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International Women's Day in Ireland

Ireland Strikes for Repeal

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This International Women's Day will see women's strikes in numerous locations across the world, most prominently in Argentina and the United States. [1]

But across the water in Ireland, women will also strike " for abortion rights, in one of the few western European states that maintains a prohibition.

Jacobin Europe editor Ronan Burtenshaw speaks to Aoife Frances, one of the organizers of [Strike4Repeal](#), about the action's roots, inspirations, and objectives. [*Jacobin*]

Can you tell us a bit about the abortion situation in Ireland currently?

Abortion is illegal in Ireland, north and south, with a few extremely rare exceptions. In the Republic of Ireland, this prohibition is underwritten by the Eighth Amendment to the constitution, passed in the early 1980s, which gives equal value to the life of the mother and the fetus. Without repealing this provision of the constitution, it is impossible to progress abortion rights in any significant way.

This was proven recently when the last government passed the Protection of Life During Pregnancy Act. It came about after a prolonged campaign of lobbying by NGOs as well as increasing pressure to act on a decades-old Supreme Court ruling. But it also came after the high-profile and tragic death of Savita Halappanavar, denied the necessary medical treatment that could have saved her life despite facing an "inevitable miscarriage." [2]

This is a terrible piece of legislation that not only limits the conditions abortions may be carried out to ones where the mother's life is at risk, and subjects women to medical inquisition to prove this to be the case, but criminalizes those who pursue abortions through other means with penalties of up to fourteen years in prison.

The result of this has been very few women using it " the vast majority of women in Ireland still travel abroad for abortions. In 2014 only twenty-six abortions were carried out in the Republic of Ireland under these laws; at the same time, we had twelve women a day travelling to Britain [for abortions].

The costs of this journey are prohibitive. This week, we learned on a national television program about a woman whose pregnancy suffered from a fatal fetal abnormality. She and her partner had to travel to Liverpool at a cost of "3,000 to terminate a non-viable pregnancy. Many families in these cases have to carry remains home in a box. [3]

For the women who can't travel, the legislation has absolutely not stopped tragedies such as Savita or the X-case before her. In 2014, there was the so-called Y-case, which was horrendous: a young asylum seeker, having become pregnant after being raped in her native country, and being unable to travel because of her status, was denied access to abortion repeatedly. Following a suicide attempt and hunger strike, she was effectively forced to give birth by Caesarean section at twenty-four weeks. [4]

In response to these horrors, there have been attempts by numerous feminist support networks across Ireland to provide access to abortion pills. [Women Help Women](#) is an international organization offering information and access to these pills, but applicants need a Northern Irish address and "75. [Need Abortion Ireland](#) was set up in April of last year to help make the connection for women in the Republic of Ireland. In the last six months, it has received

over two hundred texts and emails.

Abortion pills seem to be relatively widely-used in Ireland, although it is hard to get exact figures. As an indication in 2014 over 1,000 packages containing them were seized by customs. If that is the quantity seized it suggests that many thousands are getting through. In the Republic of Ireland the state is largely taking a hands-off approach to this, given the litany of recent scandals, but in Northern Ireland there are currently three pending cases before the courts related to abortion pills.

The latest development in the south is that there is a Citizens' Assembly underway which has been given the remit to discuss Ireland's abortion laws. We, and I think most repeal activists, see it as a delaying tactic. For one, the Assembly has no standing in Irish law, so it amounts to little more than a talking shop "and even then it has excluded some of the most important groups impacted by the prohibition on abortion from having their voices heard. [5]

What made you decide to respond to this situation with a strike?

In the first instance we were inspired by the Polish women's strike last October against their proposed abortion laws. [6] There is a large Polish migrant community in Ireland, and the strike attracted a lot of attention in our repeal movements.

Seeing the success of their action, I think, made clear that we needed to move the campaign for repeal of the Eighth amendment in Ireland forward. We had been quite patient through recent years "organizing a successful annual March for Choice, [7] building support and activist groups, and lobbying the government. But the Irish government refuses even to give in to pressure from the United Nations to act on our abortion laws, so many of us felt we needed some more radical action to encourage those in power to show political will. [8]

Strikes have proven effective in workers' struggles as direct, economic interventions, but social strikes, such as the 1975 women's strike in Iceland, have also had significant impacts. [9] Similarly to Iceland, we have put a focus on domestic labor in our calls for a strike. But we are aware of the difficulties involved in women taking strike action in all of its various forms, so we've tried to be as inclusive and respectful of this reality as possible.

In America, there have been criticisms of the women's strike from liberal commentators who argue only the "privileged" can strike. [10]

This is something we were thinking about, so we put out a call for the strike with a number of options: not going to work, not doing domestic work, turning up at a protest, or wearing black. [11] These last two were also used in Poland and open the door to more general civil disobedience as well as what would normally be considered a strike.

In Dublin, at 12:30, we have organized a mass rally on the city's main bridge, which will disrupt the normal operations of the city. We have also organized pickets outside the Departments of the Taoiseach (Prime Minister), Health and Justice, which will target the government. So there are a diverse range of ways to participate in this strike.

And there will also be diverse locations: there will be actions in every major city and town in Ireland, most major ones in Britain, with its large Irish emigrant population, and as far afield as Buenos Aires, Montreal, and Berlin. There is also a March4Repeal, organized by a wider coalition and happening later in the day in Dublin, which we support. [12]

But we do want to emphasize that abortion is a workplace issue. People having abortions in Ireland need to take sick

days or annual leave; they struggle to get a doctors' note for an illegal procedure if they suffer effects afterwards; and their work provides them with access to the finance they will need to travel. So the issue of abortion rights is very much one that warrants a strike.

Have you had much support from the organized labor movement in Ireland?

A number of the organizers of Strike4Repeal are trade union activists, but they are participating as individuals. We didn't approach trade unions to support the action because it is not a traditional trade union dispute. The conditions unions need to meet, under Irish law, to call for a strike are very narrow. And there has been significant success inside trade unions in recent years passing motions in support of repeal, so we didn't want to jeopardize that work. There is now a [Trade Union Campaign to Repeal the Eighth Amendment](#) which has won battles in a number of unions for pro-choice positions.

But we have received significant support from other areas, most strikingly the student movement. The national representative body, the Union of Students in Ireland, endorsed the strike and there are groups organized on most campuses around the country. We expect colleges and universities to see significant impacts.

The strike is supported by the Sex Workers' Alliance, which is particularly impressive solidarity because sex work is criminalized in Ireland. They [published a statement](#) which recognized the difficulties this entailed for striking and suggested ways people could participate without putting themselves at risk. And maybe most importantly, given the recent Y-case, the [Movement of Asylum Seekers in Ireland](#) have endorsed the strike as well.

Numerous small businesses – from pubs and cafés to art studios, design shops and venues – have also supported the strike in various ways, some by offering to close and others by providing free facilities or services to those who will be striking.

Strike4Repeal has also received significant political backing. Dublin City Council recently passed a motion by 80 percent supporting the strike, led by the broad left-wing majority on the council.

What do you hope will be the outcome of Wednesday's strike?

The first demand we have is for a date to be set for a referendum on the repeal of the Eighth Amendment.

We have heard from the government that a referendum could be held in 2018. But we have previously seen promises on this issue dragged out for years and even beyond a decade. We need a firm date, and one as soon as possible. This is the demand that all parts of the repeal movement are making at the moment. We don't trust that it will come through the Citizens' Assembly process, so we need to keep the pressure up, and we need to keep engaging our political imagination, as we have done with this strike, to find ways of doing that.

After Wednesday, Strike4Repeal will cease to exist, but the more than fifty groups organized to make it happen will continue. Many of them are in rural areas where the need for campaigning around the referendum is strongest. Looking forward, we're hopeful these will provide new vitality to Ireland's increasingly strong and radical pro-choice movement.

Source [Jacobin](#).

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[1] See [Argentina's Life-or-Death Women's Movement](#) and [What the Women's Strike Means](#).

[2] *The Daily Telegraph*, 13 June 2013, "[Irish abortion law key factor in death of Savita Halappanavar, official report finds](#)".

[3] *The Guardian*, 29 July 2016, "[My baby in a box': Irish GP tells of trauma of travelling to UK for abortion](#)".

[4] *The Irish Times*, 4 October 2014 "[Timeline of Ms Y case](#)", *The Irish Times*, 19 August 2014 "[Woman in abortion case tells of suicide attempt](#)".

[5] *thejournal.ie*, 25 February 2017 "['Dismay' and online anger as pro-choice TFMR Ireland excluded from Citizens' Assembly](#)".

[6] *The Guardian*, 3 October 2016 "[Women to go on strike in Poland in protest at planned abortion law](#)".

[7] *The Irish Times*, 24 September 2016 "[Thousands taking part in pro-choice rally in Dublin, London, Paris, Brussels and New York among cities hosting demonstrations](#)".

[8] *The Irish Times*, 9 June 2016 "[UN says Ireland's abortion ban is 'cruel, inhuman or degrading'](#)".

[9] *The Guardian*, 18 October 2005 "[The day the women went on strike](#)".

[10] *Jacobin*, 3 March 2017 "[No More Saturday Marches](#)".

[11] See the video of the call [here](#).

[12] See [March4Repeal – International Women's Day 2017](#).