

Planned Parenthood fights congressional witch-hunt

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It is a remarkable exposure of the ongoing decay of American capitalist politics that Republican congressional leaders chose to stage a televised McCarthy-style witch-hunt, not against a political opponent, but against Planned Parenthood Federation of America, the largest provider of reproductive health care for women in the US.

Five million women use Planned Parenthood services each year, 75 percent of them with incomes at or below 150 percent of the federal poverty level. The organization has long been a target of right-wing attack because it is the largest US provider of abortion services, and in many rural areas the only provider.

Beginning in July, Planned Parenthood became the latest social service institution to be subjected to a right-wing smear campaign involving doctored videos. The misnamed Center for Medical Progress released a series of 10 heavily edited videos that seek to falsely portray Planned Parenthood officials illegally selling fetal tissue and body parts for profit.

At the five-hour congressional hearing September 29, Republicans on the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee grilled Planned Parenthood President Cecile Richards, while their Democratic counterparts interposed a few objections. The hearing was scheduled for the eve of the September 30 budget deadline for funding the federal government, although the Republican leadership had already blocked efforts by the most extreme right-wing faction to use Planned Parenthood funding as the pretext for forcing a partial government shutdown.

The attack on Planned Parenthood is deeply unpopular, except with the Christian fundamentalists who form a major component of the Republican Party.

A remarkable *Wall Street Journal*/NBC poll, released a day prior to the congressional hearing, found that

Planned Parenthood is viewed favorably by 47 percent of Americans and unfavorably by 31 percent, slightly *better* than the 45-30 percent split found in a *Journal*/NBC poll in July, prior to the launching of the media smear campaign. Further, a large majority of Americans—61 percent—oppose eliminating federal funding for health care services provided by the organization to low-income women.

Richards noted this vast discrepancy that exists between official politics and public opinion, saying, “It’s a shame to think that there are people in this country who are so committed to ending women’s access to both birth control and safe and legal abortion, that they’ll really resort to any means to try to entrap people and twist the truth in order to reach their ends. But, again, we believe, and why I’m here voluntarily today, is that the facts are on our side, we’re proud of the health care that we deliver every single year despite the animosity by some, and we’re grateful that the American people stands with Planned Parenthood, as I think the *Wall Street Journal* poll showed last night.”

Planned Parenthood commissioned Fusion GPS, a research and corporate intelligence company, to determine the authenticity of the claims made in the undercover videos. In August, its investigation concluded, “A thorough review of these videos in consultation with qualified experts found that they do not present a complete or accurate record of the events they purport to depict.” The videos were found to contain deceptive edits, inaccurate transcripts and missing footage.

Despite these results, 11 states have launched investigations into Planned Parenthood. So far, seven have found no proof of fetal tissue sales. Five states—Alabama, Louisiana, Utah, Arkansas and New Hampshire—have all attempted to cut off state funding

for Planned Parenthood by ending their contracts with the provider for services it provides to their Medicaid recipients.

At the congressional hearing, Richards described the indispensable role of Planned Parenthood for millions of low-income women. Nevertheless, numerous Republicans continued to cite the videos as evidence of criminal wrongdoing by the organization.

Throughout the hearing, Republicans falsely suggested that Planned Parenthood receives federal funds to conduct abortions, which would violate the prohibition laid down in the reactionary 1976 Hyde Amendment, enacted under a Democratic-controlled Congress, which barred federal funding for abortions through Medicaid. Richards explained that abortions, which comprise only three percent of the organization's activities, are covered by donations for all cases except those involving rape or incest.

Led by committee chairman Jason Chaffetz (R-Utah) and Jim Jordan (R-Ohio), head of the ultra-right "Freedom Caucus," Republican committee members repeatedly interrupted Richards, shouted at her and generally acted the bully.

Given the circumstances, the conduct of Richards, who kept her composure and forcefully defended her organization's record of providing services to poor and working-class women, was refreshing. She apologized for the tone of some of the offhand comments made by Planned Parenthood officials in the secretly taped videos, but noted that every statement they had made explaining the strict controls over the use of fetal tissue for medical research had been edited out.

This was in sharp contrast to the waffling by leading Democrats. Hillary Clinton initially characterized the videos as "disturbing."

The hearing showed the drastic shift to the right in the Republican Party, and in bourgeois politics more generally, as well as the largely uncritical response of the corporate-controlled media, which sensationalized the doctored videos.

As the conservative *National Review* noted approvingly, "When the Republicans took control of Congress in the mid 1990s, pro-lifers could not even get a vote on defunding Planned Parenthood. Now, a vast majority of Republican elected officials support defunding it. Additionally, nearly every Republican presidential candidate opposes federal funding for it."

The assault against Planned Parenthood is only the latest in a series of video sting operations by the extreme right wing. In 2010, the liberal community activist organization ACORN (Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now) was dismantled in a bipartisan effort, after doctored videos produced by right-wing activist James O'Keefe were circulated widely in the media.

O'Keefe, also responsible for producing doctored videos that led to the 2011 resignation of the president and CEO of National Public Radio, also created his own undercover videos seeking to entrap Planned Parenthood. O'Keefe is an associate of Daniel Daleiden, the founder of Center for Medical Progress, and clearly taught Daleiden the methods used in this latest smear campaign.

The fact that the first serious resistance to the right-wing assault on Planned Parenthood had to come from the head of the organization itself testifies to the bankruptcy of both political parties. The Republicans kowtow to the most backward sections of the Christian right and the Democrats stand by wringing their hands, while access to reproductive health care for millions of working class women and men hangs in the balance until the next budget deadline on December 11.



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