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Mauritius

Victory in Mauritius on Abortion Decriminalization

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Victories, even partial, are rare in these times. LALIT [1] would like to share with you an important new development in the class struggle and struggle for women's emancipation in Mauritius: LALIT is the only political party that has, over the decades, campaigned for abortion decriminalization, and finally last month Parliament passed a new Abortion Law to replace the 1838 total ban on any abortion. Everyone in the country knows that this is a LALIT struggle, as our stand on abortion decriminalization had often been used "against" us. So, it is like getting accumulated "support".

This victory comes less than a year after another victory accredited to LALIT: the introduction into schools of the mother-tongues, Kreol and Bhojpuri, for the very first time in 2012.

The new abortion law passed last month decriminalizes abortion in the circumstances of serious ill-health of the woman or malformation of the foetus, rape, incest or statutory rape. But, it means that all women can now speak openly about abortion, and can, when ill after a complication resulting from a future illegal abortion, go to the hospitals for treatment with more freedom. And the struggle continues.

The law came into the National Assembly only two months after the women's organization, the Muvman Liberasyon Fam (MLF), had held ceremonies in two cemeteries with the families of women who had died as a direct result of abortion still being illegal. The MLF had over the past three years accentuated its campaign for abortion decriminalization, and putting into question the very wording of the archaic law, which referred to the woman being "quick with child". A woman had been charged in 2009 with illegal abortion, and the Director of Public Prosecutions had finally, after women's mobilization against the law as "not clear", dropped charges. In 2011 he admitted in public that the wording was not clear enough for him to arrest and charge women under, once the confusing expression "quick with child" was exposed to scrutiny. Jurisprudence showed that it usually meant around the 20th week of pregnancy, but the DPP's office had always for 174 years assumed it meant simply "pregnant", because the French version used the word "enceinte". MLF called a Common Front on Abortion which became very strong. The death of a woman photographic journalist following an illegal abortion changed the balance of forces enormously, as all the reporters and other employees of the Press groups could no longer toe the line of the main companies that run the Press, which are historically close to the Catholic Church.

During the mobilization of women behind the Bill, even if only for partial legalization - mobilization organized mainly by LALIT women who are in the leadership of the Muvman Liberasyon Fam (MLF) - the law was finally passed with only 20% of MPs voting against. This massive support in Parliament was despite a campaign that would make you think "everyone" is against, or, if not, then too weak to stand up to the religious lobbies opposing abortion.

Every time Parliament met, there were dozens of women in the galleries, holding press conferences before or after, and even staying until after mid-night. There was a candlelight ceremony in memory of women who had died from illegal abortions.

The mobilization was given strong, vocal support by the Nursing Association, the biggest union in the health sector. The leadership, including Ashok Callooa and Ram Nawzadick, and the women's wing representatives, all spoke out in favour of the law, and attended mobilizing events. The Union called for complete de-criminalization, and for women to feel free to come to hospital. "We are here to look after the sick, not to judge you," Ashok Callooa announced. He also said that nurses are the ones who see the suffering that results from back-street abortions, and he, like almost everyone else in the debate, put emphasis on the class issue. Poor women suffer disproportionately from the

repressive law.

Other Unions also came in in strong support, including the Government Teachers' Union and a Federation (the Federation of Para-Statal Bodies) as well as the big Confederation (the Confederation of Private Sector Workers, CTSP). This added to the growing support from human rights groups, and the family planning organization to the mobilized women's movement.

A surprisingly large number of MPs spoke in favour of well-nigh total de-criminalization, showing their reliance on the argumentation developed over decades of struggle, specially by LALIT and the MLF. Another surprise was the strong pro-secular approach amongst MPs of almost all parties. They put emphasis on the health issues, human rights issues, and need for a secular state. The only parties against were three parties that have only one MP in Parliament, the FSM (a fundamentalist party), the MMSD (a party run by a maverick capitalist), and the OPR (run by a former Catholic Priest). Two parties were 100% in favour, despite giving a "free vote". They were the biggest party, Labour, and the bigger of the two Rodrigues parties, the Mouvement Rodrigues, whose two MPs spoke eloquently from the point of view of working class women in the Republic as a whole. The Labour Party's coalition partner, the PMSD was 3 out of 4 in favour, while the Opposition MSM was 3/4 in favour. The Opposition MMM was split down the middle, and thus came out worst, with its anti-abortion MPs making fools of themselves in speeches so outrageous that the Press denounced them unanimously. This once-long-ago left wing party is now a bastion of the reaction.

One of the MMM's MPs, Jean-Claude Barbier, in an all-time first-ever, actually told Parliament that God had personally spoken to him about what to say in "the august Assembly".

While some MPs spoke of "murderers", one MMM deputy, Lysie Ribot, said that women who had abortions, were also more likely to have road accidents and get cancer of the cervix. She said, in a grotesque statement, that women who were raped were unlikely to fall pregnant because their ovulation got "blocked".

Adil Meea, yet another MMM MP s said religion was one of the last ramparts against degeneracy and depravity. Soon, he said we will hear talk of same-sex marriages.

But, these were marginalized completely in the generally massive support for the law, not only in Parliament, but also outside. A survey of women's opinions in the country carried out by a big commercial opinion poll company found that over 2/3 of women are in favour, and only 20% against, thus reflecting neatly the vote in Parliament.

[1] Lalit describes itself as "a very unusual party. It has stubbornly survived into its fourth decade of existence, always renewing itself successfully. From its foundation in 1976 as a left 'free-expression monthly magazine', it has developed by 2008 into a thriving party, which has recently accelerated its campaign for an 'alternative political economy'."