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Ireland

A crucial vote

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Ireland is facing its fifth constitutional referendum on the question of abortion on March 6.

The outcome of the referendum will be of critical importance to Irish women, to working class women in particular and to Irish culture and society in general. Ten years ago, it was established that the risk of a woman's suicide were grounds for an abortion. This happened in the wake of an incident known as the "X" case, in which a 14 year old became pregnant after being raped.

Under the proposals being voted on in this referendum, women who are suicidal as a result of a crisis pregnancy will not be allowed to have an abortion in Ireland. Contrary to the recent assertions of Irish Health Minister MÃ-cheál Martin, Health Boards will also be denied the power to take rape or incest victims in their care for abortions overseas - even if they are suicidal.

The only grounds for abortion will be risk of the loss of the woman's life from physical causes - neither rape, incest nor suicide are included. Women who try to perform an abortion on themselves, or anyone who helps a woman to get an abortion in Ireland, will face twelve years in prison. Under the proposed law there is the possibility of a trial like that we saw recently in Portugal - with fewer avenues for a legal defence.

A woman with complications in pregnancy will only be allowed an abortion when there is a risk that she may die. In some states in the USA laws like this have meant that abortions are delayed until there is more than a 50% chance the woman will die. A woman carrying a non-viable foetus will be compelled to go to full term or wait until her life is threatened - rather than have an early, safe termination.

Doctors will only be allowed to perform such abortions in a limited number of "approved places" - rumours say 16 - which could be many miles from a local hospital. Lives and health will be risked as women are ferried from place to place. Current practise allows abortion in local hospitals under remote direction from specialists in teaching hospitals - a system the new law will end. Hospital consultants are only now waking up to this restriction and are taking legal advice.

There is a conscience clause which allows a doctor to refuse to perform an abortion. The Commonwealth Medical Association says that in such circumstances, there must be provision for emergencies. Irish Taoiseach Bertie Ahern's proposal has no such provision.

The Women's Health Council - a state appointed body advising the government on women's health policy - has sharply criticised the proposals. It has recently been revealed that the psychiatric evidence submitted to the government is not the position of the Royal Society of Psychiatry of Britain and Ireland - who say it is a misrepresentation of their views.

To date the Alliance for a NO Vote has led the active campaigning and has established a national profile as the leading pro-choice organisation opposing the government's plans, working with all who oppose the referendum and who are not part of the anti-abortion movement. Against the referendum proposals are Fine Gael, the Labour Party, the Green Party TDs, Sinn Féin, the National Women's Council, the Irish Family Planning Association, many women's organisations, the pro-choice movement and the far left. 22% of Bertie Ahern's voters say they will vote no, while his coalition allies, the Progressive Democrats are split.

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Across the board, opinion poll evidence indicates approximately 35% for, 33% against, 20% undecided and the rest abstaining. There remains however, much confusion as to what a 'yes' or 'no' vote means - including amongst supporters of the right to choose, some of whom think a 'yes' vote means more choice.

The campaign is working to win over undecided voters by explaining the implications of the referendum, while making it clear that supporters of choice should vote 'no'. This is a delicate task, as there are many who would say they oppose abortion and do not support the right to choose, but would not want to see another 'x' case.

And while some polls indicate significant support for increased abortion services in Ireland, this is no guarantee of a majority 'no' vote. There is no suicidal 14 year-old being denied an abortion - as in 1992 - to humanise the choice for the voters.

Despite changes in attitude towards sexuality and abortion amongst the population, the outcome of this referendum is not a foregone conclusion. Either result will have a profound impact on Irish society. Defeat for the government will mean that no further referendums will be possible and abortion will be legalised for certain circumstances - specifically on grounds of risk of suicide. The pro-choice movement would be hugely strengthened.

Victory for the government will be a setback of enormous proportions for the struggle for reproductive rights in Ireland. The anti-abortionists have served notice that they will try to get the morning after pill and IUD outlawed. And needless to say the Irish women who go for abortions in Britain - and now to Russia where it's cheaper - at a rate of 7 to 10,000 a year, will be further criminalized and stigmatised.

International support is very important. It will help show the world the misogynist and reactionary intentions of the Irish government. It helps maintain pressure on Fianna Fáil and the wobbly PDs. While we are confident of defeating the government, we need the solidarity of our comrades, sisters and brothers overseas.