

Campaign for Women's Reproductive rights launches 2012 year of action

Join the March of Feminist Feet Defend Abortion Rights in Victoria!

Campaign for Women's Reproductive Rights (CWRR) has plans for 2012. One is to build the monthly defence of the Fertility Control Clinic against the "Helpers of God's Precious Infants" — we want to outnumber them! In doing this, we also strengthen the crucial fight for free speech, under assault by Melbourne City Council that has used its bylaws against the defence, not the anti-abortion harassment. CWRR is organising a huge abortion rights rally on October 13 to counter the next "March for the Babies" — and show the numbers and the determination of the pro-choice majority to defend and extend abortion rights in Victoria.

Each year on the anniversary of the legalisation of abortion in Victoria, a tiny minority of anti-woman extremists organises a protest as part of its plan to once again make reproductive rights a crime in the state. On October 8, 2011, the right wing drew larger numbers, thanks to its financial backing and connections, including the Catholic Church, some Members of Parliament and business interests. But the determined pro-choice crowd of unionists, feminists, disability activists, queers and students drowned out those bussed in from all points to give the appearance of a mass movement. Our message foreshadowed the fight ahead: "Free, safe abortion on demand now!" and "Back to the backyard, no way!"

The lower pro-choice turnout reflected a belief that abortion rights in Victoria are secure. But these rights are under serious, imminent threat. The small, yet cashed up, ultra-right is organised, and part of a global network that is attacking women's rights throughout the world.

This year Campaign for Women's Reproductive Rights (CWRR) is launching a 38-week campaign to make October 13 a day where the 90 percent shows our full strength. And for that we need your help to spread the message far and wide: we will have full reproductive freedom for *all* in this country, and a small band of fanatics is not going to stop us!

Abortion rights victory needs defending. Before 2008, abortion was a crime in Victoria — as it still is in all Australian states and territories, except the Australian

Capital Territory and now Victoria. Since 1958, abortion was controlled under the state's *Crimes Act* and carried a 10-year prison term for a woman and her doctor. A state Supreme Court ruling in 1969, known as the Menhennit judgement, made it possible for a woman to terminate a pregnancy if a doctor deemed her physical or mental health to be at risk. Although the ruling opened the door for thousands of women choosing abortion, service providers continued to work under a dark cloud of uncertainty. In the 1980s, for example, the Victorian Police served warrants on the Family Planning Association's Action Centre for teenagers and the Fertility Control Clinic, alleging breaches of the Menhennit ruling. The recent Queensland trial in 2010 of a young woman and her partner shocked the country. That prosecution was a reminder that as long as abortion remains in the criminal code, no woman or doctor is safe. However, the 90% won the day, as a jury of 12 Queenslanders quickly turned in a "not guilty" verdict. Still, abortion rights are indeed tenuous.

On October 6, 2008, as soon as the Victoria's Upper House voted in decriminalisation, the packed gallery erupted. Pro-choicers cheered; anti-abortionists shrieked "Retribution!" A leader of Victoria's anti-abortion forces is Bernie Finn, Member for the Western Metropolitan Region in the Upper House and president of the "March for the Babies." Its anti-abortion website states its aim: "to overturn this terrible law." The strategy for Victoria is a carbon copy of the United States movement: to remove pro-choice lawmakers and recriminalise abortion. Victoria's Vote for Life (taking its name from the U.S.) campaigned in the 2010 Victorian state election to unseat pro-choice incumbents and put all MPs on notice. Establishing the "personhood" of a fertilised egg is part of the strategy — again, taken from the U.S. ultra-right. In its submission to the Baillieu government's review of Victoria's Human Rights Charter in 2011, the Catholic Church called for extending protection of human rights to the "unborn."

Warning signs. Developments in the U.S. over the past two years foreshadow what can happen in Victoria and the rest of Australia. In Nov 2011, Mississippians voted on a state referendum that would qualify a fertilised egg as a "person" — thus outlawing all abortions, including in cases of rape and incest and when a woman's life is in danger. It would also have barred common methods of birth control, such as contraceptive pills and IUDs. An all-out pro-choice



campaign throttled this massively funded anti-abortion assault. The proposed law was defeated, 58 - 42%.

However, the 1973 *Roe v Wade* ruling that legalised abortion throughout the United States, has been severely eroded. Several more states are expected to push ahead with “personhood” initiatives, similar to Mississippi’s, in 2012. In 2011, states passed 83 laws restricting access to abortion — four times more than in 2010. A major factor in this was the elections of Republican legislators and governors, so that today 15 states have anti-abortion legislatures and governors. Five states now ban abortions beyond 20 weeks’ gestation; seven require an ultrasound prior to the procedure. Eight no longer allow private insurers to cover abortions. Planned Parenthood nearly lost its funding in the 2011 federal budget battle, and some states are trying to prohibit abortion providers, which receive government funding, from performing even non-abortion services.

Mexico’s capital city stands alone, where abortion is legal, but only in the first trimester. In Brazil, abortion is allowed only if a woman’s life is in danger or she has been raped. In 2010, a Brazilian judge refused to allow a woman to terminate a foetus without a brain. Needless to say, backyard abortions are increasing.

Behind the “pro life” foetus obsession. These are snapshots of a worldwide assault on abortion rights, where a political right wing, in cahoots with religious patriarchs, is waging a war on women. The international anti-abortion movement aims to strip women of their autonomy and rights. This is behind its obsession with the foetus. The so-called “pro-life” movement has nothing to contribute toward the quality of life of living, breathing human beings. Anti-woman to its core, it stands in bitter opposition to the women who are the frontline fighters for healthcare, childcare, education, decent jobs, equal pay, paid parental leave, affordable housing and all other necessities for raising children.

This drive to end abortion comes from a global capitalist economy in great crisis. The profit system has grown and prospered on the backs of women — from their free labour at home and underpaid labour in the workforce.

Reproductive rights for women have always been under threat from those who rule the boardrooms. The profit system needs women dependent, breeding and raising the next generation of workers — not as free, independent agents in political and social life.

Time to organise. East Melbourne’s Fertility Control Clinic is a battleground. Campaign for Women’s Reproductive Rights has defended this medical facility against anti-abortion harassment for more than six years. The harassment, which started from the clinic’s foundation in 1972, has become increasingly vicious. On a daily basis, anti-abortionists stalk any woman who enters, or merely walks past, the clinic. One busy morning 10 years ago, security guard Steve Rogers was killed as he protected the clinic from a fanatic intent on blowing it up.

Over 90% of the population support a woman’s right to choose. The tiny gangs that stand outside medical clinics and family planning centres, threatening and assaulting patients and clients, get away with it because they are organised. Complacency means the pro-choice majority has dropped away. But this has only encouraged the far-right to fight back against the tide of history. Well, enough! Women have enough on their plates just to survive the ongoing Global Financial Crisis without having to revisit the basic fight to control their own bodies.

On October 13 we need tens of thousands out, loudly and proudly declaring: “Abortion rights are here to stay!” Join CWRR in making this year a celebration of the legal victory of 2008 and in sending the anti-choice bigots scurrying back to their haunts and off our streets.

Ultimately, a reproductive justice movement will win full abortion rights for every woman and everything else she needs to make genuine, independent decisions about her body and her life. A broad-based movement of people of all colours, ages, sexualities and genders, people with disability, unionists and students will connect women’s reproductive rights to everyone’s struggle for quality education and a secure job, quality housing and healthcare, and full equality. Such a movement will not only outnumber the right wing, it will outflank and overpower it — and put it out of our collective misery.

Get involved with Campaign for Women’s Reproductive Rights!

If you’re keen to share your talents, exercise your passion and offer your energy — from letterboxing to fundraising, leaflet designing to keyboard inputting, strategising to outreaching — *CWRR needs you!*

To find out more, get a copy of CWRR’s manifesto, *What we stand for*, get onto CWRR’s elist or join in, email cwrr.justice@hotmail.com, phone 03-9388-0062 or come to the next clinic defence on the fourth Saturday of the month: Fertility Control Clinic, 10.00 am, 118 Wellington Parade, East Melbourne. Also Like CWRR’s facebook page and stay in touch: <http://www.facebook.com/CampaignWRR>.