

Michigan House of Representatives passes anti-abortion bill

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On June 13, the Michigan House of Representatives passed a bill that would severely restrict access to abortion statewide. Sixty-four Republican representatives and six Democrats voted to secure passage of House Bill 5711 and send it to the Michigan Senate, which is expected to take up the legislation this fall.

Two other anti-abortion bills, HB 5712 and HB 5713, have also been introduced in the House. Voting on the latter bills has been postponed until, according to the House speaker, lawmakers can verify their constitutionality. The three bills have been collectively dubbed a “super bill.”

HB 5711 would increase operating costs for abortion providers by reclassifying facilities that advertise abortion services and/or perform more than five abortions per month as “outpatient surgical facilities,” even if no surgical abortions are provided there. Reclassified clinics would be subject to expensive licensing and regulatory requirements. These clinics would also be required to carry \$1 million in liability insurance.

There can be little doubt that the cost of services would rise to meet these new budgetary demands. Planned Parenthood, which provides some abortion services on an outpatient basis at some locations, is a primary target of the bill. The organization has many clinics in older office buildings or former retail spaces that will be structurally impossible to bring up to the standards of surgical facilities or insure at the new level proposed.

Clinics unable to pay would be forced to close their doors, as has been the case in other states, such as Pennsylvania, where onerous legislation intended to block access to abortion care has been passed. With Planned Parenthood locations forced to close, the

poorest women would be cut off not only from access to abortion, but also from other family planning services, breast exams, pap smears and other preventive testing procedures.

The bill would also place humiliating requirements on women. Any woman seeking an abortion would have to attend “coercion screenings” to determine whether she was being forced to abort by a third party.

Additionally, patients would be required to pay for the burial or cremation of aborted fetuses gestated beyond eight weeks. Failure to dispose of a fetus in this way would be considered a felony. This requirement by itself effectively eliminates abortion as an option for many women, as cremation and burial costs often run into the hundreds and sometimes thousands of dollars.

The bill would also ban telemedical abortion services, i.e., the prescribing of abortive medicines via telephone or the Internet, cutting off many rural women from access to the medical procedure.

The remaining bills, not yet voted on, would ban abortion outright after 20 weeks, with no exceptions for the health of the mother, rape, incest or fetal abnormality.

These bills are similar to a raft of anti-abortion laws enacted across the country. Recent measures include: Wisconsin's outlawing of non-surgical abortion in April of this year and a Virginia law requiring that patients undergo ultrasound and then wait 24 hours before becoming eligible for abortion, passed in March of this year.

According to a study by the Guttmacher Institute, 19 states enacted 80 new provisions that restrict access to abortion during the first half of 2011, more than double any other year on record.

The introduction of the anti-abortion legislation provoked outrage within Michigan and nationwide.

Democratic Party state legislators have sought to co-opt this opposition with a series of publicity stunts that will do nothing to stop the enactment of the reactionary laws. Their real purpose is to channel popular anger behind President Obama's reelection campaign.

Several Democratic state representatives introduced amendments to HB 5711 that would have restricted access to vasectomies and erectile dysfunction treatment. These symbolic, tit-for-tat proposals serve only to paint the anti-abortion bills as "anti-woman" measures that require an "anti-male" response, obscuring the more fundamental issues of democratic rights.

This political theater culminated on June 18 after a gag order was imposed on two female Democratic representatives by the Republican speaker of the house, on the grounds that the women legislators' remarks during the floor debate, including the word "vagina," showed a lack of "decorum."

Abortion rights groups organized a performance of *The Vagina Monologues* on the steps of the state capitol, featuring readings by nine female Democratic state representatives. Predictably, pro-Democratic Party publications gave prominent coverage to the episode. The *Nation* magazine ran an editorial headlined "Vagina, Vagina, Vagina."

By reducing attacks on the right to abortion to "the war on women" and a question of identity politics, the Democratic Party and its "left" supporters conceal the class nature of the attacks on poor and working class women who will be most burdened by the passage of such legislation.



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