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France

# The struggle for abortion rights - from Simone Veil to the present day

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**The death of prominent French politician of the conservative right, Simone Veil, who nevertheless as Health Minister was responsible for introducing the legislation which legalized abortion in France in 1975, was an occasion to look back on the struggle for abortion rights in France and the situation today. Manu Bichindaritz of *l'Anticapitaliste* spoke to Suzy Rojzman, spokesperson for the Collectif national pour les droits des femmes [National Collective for Women's Rights] on the current situation.**

**Can you look back at the context in the early 1970s of the struggle which culminated with the passing of the so-called Veil law in 1975?**

On the question of abortion, the 1920 law was still in force which forbade abortion and any propaganda in its favour, with the aim of boosting the population of the nation after World War 1. The right wing as a whole remained very hostile to abortion. The representations of women were completely traditional: they should remain at home to look after children, the pressure of the reactionary Church was very significant.

What is revealing on the period is for example that the Neuwirth law on contraception was voted through in 1967, but the decrees of application only came out in 1972. There were obviously many clandestine abortions. Women who had money had abortions in Switzerland under good conditions. Others had them in much worse conditions, with medical consequences which could be very serious for health. But in any case, a woman who wanted an abortion did it.

**In the last few days, homage has been correctly paid to the personal courage of Simone Veil who in particular had to confront her own camp [1], but little has been said on the mobilisation – which was nonetheless essential – in favour of abortion with in particular the role played by the Mouvement pour la liberté de l'avortement et de la contraception [MLAC – Movement for Freedom of Abortion and Contraception].**

It was a few years after May 1968 when there had not been any feminist movement in the proper sense. Symbolically, the point of departure of the Mouvement de libération des femmes (MLF – Women's Liberation Movement) was the placing of a wreath to the wife of the unknown soldier at the Arc de triomphe in August 1970. In April 1971 the *Nouvel observateur* published the Manifesto of 343 women who stated that they had had abortions, a first gesture of civil disobedience: no signatory was prosecuted. Then in October and November 1972 there was the trial in Bobigny where a young girl from a working class background, Marie-Claire, was prosecuted for having had an abortion after being raped, as well as her mother and two women who had helped them. The lawyer was Gisèle Halimi and the trial became politicized around the demand for abortion. The verdict was a moral victory: Marie-Claire and the two women who had helped here were released and nobody was imprisoned. Finally in February 1973, the Manifesto of the 331 doctors who stated they had carried out abortions was published – a new gesture of civil disobedience.

In April 1973, the MLAC was set up, in particular to ensure protection in case there were prosecutions of doctors. This became the main actor in the mobilisation, a very unitary force made up of feminists, lawyers, family planning activists, far left organisations, the MNEF, the CFDT and so on. There were between 300 and 400 autonomous committees across the country: where the right to abortion was demanded, it was practiced by the Karman method (by suction), collective trips abroad were organised, to England in particular, to have abortions. There was also a film which was banned but was shown all over France, *Histoire d'A*, to show an abortion by the Karman method. And obviously, there were also big demonstrations. It was a huge social movement.

### **And the government was obliged to respond, by changing the law.**

On November 26, 1974, when Simone Veil made her first speech in the National Assembly, before highlighting the question of women in distress, clandestine abortions and so on, she first said that the 1920 law was ridiculous and that order had to be restored. As a woman of the right, she was caught between a big social movement and the reactionary right. So the government was obliged to legislate. It was in this context that she was able to confront the hard right, in the Assembly and outside of it.

The 1975 law is a compromise law, very restrictive. It was voted in for a trial period of five years and in 1979 it was necessary to go back on the streets. Abortion was not reimbursed. The period was very short, at ten weeks, nine if we add the week of reflection after the obligatory prior interviews. There were restrictions for foreigners who had to be resident for at least three months to have an abortion. For minors, the authorization of their parents was necessary, and there was a special conscience clause for doctors.

It was then necessary to improve this law subsequently. There were street mobilizations in 1979 to confirm the law, with two demonstrations (one mixed and one non-mixed), with a real risk of going backwards. In 1982, it was necessary to force the reimbursement of abortion from the left wing government, as Bérégovoy, then minister of social affairs, was opposed to abortion. And later, we obtained new improvements in 2001 and 2014.

### **Abortion is then a right which now exists in France, but what threats exist to this?**

The most significant threat is linked to hospital restructuring, with the HPST law which has restructured public hospitals, notably by closing local maternity units in where the CIVGs (abortion clinics) are often located. This poses problems in terms of having an abortion. So we demand the opening of abortion clinics, the lifting of the conscience clause for doctors, and an increase in the time limit, which is now twelve weeks.

Also there remains obviously the sword of Damocles: the anti-abortion activists who have never given up, entering abortion clinics, chaining themselves up, destroying files and so on. The Cadac (Coordination des associations pour le droit à l'avortement et à la contraception – Coordination of associations for abortion and contraception rights) has succeeded in making trying to prevent carrying out abortions an offence, but recently there have also been anti-abortion activists like "les Survivants", Xavier Dor, SOS Tout petit, or Sens Commun - the latter are Fillon supporters who emerged from the Manif pour tous mobilization against gay marriage and chose in this context not to affirm their opposition to abortion, although they are of course against it. Having said that, it is complex: Marine Le Pen, in order to obtain the women's votes she needed, removed any reference to abortion from her presidential programme for 2017, while saying that she would ensure that the hindering of abortions would no longer be an offence if she became president!

### **Beyond our frontiers, we see that mobilization for abortion rights also remains a necessity. What perspectives?**

In 2014, there was a serious threat to abortion rights in Spain, with a response initially in the country then throughout Europe. In Paris, there were 30,000 demonstrators on February 1, 2014. Recently, there were mobilisations in Poland, where the government wants to tighten an already very restrictive law. There are countries like Ireland or Malta where abortion remains illegal, and many countries where there are all types of threats linked to austerity, as in France. Abortion is a subject for national legislations, and doesn't come under the remit of the European Union. It's a question which isn't dealt with in the charter of fundamental rights.

From these demonstrations of support an appeal has emerged, an international petition, with mobilisations across

Europe around September 28. In particular, there will be a big demonstration in Brussels on September 28, an international day of struggle for abortion, with delegations from all over Europe. Beyond this, the question of perspectives, notably for 2018, the year of the European elections, remains posed.

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# Abortion - Women Decide!

This campaign, launched by the World March of Women, the Family Planning and the CADAC in France on the basis of an Appeal has been supported by feminist and human rights groups, trade unions and political organisations notably in France but in many other European countries. The multi-lingual site is here: [Abortion - Women Decide!](#) with the appeal in several languages as well as other campaign material.

The petition is on [Change.org](#).

PS:

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[1] While presenting the law to the National Assembly Simone Veil was the object of many personal attacks and heckling. These included references to unborn foetuses and gas ovens, in the full knowledge that Veil was herself an Auschwitz survivor who had lost all her close family there.