

Mass protests in Madrid against new abortion reform

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Thirty thousand people marched in Spain's capital on Saturday to protest the right-wing Popular Party (PP) government's new law that severely limits abortion rights. The law is almost certain to pass in late spring, with the PP having a large majority in parliament.

The law on the Protection of the Conceived Life and Rights of Pregnant Woman seeks to turn the clock back to the days of General Francisco Franco. Under the new proposals, women will only be permitted to terminate their pregnancy in two circumstances: rape and "lasting harm" to the mother's health. In the case of "lasting harm," a woman will need the approval of two doctors not employed by the clinic treating her. Under-18-year-olds will need to be accompanied by their parents, and have their permission, before an abortion can be performed.

Abortions based on incurable disease of the foetus or a foetal anomaly incompatible with life will once again be illegal. The law will make abortion an offence and doctors carrying out abortions considered illegal will face up to three years in prison.

Spain will once again have one of the harshest abortion laws in Europe, even when 73.3 percent are in favour of maintaining the abortion law passed under the Socialist Party (PSOE) in 2010, giving women the right to abortion up to the 14th week of pregnancy, rising to 22 weeks in case of foetal deformities.

The same poll by Sigma Dos for the daily *El Mundo* shows that only one-third of PP voters agree with the new reform, while 52 percent reject it. Even among those older than 65 who grew up in Catholic-run schools under Francoism, 57.9 percent are against the reform. Among youth aged between 18 to 29, this rises to 84.3 percent.

Since the draft law was passed in late December, daily protests have been taking place across the

country, culminating in last Saturday's mass protest.

The protest started when The Train of Liberty, organised by two feminist organisations in Asturias, Feminist Turtulia les Comadres and Mujeres por la igualdad de Barredos, decided to hand a petition to the Congress of Deputies registry titled "Because I decide". This sparked massive support by women's organisations.

When they arrived in the Atocha Station in Madrid, the protesters were welcomed by thousands who had travelled from other cities called by the feminist platform "Decidir nos hace libres" (To decide makes us free).

The demonstration walked from the Paseo del Prado to Neptune, with shouts of "[Justice Minister Alberto Ruiz] Gallardón resign". Marchers carried banners reading, "Allow mothers to decide" and "Deciding makes us free."

The march was also fuelled by the provocative memorandum accompanying the text of the bill leaked last week, which states that the reform will have a "positive net impact" on the Spanish economy through an increase in the birth rate.

On the same day, hundreds marched against the law in Paris, Rome and London. In France, large protests were held in Bordeaux, Marseille, Nantes, Strasbourg and Toulouse. In Paris, at least 5,000 took to the streets in protests called by 80 organisations and parties.

In Brussels, a demonstration of 2,000 staged a protest in front of the Spanish Embassy and then marched to the headquarters of the European Parliament. Banners could be seen reading, "We are all Spanish women" and "Abortion legal and secure."

The debate in Congress over the government's abortion reform got underway two weeks ago.

The law will not put an end to the more than 110,000

abortions that are carried out in Spain each year. Instead, the impact of the law will weigh most heavily on the working class in a context of 26 percent unemployment, attacks on working conditions and salary cuts. Women will once again have to travel abroad or resort to unsafe methods. The PSOE is as responsible for this situation as is the PP.

Behind this project lies the Catholic hierarchy. Last Thursday, Spain's bishops came out in defence of Gallardón, stating, "We bishops always celebrate initiatives that are in favour of human life, no matter where they come from. That is why we see in the bill introduced by the current government a positive advance compared with existing legislation, which considers abortion a right."

The PP has given in to other demands like the latest education reform, which opens the door to more charter schools (private schools subsidised by the state) in which the Catholic Church has a strong presence. Added to this, religion has been reinstated as a subject that counts towards a high school student's average grade, a determining factor in obtaining scholarships.

The law once again exposes the role played by the PSOE and the Stalinist Communist Party, in the transition from the Francoist "national-catholic" regime to bourgeois democracy, in allowing the Catholic Church to safeguard its privileges.

The PSOE has announced it will make a struggle against the reform its axis for the upcoming European elections. Having itself been responsible for massive austerity measures during the 2008-2011 Socialist Party government of Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero, and facing a record historic-low of 24.4 percent of votes, the PSOE hopes it will gain support on this issue in a manner that does not threaten the interests of big business.

The PSOE, however, has constantly capitulated to the Catholic Church. In 1985, the PSOE with an absolute majority in parliament passed legislation allowing abortion, while still considering it a crime except in three circumstances: as a result of rape, in the case of foetal abnormality or when there was a danger to the health of the mother. The effect was that 98 percent of the women that aborted were forced to justify themselves by citing a physical risk to their person.

In 2008, the PSOE again capitulated to the Church, removing the extension of abortion rights in its

manifesto for the national elections that year. It resurrected it once again in 2010, passing a new limited abortion law amid the global economic crisis and as a distraction to its policies. The law meant that women who could decide to abort under the "danger to the health of the mother" clause in the 1985 law, under which there was no time limit, now could not do it after the 14th week. The reform imposed a 22-week limit on "voluntary interruptions of pregnancy" in the case of serious threats to the health or life of pregnant women, which previously had no time limit.

The latest reactionary abortion law must be seen within the context of the systematic attacks on the democratic rights of the working class. The PP government has passed legislation drastically curtailing the right to protest and freedom of speech by imposing huge fines and jails sentences. The defence of abortion rights and other fundamental democratic rights today requires a broad-based struggle of the working class against the measures of the PSOE and the PP, and its trade unions and pseudo-left accomplices.



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