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Women

Lessons from Irish unions: The Trade Union Campaign to Repeal the 8th

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In May, the Republic of Ireland overwhelmingly voted to repeal the 8th Amendment to its constitution; Irish President Michael Higgins signed the change into law in September. The amendment, passed in 1983, was in effect a total ban on abortion; the law stated “the unborn” has the same rights as the person carrying it. Some 67 percent of Irish voters voted “yes” to repeal after a years-long campaign that split political parties, created surprising alliances, and saw a flood of American conservative dollars into the “Vote No” campaign’s coffers.

Union members and leaders make up about a third of the workforce; like in the US, women make up more than half of membership. A key help in shifting public opinion and organizing the Repeal campaign was The Trade Union Campaign to Repeal the 8th Amendment. The Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) had a history in the pro-choice movement in Ireland, having campaigned against the 8th Amendment when it was first proposed, and the Trade Union Campaign to Repeal the 8th Amendment began several years ago, long before the referendum on repeal was called.

Abortion had always been illegal in Ireland, but the 1983 referendum was called at a time when most other Western nations had expanded women’s right to abortion. Instead, Ireland doubled down. Any Irish person with an unwanted pregnancy had to take a pricey trip to the UK for a legal abortion if they could afford it—a reality dramatized by a rally in Dublin a week before the referendum, where women in canoes paddled up the River Liffey bearing banners that read, “Don’t Make Irish Women Get the Boat.” For those who couldn’t make the journey, recent years brought underground access to illegal abortion pills and the risk of a 14-year prison sentence, or being forced to carry a pregnancy to term, sometimes at risk of their life.

That risk was underscored by several dramatic cases in the 1990s and 2000s in which courts intervened to halt abortions, including in the case of miscarriage, most famously in the case of Savita Halappanavar in 2012, who died after doctors refused to intervene as she miscarried. Courts had even ruled for doctors who pushed a woman into an unwanted Caesarean section, citing the 8th.

And so, according to Mandy La Combre of the Trade Union Campaign to Repeal, “We see the issue of ‘repeal’ among the forefront of achieving equality for our female membership.” La Combre pointed out that women in Ireland make up more than 50% of trade union membership in Ireland, and that 50 percent of working women in Ireland earn â,–20,000 or less. That means that the â,–800 - â,–2,000 that travel outside of Ireland for abortion care might cost could be up to 10% of their annual income. “This amounts to significant stress for women,” she said, “That compounded with the added emotional stress of travelling abroad often in fear and distress denies women any semblance of dignity and is an affront to their basic human rights.”

Longtime prochoice and trade union activist John Meehan explained that when the Trade Union Campaign began, none of the major unions had a clear policy on repeal. It was slow work convincing them, he said, but by the 2010s, it was clear that public opinion was shifting, and when activists raised the issue at union conferences or regional meetings, it won support easily. Union leadership, Meehan said, could be hesitant to break its habits, but it was increasingly clear that repeal was in the interests of the membership.

In 2017, several unions and labor federations, including Unite the Union, UNISON, Mandate Trade Union, the Communications Workers Union (CWU) Ireland and the GMB commissioned and funded a sweeping survey, Abortion as a Workplace Issue, which found that many union members had experience with the need for abortion

affecting them on the job—“from not being able to get time off to fear of stigma in the workplace. 51 percent of respondents not only approved of repealing the 8th but of making abortion accessible “when a woman asks.” (In September, the health minister announced the service will be free.)

One respondent said, “I would like to discuss how access to abortion is a socio-economic issue. If you have money and means to travel without anybody taking note, then you can go to the UK and have an abortion and no one is any wiser—no embarrassment or public stigma. If you are in a low-paid job or unemployed, you could end up trapped in an unwanted pregnancy or have to turn to friends, family, money lenders for finance.”

Beyond proving that union members were already thinking about and being affected by the abortion ban, Meehan said, the report “shows that in this country when groups of people just sat down and just talked about the issue, it was much more of a trade union issue than they [originally] conceived.... For example, lots of people in it said it never occurred to them to go to their trade union about the issue.” The stigma around abortion would have prevented them, in a way that it would not have prevented a man from seeking care if he had an injury or illness. A woman who needed to travel for an abortion could not tell her boss that she needed time off work for an illegal procedure (even if since the 1990s the Irish constitution has also mandated that one does have the right to travel for an abortion), and so long as the unions remained silent on the issue, she would have no support.

“Now, that, frankly, had to change,” Meehan said. “That meant a break from this kind of routine-ist approach towards trade unions. It meant both women coming forward and institutions, trade unions, dealing with this, recognizing it.”

That leadership from within the labor movement came from women-led unions like Mandate, which represents shop workers who are overwhelmingly female and working-class. It took years of working with unions, labor councils, and identifying activists within the labor movement to make the Trade Union Campaign for Repeal bigger and stronger. “The perspective of some unions is to stick to workplace issues and not concentrate on human rights issues, so this has been challenging,” La Combre said.

The campaign also backed members of the Oireachtas (the Irish legislature) who were fighting for repeal, and met with politicians from various parties ahead of the 2016 general elections to try to determine their positions on repeal. For a long time, most of Ireland’s major parties—the two largest, both center-right parties, Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil, as well as the left-nationalist Sinn Féin—had been anti-abortion, and while Irish Labour was ostensibly pro-Repeal, it only had managed to be in government in coalition with the conservative Fine Gael. Smaller socialist parties like People Before Profit took a fully pro-choice stance, and quite a few independent members of the Oireachtas did as well, campaigning hard for repeal.

The Right2Change movement, which grew out of the anti-austerity campaign for water rights after the institution of fees for water in 2014 and was heavily backed by trade unions, included repealing the 8th in its policy platform, released in the lead-up to the 2016 election, and over 100 candidates—including Sinn Féin, moving toward a pro-choice position—signed on to that platform. Fine Gael maintained its hold on government, but shifted its own position, particularly with the rise of Leo Varadkar to the position of Taoiseach (prime minister). Varadkar, openly gay and the son of an immigrant, represents a new face for conservative politics in Ireland, courting the foreign businesses that use the country as a tax haven with a newly friendly, socially-liberal face.

This meant that by the time the referendum was called, three major parties supported it and even the leadership of the socially conservative Fianna Fáil backed Repeal, though a good half of the party’s membership and elected leaders supported the No campaign.

But it was the activists at the grassroots and within the Trade Union Campaign, not the elected officials, who won the

overwhelming victory on May 25. The elected officials had been pulled along toward change by campaigners, who learned from the country's 2015 referendum on marriage equality that talking about supposedly-sensitive "cultural" issues taught them much about how those issues affected people's daily lives. The "respectable middle ground" of the Repeal campaign might have been the voice on the television, but it was activists like Meehan and La Combre who had spent decades winning people over who did the on-the-ground work and had the hard, personal conversations that changed minds.

The support of the labor movement was key in illustrating the ways in which abortion in Ireland was already happening, but happening unequally and exacerbating the economic stress that many were still feeling after years of austerity. It brought the voices of real working people to the fore, and pushed back on the idea that unions should only care about "bread-and-butter" issues. It took a risk, and found its position reflected in 67 percent of the country.

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