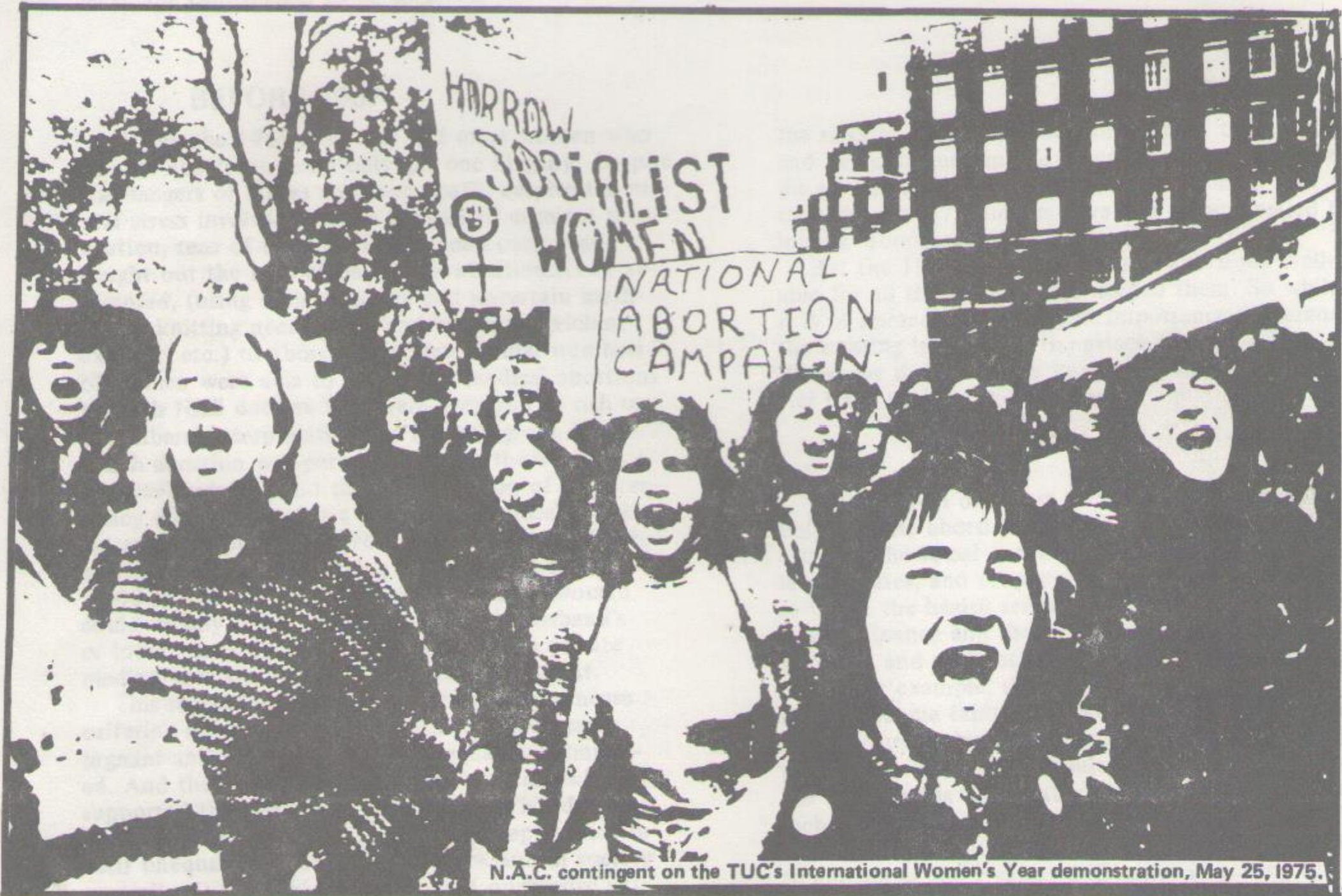


Free Abortion

On Demand!



N.A.C. contingent on the TUC's International Women's Year demonstration, May 25, 1975.

Photo: Angela Phillips (IFL)

IMG Pamphlet

8p

THE FIGHT FOR FREE ABORTION AND CONTRACEPTION ON DEMAND

The second reading of James White's Abortion (Amendment) Bill, which aims drastically to reduce access to legal abortion, took place on 7 February this year when a Select Committee was set up to make recommendations on possible changes to the 1967 Act. This Select Committee consists of ten supporters of White's Bill (many known for their extremely reactionary views on this and other subjects) and only five opponents of the Bill. Only four members are women.

Thus we are faced with a very immediate and urgent fight for the right to abortion. As socialists we support the struggle against all restrictive abortion laws, for the right of women to choose, that is for the right to free contraception and abortion on demand. We take up this struggle on the basis of our commitment to the struggle for women's liberation. We recognise that one necessary part of that involves the assertion of the right of women to control their own bodies—their fertility and their sexuality—and that free availability of contraception and abortion as a right are necessary to this end.

Moreover, we recognise that the present attacks on abortion are not taking place in isolation but are part of a series of reactionary and repressive developments which are gaining momentum in the context of the present crisis. At a time when the attacks on the living standards of the working class are reaching new heights, it is crucial that the workers' movement is fully prepared to resist this offensive. Organisationally, its strength is intact. Politically, serious weaknesses exist, not least a general backwardness on the question of women's oppression, and on abortion in particular. It is these weaknesses that sections of the ruling class can utilise to open up divisions within the working class, as the crisis intensifies. Through building the National Abortion Campaign, we can help unify the working class—in a way which both strengthens its own position and advances the struggle for the liberation of women.

In this pamphlet we try to assess the political issues involved in the present confrontation over access to abortion, and we discuss the political arguments and actions which must be developed if the full political strength and potential of the campaign is to be achieved.

BEFORE 1967

Before the 1967 Abortion Act most women who wanted abortions could only get one illegally. Despite the dangers of illness and even death, despite the mental stress involved and the dangers of criminal prosecution, tens of thousands of women each year sought out the help of backstreet abortionists or attempted, (using such primitive and uncertain methods as knitting needles, gin and hot baths, violent exercise, etc.) to abort themselves. Similar numbers of women were able to get proper medical abortions through NHS doctors who were prepared to rish making liberal interpretations of the one ground on which abortion was permissible—that the woman's life was in danger and that continuation of the pregnancy would make her a physical or mental wreck. (In anticipation of the 1967 Act, access to NHS abortions eased slightly during the 1960s—there were 2,200 in 1960; 6,100 in 1966).¹ Wealthy women could usually use their money (or their husband's or lover's money) and influence to obtain private medical care for abortion when they needed it.

This repressive legal situation imposed immense suffering on the majority of women who became pregnant and who wanted their pregnancy terminated. And the reactionary ideas and attitudes which supported this legislation, and turned a blind eye to the suffering it produced, helped to keep women in their unequal place at home, at work and in society generally. It is to this repressive and oppressive situation that the anti-abortionists and all the supporters of James White's Abortion (Amendment) Bill would have us return.

1967 ACT

Since the 1967 Abortion Act came into effect abortion has been legal where two doctors agree that a continued pregnancy is likely to be more dangerous to the physical or mental health of the woman or her existing children than an abortion. As a result of the 1967 Act many women have been able to have safe, legal abortions and numbers of women having to run

the risks of backstreet abortions and of those dying and being maimed in the process has been vastly reduced. Since the 1967 Act, 31,000 women less than the pre-'67 numbers have had to be treated following abortions.

But the 1967 Act did not make abortions available for all the women who needed them. So while it is of immediate and urgent importance to defend the existing law against the attack led by James White, we do this in the knowledge that the 1967 Act itself was *not* good enough.

THE NHS

The problem of access to abortion now arises not only because abortion is not a legal right, but also because of the social context within which the present law operates, and most particularly because of the way in which the health service is structured. The chronic lack of finance and the bureaucratic and hierarchical structure and goals of the National Health Service have meant for example, that while in some areas abortions have become fairly available, in others they remain virtually unobtainable through the NHS; the waiting period between initial consultation with a doctor and the operation is undesirably long; in many cases the techniques used are not the safest and most up-to-date; and in general it is working class women who are likely to encounter the greatest difficulties in getting the help they need from the health service in this as in other health matters.

Because of the power which they continue to wield within the NHS, senior consultants who are personally opposed to abortion have been able to restrict the numbers of abortions taking place within their hospital regions (for example, in Birmingham and Sheffield, abortions have been very difficult to get).² The general shortage of staff and pressures on medical facilities combined with the bureaucratic procedures of referral have meant that women seeking NHS abortions have had to wait longer for them than women obtaining private abortions.³

Such delays are clearly not in the interests of either the mental or physical well-being of the women concerned. Medical abortions are safest during the first 12 weeks of pregnancy (and in fact involve less risk to health than continued pregnancy and childbirth). It is during this period that women should be able to get abortions they need. The NHS, especially in some of the more reactionary areas, has been slow to use the more simple, efficient and safe abortion techniques, and there has been great resistance to the setting up of out-patient clinics providing this type of abortions. In parts of the USA—especially in New York state since the liberalisation of the law in 1970, these services have been extremely successful.

Reluctance to develop the most effective and straight-forward abortion service is partly financial (in light of the massive cuts in social spending), but it also reflects the persistence of strongly punitive attitudes to women who in their ideas or actions seem to be rejecting some aspect of their traditional 'role'—in this case, rejecting maturity at a particular time. As in other types of medical treatment, patients are rarely told exactly what options are open to them, the precise nature of the treatments they will receive, their rights in the situation, etc. In many cases their needs and feelings are totally ignored.

Furthermore, women seeking abortion are likely to be given a rude, unsympathetic and moralising reception by doctors who refuse them treatment, and often also by doctors who do refer them for abortion. Women have been given grossly exaggerated 'information' about the risks attached to abortion, and there have been cases in this country where women have been given abortions only on the condition that they 'consent' to sterilisation. This practice has reached scandalous proportions in the USA. Many welfare mothers—especially non-white women—have been forced to accept sterilisation as a condition for receiving further welfare cheques!

The inadequate health care provided by the NHS in this, as in other areas of treatment, has created the basis for the development of private health practice. The escalating costs of the NHS have been a chronic problem for British capitalism since 1948. The result of successive governments' policies whose main priority has been the defence of profits rather than meeting the welfare needs of those who work to produce those profits, is an NHS which is in a state of collapse. This country's health workers are among the worst paid in any 'advanced' capitalist country. 75% of beds in hospitals were built before 1918, only 5% of GP's operate from purpose-built health centres, there is a drastic lack of staff in all sections of health work (75,000 nurses and 10,000 technicians are needed now). In November 1973 the Tories lopped £111 millions which has not been replaced. In this situation, the growth in private medicine outside the NHS means we are re-inforcing a two-tiered health service. This results in an adequate private service for those who can afford private fees, but a run-down service for the working class.

Thus, getting a legal medical abortion in Britain in 1975 can still be a difficult, humiliating and uncertain business, in a health system, which although it has undoubtedly made a contribution to improved standards of health in all classes, is structured in such a way that it mystifies illness, and controls people before it contributes to their physical and mental well being. The crisis in the welfare state as a whole, and in the health service, in particular, is well illustrated in the case of abortion, where the need for a health service which is properly financed and organised so as to meet people's physical and psychological needs can be so clearly seen.

JAMES WHITE'S AMENDMENT

Under the 1967 Act, 100,000 women each year are provided with access to legal abortions. However, many abuses remain and the terms of the Act are restrictive. The Act did not give women the right to decide herself whether or not to terminate a pregnancy. She still had to seek the approval of at least two doctors. It did not ensure the NHS facilities would be made available. And it still meant that women would have to prove they were mentally, physically or 'environmentally' unfit for the 'norm' of motherhood. It left so many restrictions that backstreet abortions have not been swept away.

February 1975 saw the second reading of a Bill sponsored by James White, Labour MP for Glasgow, Pollock, that will supposedly amend the 1967 Act to get rid of some of the abuses. The Abortion (Amendment) Bill does nothing to remove the abuses that remain in the present Act, such as the continued restrictions and humiliations imposed on women. Its supporters claim it would cut down on racketeering in the private sector, but if safe, legal abortions were freely available on the NHS then private clinics would not be able to function.

In fact, this so-called Amendment Bill is an attempt to make it even harder for women to get legal abortions. It threatens to change the medical grounds for abortion from the comparative clause of 1967—'continuing the pregnancy involves a greater risk of injury to her physical or mental health than an abortion'—to a definitive and highly restrictive basis 'continuing the pregnancy meant a risk of serious injury to the woman's mental or physical health'. Based on a study of the grounds used for obtaining legal abortions since 1967, we can estimate that approximately 80,000 women annually will no longer be eligible for a legal abortion if this becomes law.

Apart from the restrictions imposed on the medical grounds for obtaining abortion legally, this 'Amendment' Bill would make it impossible for any woman under 16 to receive advice or counselling without her parents being present. It would make it impossible for foreign women to obtain abortions (unless conception occurred on British soil), because there would be a 20-week residency restriction that would match the proposed restriction banning abortion after the twentieth week of pregnancy.

Other clauses in the Bill would impose further restrictions. Only two doctors in practice for at least five years, and in different practices would be eligible to approve. Only agencies approved by the Secretary of State for Health and Social Services would be allowed to give advice and information on abortion, unless they were not paid for giving advice. It would become illegal to publish information about abortions, including the identity of anyone who had given evidence in court in a case of criminal abortion.

The Bill would also change the law in relation to the burden of proof. If charged with performing an abortion outside the permitted grounds of the Bill, the doctor and his or her assistants would have to prove that they did not break the law. At the moment, in most situations involving British criminal law, the accused is assumed 'innocent until proved guilty'. This legal clause of the Act involves a challenge to a very basic democratic right.

WHICH ABUSES?

Some of the supporters of James White's Abortion (Amendment) Bill have argued that they are not against abortion in all circumstances, but that they are against the 'abuses' of the 1967 Act. What are these abuses? If there are serious abuses how could they be overcome?

Some MPs who supported the liberalisation of the abortion laws in 1967 are now supporting White, or are saying at least we need to cut out the racketeering in abortion. Many people have been horrified by the rapid growth of private abortion clinics, and by the profits being made out of this new 'health industry' in the last few years. In particular, a lot of noise has been made about the large numbers of women from abroad who have been coming here to get abortions (overwhelmingly private ones).

The only sort of 'solution' to this situation offered by White is to cut down on legal access to abortion generally, and thus condemn more women in Britain and abroad to backstreet abortions, driving many of the racketeers underground to meet their needs. And yet the growth in private clinics is a direct result of the deficiencies in the present law and the inadequacies of the National Health Services. This situation can only be constructed



The 7 February demonstration against the restrictive Bill

ively changed in the context of the general struggle to end private practice altogether, and to integrate its resources into a fully comprehensive national health service.

Women from France, Western Germany, Belgium, the south of Ireland, Spain, Switzerland, etc. come to Britain for abortions not because they enjoy travelling, but because legal medical abortions are (or have been until very recently) extremely difficult or impossible to obtain in their own countries. The only progressive way for us to relate to this situation is by linking up our campaign for women's right to safe, free and legal abortion and contraception on demand to similar campaigns in other countries.

We cannot accept the present situation in which women (at least those who can get access to the information and money) have to travel to another country (or even another town for that matter) to get an abortion, or else to face the risks of backstreet abortion in their own country. In Italy, to take one example, even the government admits that about 3,000 women die each year from backstreet abortion.

Already we have seen solidarity actions with the fight for abortion in West Germany and Italy; and MLAC, the abortion movement in France, has taken the initiative in beginning to establish some co-ordination between the organisations in different countries. The building of these links and the international actions which they can produce is an important part of our fight for abortion in Britain.

SOCIAL CONCERN

James White, the sponsor of the Abortion (Amendment) Bill, has also claimed that he is against the 'abuse' of the existing law, rather than against abortion itself. But by 'abuses' James White

means the large numbers of foreign women, the total numbers of abortions performed, and the possibility of establishing abortion on demand through an extremely liberal interpretation of the 1967 Act.

'We also intend to take care of abortion on demand. There are some 200,000 abortions done in this country every year and we think it is too many. We think people are using abortion instead of birth control. We don't want to make it difficult for the following categories: women with large families, single women, young girls, or women with housing problems. But we certainly don't think a woman should be able to have an abortion just because she wants to.'

James White, *Guardian*, 6.2.75

THE ANTI-ABORTIONISTS

Despite the apparent concern for the hard-pressed working class woman expressed here, these ideas actually involve a rejection both of women's rights and of working class rights generally; it is important to examine these arguments carefully. Basically, James White is saying that abortion should be available if it will deal with (help to hide?) some social problem such as housing, low wages and benefits—which especially effect women on their own, the prejudice against illegitimacy, the lack of nurseries and other provisions for children—all of which are such a continuing feature of our society.

Such an argument has more in common than has generally been recognised with the most objectionable assertions of Keith Joseph. He argues that our social problems could be overcome ('the cycle of deprivation could be broken') if the poorest sections of the working class could be persuaded to have fewer children—or no children at all. This approach—as expressed by both Joseph and White—implies that poverty, bad housing, the economic vulnerability of single women with children, are actually caused by 'unsuitable' women getting pregnant and having children, rather than by the inhuman way in which our society is organised.

It also implies that rather than fighting for decent housing, a decent standard of living, large allowances payable for every child, free nursery places available for all children, equal pay and benefits for women, that working class people should have priority rights to contraception and abortion, and thus—by having fewer (or no) children, make fewer claims on the system.

Similar arguments have been used for many years in relation to poverty internationally, with experts of the United Nations and other spokespersons for imperialism proclaiming that the poverty of the 'third world' is produced by the 'too rapid' rates of population growth in those countries. In this way, attention has been diverted away from the benefits which the capitalist powers of the west have drawn from this very poverty with their trade and loan schemes to the 'third world', all drawn up in a way which adds to the affluence of the west and increases the poverty and dependence of the poor countries.

James White links his acceptance of abortion 'for women 'with social problems' to his rejection of 'abortion on demand', abortion as a right. Here again he is treading a well-worn and reactionary path. It has two main aspects to it—firstly, it involves the suppression of the idea that working class people have rights which they can assert; secondly, it involves the idea that women cannot really know their own minds or make decisions which have any real validity.

Because the arguments for and against contraception and abortion are so confused with reactionary ideas and interests lined up on both sides, we have to be exceedingly clear and insistent about the basis of our demands and commitments. We don't want to lend credence to the population controllers;⁶

we don't think that poverty can be overcome without a transformation of society as a whole both nationally and internationally. We see the struggle for free contraception and abortion on demand as part of the struggle for women's rights and towards their liberation.

We oppose enforced motherhood, and we oppose enforced sterilisation or birth control. This is why we stand by a woman's right to choose whether and when she will bear a child or end a pregnancy. Free and accessible safe methods of contraception, abortion and sterilisation must be available to all women to establish their right to control their own reproductive processes.

THE ANTI-ABORTIONISTS

James White has acknowledged that his interest in abortion is very recent and that a good deal of his 'knowledge' on the subject was acquired from a book called *Babies for Burning*. This book, which, despite their reluctance to admit it, seems to have been sponsored by the anti-abortionists, claims to be a rigorous and objective analysis of the realities of abortion in Britain today. Amongst its 'revelations' is the claim that aborted fetuses are being used for soap-making and for scientific experiments. However, as a *Sunday Times* research team has shown,⁷ this and other claims in the book are without foundation. Nevertheless, partly on the basis of this book, we are confronted with a Private Member's Bill which could become law and a Select Committee, composed in the majority of men who support this Bill, set up to make recommendations on changes in abortion laws.

The Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child (SPUC), Life and other anti-abortion organisations bear considerable responsibility for this immediate situation. Their intensive propaganda activities around horror-images of abortion have prepared the ground for such publications as *Babies for Burning*.

Their own demonstration around the slogan 'Abortion Kills'—massive through the organisational strength of the Catholic Church; their rhetoric on the theme 'social care, not abortion'; their lobbying of MPs and electoral campaigns involving support of 'your local anti-abortion candidate' (of any political party)—all these things have contributed to the situation in which James White and many other MPs have come to believe that there are votes to be won by taking up the anti-abortion issue.⁸

The anti-abortion organisations emerged in 1967 around their opposition to the liberalisation of abortion laws. Since then they have grown in size and effectiveness in the same general context as a range of other reactionary social movements (such as the Festival of Light, and Mary Whitehouse's Viewers and Listeners Association, for example) and in opposition to the anti-authoritarian and anti-traditionalism of the radical movements in the sixties.

The appeal of this range of reactionary movements was initially focussed around the reassertion of traditional bourgeois ideals relating to the family, motherhood, sexuality, morality, authority, etc. But as Britain has moved progressively into a period of economic recession which is related to a deepening crisis in political and social relations in society, so these traditional ideas have begun to reconnect to developing reactionary currents within society.

On the one hand, re-emergence of fascist groups like the National Front have seized the opportunities held out to them by SPUC and Life to embrace anti-abortion propaganda and proclaim their own anti-abortion positions. And, perhaps on a more significant scale, the anti-abortion

and other reactionary movement connect to the renewed need to define women as domestic slaves—as child-minders and houseworkers—which is associated with the present economic decline. Now there is a reduced need for women as paid workers, and an increasing disability to provide basic social, educational and health services. Beyond those issues which most specifically relate to women, the anti-abortionists have become one of the spearheads of the trends towards increasing repression and attacks on democratic and working class rights⁹, which are emerging more sharply as the States' response to the growing crisis in economic, political and social relationships, and to the social and political polarisations which they produce.

Nevertheless, many of the supporters of SPUC—or of the general argument against abortion—are not die-hard reactionaries. Some of them, especially many of the women and younger people have been mobilised directly by the Church; some have become caught up in the moral arguments and the missionary zeal of the anti-abortion campaigners.

The anti-abortion organisations have successfully posed abortion as an issue which is above party and class. Although the leadership of these organisations remains firmly in the control of a collection of reactionary and establishment figures, they have drawn support from all social classes. Although they insist that abortion is not a political question, they have carefully courted MPs and parliamentary candidates at election times (admittedly, with an amazing disregard for their party affiliations). During the 1974 elections, SPUC and Life produced posters and leaflets asking people to vote for 'your local anti-abortion candidate' and made no public statements of disassociation when the National Front supported them. The present Abortion (Amendment) Bill is the reward of these efforts.

SOCIAL CARE ARGUMENTS

The cross-class support which SPUC and Life have mobilised has partly been won by the way in which abortion is posed as a moral question. Through this they have been able to latch onto the guilt and mystery traditionally surrounding the subject, and to appear to be taking up the cause of the weak and helpless against the powerful, ruthless, and inhumane forces which dominate in this society. Within this framework SPUC and Life have asserted that abortion is murder, that the rights of the foetus must be recognised and that women who become pregnant but who do not want a child should receive 'social care, not abortion'.

While we reject the emotive and abstract way in which these views are raised, we should not evade all the issues which are involved. We do not think that abortion is murder; we think that there is an important distinction to be made between the *potential* life which the foetus represents and the actually viable life of the born infant and the life of the grown woman. Pregnancy tends to take over a woman's life—socially and psychologically as well as physically—and we think that women should be able to decide whether or not this should happen to them at any particular time.

SPUC and Life have counterposed 'social care' and abortion. But their commitment to social care offers no solutions to most of the women who are overwhelmed by social problems which will be intensified if they have to have a child. SPUC's concern to improve housing, family allowances etc. has struck at the level of slogans, while Life has attempted to provide some assistance (of a moralising, charitable type) to individual women who are pregnant and desperate.

But however inadequately or inactively SPUC and Life have taken up these questions, they do raise real problems relating to the shortage of housing, the inadequacies of social services and benefits. In answering these arguments, we

have to show that we do not counterpose the right to abortion and the right to housing, social services and benefits. In fact, we see these rights as necessary complements to one another. The other side of the coin of a woman's right to choose is to fight for conditions whereby women can have a *real* choice—to have children or not. This means a fight for nursery facilities, for increased child allowances for every child, for maternity (and paternity) leave, for equal pay, etc. must be related to the campaign for abortion.

LABOUR PARTY AND TRADE UNIONS

The idea that abortion is a moral question and nothing to do with politics or class interests has hardly been challenged by the traditional organisations of the working class. Neither the Labour Party, the trade unions, or the Communist Party, nor the organisations of the revolutionary left have had much understanding on the political significance of the demand for the right to contraception and abortion, much less of campaigning for them. Thus, until very recently the main progressive challenge to traditional and reactionary ideas on these questions has come from the women's movement.

Both the Labour Party and the TUC have consistently evaded the question of abortion. The Labour Party has managed to produce a whole series of green papers, white papers, pamphlets and statements expressing the Party's opposition to discrimination against women, and has made many high sounding statements about the importance of International Women's Year. Yet, at the same time it has maintained a silence on the question of abortion even when some of its own members introduce a Bill to reduce access to abortion.

Similarly, the TUC, which at the level of resolutions on equal pay, has recognised women's rights for nearly a hundred years. They have joined into the celebration of International Women's Year—at least by producing stickers and glossy literature—but continue to avoid mentioning the question of abortion even in their 1975 version of the TUC Charter for Women.

These silences are 'justified' on the grounds that the abortion issue is 'too controversial' in the case of the TUC. Or in the Labour Party, we are told that it is not a political issue because it relates to people's 'private lives', and that it is not a question for party of class commitment but one of 'individual conscience'. All of these 'justifications' contradict the proclaimed commitment to women's rights which—from the fight for the vote onwards—have been seen as very controversial.

Within the Labour Party and the trade union movement we have to challenge the reformism which says that these 'controversial', 'personal', 'individual' questions are outside of their sphere of concern. Within this society there are no areas of private life which are outside the control of the state. The State regulates our sexual relationships (as many homosexuals discover to their cost); it determines the grounds on which we have access to contraception and abortion; and it supervises the relationships between parents and children, between husbands and wives, and between lovers.

Our 'freedom of conscience' is strictly limited. If the James White Bill is passed, there will be no 'freedom of conscience' for women who want abortions but who do not fulfill the grounds in the Bill. There will be no 'freedom of conscience' for doctors who will be constrained by the law from carrying out abortions. Like other questions related to the family, abortion is a social and political issue and the reformism which both denies this and allows legislation covering these to be passed must be fought.

OPPOSITION FROM INSIDE

Such criticisms have already emerged from within the ranks of the Labour Party and trade union movement. Within the Labour Party, opposition to this view of abortion as 'non-political' has been led by the six women Labour MPs who in January sponsored the campaign by the Abortion Law Reform Association (ALRA) for 'abortion on request' up to twelve weeks.

These women have fought noisily in Parliament for the Select Committee on abortion to have more women members (it was set up with only four women out of fourteen members) and for it to be less overwhelmingly weighted—in its Labour Party representatives—by anti-abortionists. They have gained support from other Labour MPs and have spoken at many meetings organised by the National Abortion Campaign. In addition, they have recently put out a call to the labour movement to support the 21 June demonstration, in addition to sponsoring the Ad Hoc organising committee.

At other levels of the Labour Party the fight has also been taken up. Several Labour Constituency Parties have agreed to sponsor the demonstration and have come out in opposition to White's Bill. In addition, a significant number have sponsored meetings up and down the country on this question.

However, it's all very easy for these individual Labour MPs to speak on the question. A more difficult task—but one that should be carried out immediately—is to launch a fight within the Labour Party, both in the National Executive and in the Parliamentary Labour Party, to ensure that the Labour Party adopts a political position on this question. It's not good enough for the women MPs to say they personally are opposed to any restrictions, while at the same time stating it is a question of 'individual conscience'.

And the Labour Constituency Party also has a role to play in this fight. Resolutions to the National Executive for the Labour Party Conference on 29 September in Blackpool calling on the Labour Party to take a stand in opposition to the Bill and for a woman's right to choose (with all that entails, including opposition to cuts in social spending that reduces nursery facilities, and makes it impossible to implement even the 1967 Act) should be organised now. It is the membership of the Labour Party that should decide the policies adopted by the MPs in Parliament. However, the MPs will only implement the policies insofar as each and every Labour Party member is drawn into the campaign and ensures a strong movement is built *outside* of the halls of the House of Commons.

Opposition within the trade union movement to the traditional evasions on the question of abortion has often come from women activists within the women's movement—directly or indirectly. The debate at the Women's TUC—against the wishes of the bureaucracy and the platform of the conference is one example of this. This Congress came out in overwhelming support for the resolution opposing White's Bill and called for free contraception and abortion on demand.

The Working Women's Charter Campaign has also played an important role in taking up this fight within the labour movement. In London it was the Charter Campaign that organised the demonstration and meeting at the time of the second reading of James White's Bill on February 7. In many towns up and down the country, the Charter has been able to use the links with the labour movement that have been built to hold trade union branches to the demand in the Charter relating to abortion and contraception. And, thus through the basis laid by the previous organising of the Charter Campaign, local National Abortion Campaign (NAC) groups have got off to a firm start.

Many trade unions, Trades' Councils and national executives of trade unions have agreed to sponsor the 21 June

demonstration. However, this also is not enough. We must organise to ensure that trade unions will actively mobilise their members, organise speakers from NAC to address meetings held at the workplace as well as branch meetings, make financial commitments to the campaign, provide transport and childcare facilities for women and men wishing to attend national activities, etc.

In addition, union branches which pass resolutions on the question of abortion should fight for the executive and the conference as a whole to take a position. Those unions which sponsor Labour MPs in Parliament can instruct their MP to follow the decision of the conference. The TUC Congress held every year in September should not be let off the hook—although the Women's TUC passed a favourable resolution, it is not binding upon the TUC itself. Only a massive campaign within the ranks of the labour movement will ensure that the TUC adds its support to this resolution.

MASS SUPPORT

There are several reasons why these developments inside the traditional organisations of the working class are important. Firstly, and most obviously, mass support from within the Labour Party and trade union movement will strengthen the struggle for abortion. A fight within the Labour Party and trade union movement will enhance our capacity to win on our terms—not only to defeat the Bill, but to get abortion on demand on the NHS. This fight will intensify the pressures on the Labour Party leaders and the trade union bureaucracies and begin to undermine their reformist conceptions which distinguish between the personal world of individual conscience and the public world of party political issues.

Moreover, if we get a public commitment from large sections of the working class movement for abortion as a woman's right, we can utilise the doors opened to take up the general struggle against sexism within the working class. It is clear that the ruling class has launched an attack which has ideological dimensions as well as economic ones. The working class must be prepared for a unified fight against all attacks. This means it must take up all aspects of the attack—defending the interests of those at the point of production as well as those in the home, on the dole queues, and in the colleges. This is the way to ensure that wives of workers at Cowley and at Chryslers in Coventry do not see their interests as different from the workers' movement.

NATIONAL ABORTION CAMPAIGN

Before 1975 political work on the question of abortion was undertaken by three main groups: by helping charitable organisations such as British Pregnancy Advisory Services; by groups such as the Abortion Law Reform Association which directed its fight mainly through Parliament; and by the women's movement through such groups as the Women's Abortion and Contraception Campaign (WACC) and women's centres. In addition, last year a number of Ad Hoc Committees Against SPUC were established in many towns throughout Britain.

At the time of the second reading of the Abortion (Amendment) Bill, the Organising Committee of the London Working Women's Charter Campaign put out a call for a demonstration. At a meeting in Central Hall, Westminster following the demonstration it was decided—in light of the large amount of support—to call a meeting of representatives of organisations and any interested individuals as to

discuss how to take the fight against the Bill further. At this meeting it was agreed to set up the National Abortion Campaign (NAC) on the basis of opposition against any restrictive legislation and of support for a women's right to choose. Represented at this meeting included the women's movement, ALRA, Labour Party members, the IMG, the International Socialists, the Communist Party, the National Union of Students Executive, as well as the Working Women's Charter Campaign, trade unionists and anti-SPUC groups

It has become clear that the basis for very extensive support exists,—the women's movement has passed resolutions supporting NAC at two national conferences (one of them being the conference of the socialist current within the movement). Increasing numbers of trade union branches and Labour Constituency Parties are being drawn into the campaign. Local groups have been set up in almost every major town—organising public meetings, street theatre, leafletting at markets, petitioning opposition against White's Bill.

Although most of the activity is now being directed towards building the 21 June demonstration, it is important to look ahead. In the event of the Bill being passed the whole weight of the workers' movement should be thrown behind those doctors, journalists, teachers, social workers, etc. whose present activities—performing and assisting abortions, referring people for abortions, reporting anything to do with abortion will become illegal under the amended Bill. Dr. Peter Huntingford has already stated publicly that he will continue his practice as it is at present should the Bill be passed. Others will no doubt take up this example if we publicise it. But this means approaching people now—and getting those trade unions and organisations that are not directly affected by the Bill to commit themselves to support any actions in defiance of the Bill.

If the Bill does not pass there are many tasks ahead. The fight against social spending cuts which make the limited 1967 Bill ineffectual, for increased nursery facilities, (state-provided, open 24-hours a day, and under community control), for free and efficient contraception and sterilisation facilities, for maternity (and paternity) benefits are still yet to be waged on a national, massive scale. We yet have to tackle all those Hospital Boards which have refused to implement the 1967 Act, and the Medical Schools which do not equip doctors to provide adequate health services for women. In addition, we can be sure that SPUC will not remain silent if the Bill fails. We must meet this major offensive which will no doubt be launched on its own terms—through massive demonstrations and through organising in every factory and in every neighbourhood against all the ideas which groups like SPUC represent.

Already the call has gone out from an international conference on abortion in Paris in April for a European demonstration in Italy in the autumn. We must prepare building this demonstration soon after 21 June. If we can get delegations from Labour Parties, trade unions, women's groups, political organisations, we will be able to demonstrate in practice how we can build international links. We will not only aid the Abortion Campaign in Italy, but we will also be able to use this opportunity to take up the rampant national chauvinism that many labour leaders have displayed in the EEC Campaign in Britain. And the lessons learned in fighting against reactionary forces, in building massive support on this issue, and in developing the confidence and political capabilities of women involved in campaigns in other countries will not be lost, but can be shared in meetings planned at the time of the demonstration.

If we develop these kinds of perspectives, we will be taking forward not only the workers' movement as a whole but also the struggle for the liberation of women.

FOOTNOTES

1. Report of the Lane Committee on the working of *the Abortion Act*.

2. Report of the Lane Committee

3. In fact, there is a growing practice amongst doctors to induce births to suit the needs of the under-staffed hospitals.

4. *IMG Struggle for Health Pamphlet, No. 3, 'Defend the NHS, Smash Private Practice Now'* includes these and many more facts and figures about the state of the NHS and how to fight to defend it.

5. But we should not take White's statements too literally here. The Bill of which he is sponsor would certainly drastically oucut the numbers of women in 'these categories' who would be able to get legal abortions. Either White does not understand the terms of his own Bill, or his statements are deliberately misleading. We should also note that a similar rejection of a woman's right and ability to make up her own mind is reflected in the recent ruling on rape which has established that a man cannot be found guilty of rape if he believed that the woman had given her consent—*however unreasonable his belief might be*.

6. For further and very clear discussion of all the issues involved in this question in the context of Latin America see: *'The Political Economy of Population Control in Latin America'* by Bonnie Mass.

7. *Sunday Times*, 30.3.75

8. 'I'd never thought about abortion until the 1970 election. But on polling day in Glasgow a paper showed a picture of my Tory opponent with a group of nuns calling the Labour Governemnt immoral for working the Abortion Act. How would you like that if you were fighting a marginal seat (via a strong Catholic vote) and it happened to you? James' White, *Sunday Times*, 24.4.75

9. Other examples include attempts to curtails trade union rights; the use of conspiracy laws; the Jenkins' legislation; the attacks on gay teachers and social workers, etc.