

Irish government calls abortion referendum

Dermot Quinn
23 April 2018

Simon Harris, Health Minister in the Fine Gael-led Irish government, has announced a referendum on May 25 to scrap the notorious Eighth Amendment in the Irish constitution. The so-called “pro life” amendment blocks legal termination of pregnancy in Ireland. Currently women can receive a 14-year jail sentence. A parliamentary committee has recommended allowing terminations and unrestricted access to abortion up to 12 weeks into pregnancy.

A decision on this minimal concession has split all the major parties and seen repeated twists and turns from leading politicians. Tanaiste (deputy prime minister) and Minister for Foreign Affairs Simon Coveney has elucidated four different positions, while Harris himself, on the conservative wing of Fine Gael, changed his view little more than a year ago. Fianna Fail leader Micheál Martin also recently switched to supporting repeal.

Behind the confusion are seething class tensions and the collapse in the authority of the Catholic Church, following the clergy’s involvement in sexual/physical abuse in brutal children’s homes and orphanages. Church attendance in a country where the Church dominates education and health provision has fallen to around 20 percent of the population. In working class areas the figures are reported to be as low as 2 to 3 percent.

The Eighth Amendment was introduced in 1983 after a referendum and three years of protests, rallies and religious vigils orchestrated by right-wing Catholic organisations backed by the Church. Supported by all the major parties, the aim was to copper fasten by national plebiscite Ireland’s already draconian abortion laws.

Passed by a 66.9 percent majority, on a turnout of only 53.7 percent, the 1983 constitutional amendment reads: “The state acknowledges the right to life of the unborn and, with due regard to the equal right to life of

the mother guarantees in its laws to defend as far as practicable and vindicate that right.”

The following decades have seen numerous cases in which women have tried to circumvent the reactionary prohibition with terrible emotional, financial and health costs.

In 1992 the High Court ruled that a 14-year-old rape victim could not travel outside Ireland to terminate a pregnancy. The attorney general placed an injunction to prevent her from travelling to Britain. After a public outcry and continuous mass protests outside parliament, the “X case” as it became known, forced the then-Fianna Fail government into holding a series of referenda. These resulted in the freedom to travel outside Ireland for an abortion and the right to information on abortion services being conceded.

In 2010, it was reported that 4,402 women gave Irish addresses to UK abortion clinics in the course of that year. In the same year the European Court of Human Rights ruled that the Irish state failed to provide clarity on the legal availability of abortion where the mother’s life was at risk.

In 2011, Amanda Mallet received a scan in Dublin’s Rotunda Hospital in 2011 which showed the foetus she was carrying was suffering Edwards syndrome, a fatal condition. Informed by the hospital that she would have to travel to England to terminate the pregnancy she scraped the money together. In 2016, the United Nations Human Rights Commission found that Amanda had been subjected to “discrimination and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment due to Ireland’s abortion ban.”

In 2012, Savita Halappanavar died in a Galway hospital of septicaemia from complications arising from her pregnancy. She had repeatedly requested an abortion, which could have saved her life. The 31-year-old Indian woman was told by staff at University Hospital Galway that to procure an abortion was

impossible as “this was a Catholic country.”

After a huge public outcry and ongoing protest rallies, Enda Kenny’s Fine Gael government grudgingly introduced the 2014 “Protection of Life During Pregnancy Bill” allowing for abortion if the women was deemed to be suicidal.

This year’s referendum comes after years of intense campaigns, protests and even a strike demanding abortion rights. Particularly amongst young people, there is broad support for repeal of the reactionary law.

In the face of this, the major parties have moved at the last possible moment towards repeal, while the Church itself and the religious right, in Ireland and internationally, are campaigning aggressively to oppose any change.

Although opinion polls are registering large majorities, 63 to 37 percent in favour of repeal, some 20 percent of voters are undecided. A No campaign began on March 10 with a large rally in Dublin addressed by businessman and millionaire Declan Ganley. One of the most prominent right-wing and conservative voices in Ireland, Ganley told the crowd that “the coming weeks would be a battle between the people and the powerful.”

Another speaker was Niamh Uí Bhriain, who also fraudulently presented the anti-abortion campaign as an uprising against the “elite.” Urging a “No” vote, she claimed, “This is a rising of the people against the elites, and on May 25 it’s time to join a rebellion, and to reject both abortion on demand and the untrustworthy political class.”

A UK-based data-analytics company Kanto Systems has been hired by the “Save the Eight” campaign to work for a “No” vote. Kanto Systems is run by Thomas Borwick, son of former British conservative MP Lady Victoria Borwick. Borwick was chief technology officer with the Brexit campaign in Britain and has close ties to hedge fund billionaire Robert Mercer, a key backer of Donald Trump.

It is a measure of the backwardness of the Irish bourgeoisie, inseparably entangled as it is with the Catholic Church, that a struggle on this issue is even necessary. Throughout the entire history of the Irish Free State and the Republic of Ireland the Church has ruthlessly maintained the leading role handed to it on all social matters by all the political representatives of Irish capitalism, who viewed the Church as its pre-

eminent ally against the working class.

If the minimal concession over the 8th Amendment is now being made, it is because any further delay would threaten Church influence with an even more rapid collapse. The amendment is also regarded by sections of the bourgeoisie as an obstacle in their attempts to market Ireland internationally as a modern investment location, particularly for tech companies with a young and socially liberal workforce. Ireland currently has the most restrictive reproductive rights regime in Europe.

Even if the 8th Amendment is repealed next month, the new limit of 12 weeks on terminations is still more restrictive than the 24-week limit in operation across the Irish Sea in Britain. Even this can be extended in cases of medical emergency.

The *World Socialist Web Site* unequivocally defends the right of free and readily accessible abortion on demand, to comprehensive emotional counselling, free contraception advice, free contraceptive provision and advanced sex and sexual health education in schools. This is inseparable from the struggle for decent social conditions for all who want children but fear the economic consequences. Both require immense inroads into the wealth and social power of the ruling oligarchy, in Ireland and internationally and the socialist re-organisation of society.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact