, religious forces.

Komen has provided grants to Planned Parenthood for many years, giving \$700,000 in 2011. The cut-off would have denied breast cancer screenings for thousands of Planned Parenthood's mostly low-income and poor patients. The organization provides screenings and reproductive health services for one in five women in the US. Ending the Komen Foundation grants would have inevitably led to missed diagnoses, suffering and death.

This made all the more transparent the fact that the foundation's decision to cut funding was politically motivated. Notwithstanding its reversal as a result of popular outrage and internal opposition, the organization's bowing to neo-fascistic crackpots and anti-abortion fanatics illustrates the grotesquely outsized influence these numerically small forces wield within American social and political life.

While the Susan G. Komen Foundation is headed by Republicans who would in the context of today's political spectrum be considered "moderate," rather than by Democratic-aligned liberals, its disgraceful action is symptomatic of a general cowering before the far-right within the political, media and cultural establishment.

After the news broke on Wednesday, Komen founder Nancy Brinker made the utterly unbelievable claim there was no political motivation for the cut-off of funds. Komen President Elizabeth Thompson told

reporters Thursday that the group's actions were not linked in any way to an investigation into Planned Parenthood currently under way in Congress. Florida Republican Representative Cliff Stearns, an anti-abortion fanatic, is conducting a witch-hunt against Planned Parenthood in an effort to defund the organization by proving it uses federal funds to pay for abortions, which is banned under the reactionary Hyde Amendment.

It is now clear that there was not only a direct connection to the Stearns investigation, but that the Komen board of directors rewrote their grant guidelines to prohibit the foundation from funding any group that is under formal investigation by a government body. A source involved with Komen management told the *Atlantic's* Jeffrey Goldberg: "It was completely arbitrary. If they hadn't come up with this particular rule, they would have come up with something else in order to separate themselves from Planned Parenthood."

Key to the rightward shift on the Komen board of directors was the hiring of Karen Handel as senior vice president for public policy in April 2011. Handel is a longtime Republican Party operative and opponent of democratic rights, with connections going back to the Reagan administration. As Georgia secretary of state from 2006 to 2009, she attacked voting rights, implementing laws requiring voters to show state-issued photo IDs before casting ballots and requiring verification of citizenship when registering to vote.

Handel lost a closely contested race for Georgia governor in 2010, supported in her bid by Sarah Palin. She wrote on her campaign blog at the time: "I believe that each and every unborn child has inherent dignity, that every abortion is a tragedy, and that government has a role, along with the faith community, in

encouraging women to choose life in even the most difficult of circumstances... since I am pro-life, I do not support the mission of Planned Parenthood.”

There is no question that Handel took the job at Susan G. Komen with the aim of severing the foundation’s connections to Planned Parenthood, and that Komen’s board of directors knew precisely what they were getting. What a remarkable choice to head public policy efforts for an organization pledged to promote women’s health!

Komen’s alliance with anti-abortion crusaders did not stop with Handel. The group Americans United for Life has aggressively pushed for Congress to end federal funding for Planned Parenthood. The group’s report, “The Case for Investigating Planned Parenthood,” led to a probe by the House Energy and Commerce Committee and Stearns’ investigation of the health care provider. Komen seized on that investigation to provide a mechanism for eliminating funding for Planned Parenthood.

The Komen Foundation debacle is but the latest incidence of a cave-in to these ultra-right forces, particularly in the area of women’s health. In a clear affront to the health of young women, the Obama administration last December overruled a Food and Drug Administration (FDA) recommendation that would have allowed emergency contraceptives to be sold over the counter with no age restrictions. The decision to overturn the FDA ruling had no basis in science and was denounced by women’s health advocates and medical professionals. It was a move calculated to build support among the religious right and the Catholic Church for Obama’s reelection bid.

In this decision and in Komen’s defunding of Planned Parenthood, women’s reproductive rights are being subordinated to blatantly religious bias and bigotry that have no legitimate place in a discussion on how health services should be dispensed and to whom. But the implications go beyond women’s reproductive rights and health. All democratic rights of all layers of society are at risk if basic questions of social policy are dictated by religious prejudice.

The widespread outcry against Komen’s decision to defund Planned Parenthood clearly caught the organization off guard. In the space of several days, Planned Parenthood raised more than \$400,000 from about 6,000 individuals, as well as some larger

donations from individual politicians and trusts.

The cutoff of funding—which would have had a devastating impact on poor women in particular—prompted the sentiment among many: enough is enough! The reaction is an indication that, despite the kowtowing of the political establishment to these right-wing elements, there is minimal popular support for their politics and a growing determination to oppose attacks on democratic rights.

The Komen Foundation has retreated in the face of this reaction, also no doubt out of fear that the widespread revulsion might impact their relationship with some of their larger donors. However, there should be no illusion that such attacks on democratic rights will cease. The forces behind the assault on Planned Parenthood will redouble their efforts.

There must be no illusion that the liberal Democratic Party establishment will stand up to these forces and take a principled stand in defense of democratic rights. As the record of the Obama administration in continuing and expanding the Bush administration’s policies of war, torture, indefinite detention and state murder of alleged terrorists underscores, there is no constituency within the ruling class for a serious defense of democratic rights.

The only social force that can lead the defense of democratic rights is the working class, mobilized in opposition to the entire political and financial establishment on the basis of a socialist program.

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