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Portugal

Abortion Still Restricted

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Proposals to liberalise access to abortion until the 12th week of pregnancy were defeated in the Portuguese Parliament on February 20th. The reform failed because 13 Socialist MPs voted against the liberalisation.

Once again, Portuguese progressive movements have been defeated by their pseudo-left "representatives." And Portuguese women have lost a real possibility to change the most repressive abortion law in continental Europe. At least 16,000 women are forced into illegal abortions every year, in the conditions and with the consequences this implies.

The parliamentary discussions started at the end of last year, when a member of parliament elected on the (ruling) Socialist Party list admitted that, as a doctor, he had performed abortions beyond the strict limits permitted by Portuguese law. He proposed an amendment to existing legislation, saying that the legal limits on abortion of malformed fetuses were too conservative. This purely medical argument did win parliamentary support.

The proposal to permit abortion until the 12th week of pregnancy was originally presented to parliament by the youth organisations of the Socialist and Communist Parties. Despite their extreme moderation, these proposals were a step forward; recognising women's right to choose. They provoked a new wave of public discussion about the abortion question.

The Catholic church immediately launched a counter-campaign, including television advertisements, opposing abortion. The main opposition to the pro-life counter-attack came from the Socialist Revolutionary Party (PSR) Portuguese section of the Fourth International. While the Communist and Socialist Party youth organisations confined themselves to parliamentary lobbying, the PSR ran the only visible campaign on the street; reaching thousands of people.

Many unorganised women did join the campaign to support the liberalisation of the abortion law. But attempts to use this campaign to rebuild the women's movement have failed. Still, the response to the PSR campaign suggests that there has been a change in Portuguese society since abortion was last discussed, in the 1970s, when the country had a flourishing women's movement.

This time round, younger people understood the issues, and mostly condemned the Church's reactionary campaign. Attendance at the main PSR-sponsored rally outside the Parliament was very high (not counting the "pro-life" counter-demonstration!).