

ATF joins investigation into New Year's Eve fire which destroyed abortion clinic in Knoxville, Tennessee

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A Planned Parenthood clinic in Knoxville, Tennessee, which provided abortion services, was declared a total loss after fire destroyed the building in the early hours of New Year's Eve.

Firefighters were alerted to heavy smoke coming from the building at 6:40 a.m. on December 31. By the time fire crews arrived at the site, flames were coming through the roof, and most of the building was engulfed. The facility, which offers health care to workers in one of the most impoverished neighborhoods in the city, had been closed and undergoing renovations since December 7. No injuries from the fire were reported.

The cause of the fire is still under investigation. However, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) immediately joined local authorities in the investigation of the incident due to the politically charged atmosphere around the issues of abortion and women's health services throughout the nation.

Later this year the Supreme Court of the United States could overturn the right to abortion established by *Roe v. Wade* by upholding a Mississippi law blocking abortions after 15 weeks. Last year saw more anti-abortion regulations passed by state legislatures than at any point since abortion was legalized by the 1973 landmark decision. Should the ruling be overturned, a wave of legislation effectively banning abortion is expected to follow or go into immediate effect in states throughout the country.

In 2020, Tennessee passed one of the most restrictive abortion laws in the nation. The "fetal heartbeat bill" would have banned abortions after six weeks, before many women even suspect they are pregnant. Though

the law was blocked by a judicial ruling less than one hour after it was signed by Republican Governor Bill Lee, far-right members of the legislature and fascistic extremists with ties to the January 6 coup attempt at the U.S. Capitol continued the attack on workers' access to abortion in Tennessee.

The New Year's Eve fire occurred just under a year after shots were fired by a masked gunman into the front doors of the clinic on January 22, 2021, the 48th anniversary of the passage of *Roe v. Wade*. While no one was charged with the attack, suspicions were raised about the involvement of members of the Patriot Church in neighboring Loudon County whose pastor has ties to right-wing extremists in Tennessee and throughout the US.

The pastor of Patriot Church, Ken Peters, is the founder of The Church at Planned Parenthood (TCAPP) which he started in Spokane, Washington, in 2018. TCAPP targets Planned Parenthood clinics throughout the country at which to hold their monthly "services." During these events, participants crowd the sidewalks and entrances to clinics, singing, praying and shouting at patients and passersby. Peters has been known to use his megaphone at these demonstrations to brag about the number of congregants who carry guns to the gatherings and to tantalize his followers with scripture-based calls to violence.

In comments to a local TV news station about the New Year's Eve fire at the Knoxville clinic, Peters remarked: "Christians would never participate in any sort of destruction of property, or looting, or rioting." This is ironic coming from a pastor who flew on a private jet to Washington D.C. on the eve of January 6 to speak at a rally that resulted in the storming of the

Capitol by fascistic groups intent on overthrowing the Constitution.

He was also instrumental in shutting down Knox County Schools for a day and disrupting schools for a week after a federal judge imposed a mask mandate in the district to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act.

In September, Peters encouraged parents to defy the judge's ruling by having their children refuse to wear masks in school. The district cancelled classes in order to prepare for the onslaught of anti-mandate reaction and the subsequent safety issues posed by unmasked students in classrooms. Throughout the week, the pastor rallied families and sympathizers to converge at school entrances with signs disparaging those who abided by the law and wore masks, further hampering efforts to continue instruction despite scores of teachers, school staff and students being absent due to a back-to-school surge of the pandemic.

Amid the accelerating economic and social crisis spurred on by COVID-19 pandemic, the aim of these far-right extremist attacks on the services provided by Planned Parenthood and the employment of public safety measures during the pandemic, administered by the entire political establishment, is to divide the working class and waylay the growing class struggle into reactionary attacks on the most exploited layers of workers.

The *World Socialist WebSite* called attention to this tactic of the ruling elites on December 2: "The far-right political forces being mobilized to destroy the right to abortion are the same forces that have played a leading role in demanding the ending of all restrictions on the COVID-19 pandemic and which came close to establishing a fascist dictatorship with the coup attempt of January 6."

The Democrats, culpable for the 826,000 Americans dead from COVID-19 and a dramatic erosion of democratic rights and living standards, have enabled the far-reaching attacks on the health and well-being of the working class while cloaking themselves in the mantle of civility and bipartisanship.

The fight to uphold the right to abortion is a class question; it requires a politically independent movement of the working class. The ruling elite and its representatives have made clear their determination to subordinate the health and rights of workers to Wall

Street and ever-skyrocketing profits. The working class must respond through a mass movement, coordinated on a global scale, aimed at the overturn of the capitalist system which bears responsibility for these social crimes.



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