

Ontario Coalition for Abortion Clinics, Box 935, Station Q, Toronto M4T2P1
Telephone (416) 961-1507

Why should trade-unions support the legalization
of medically insured free-standing abortion clinics*?

Sisters and brothers,

The Ontario Coalition for Abortion Clinics (OCAC) believes that the right of women to control our own bodies is a basic human right. To freely decide to have children or not to have children, and when to have them is a decision all women should be able to make. But this is not the case, the decision to have an abortion is out of a woman's hands.

The access to legal abortion is limited and restricted by the Criminal Code. Accordingly, abortions can only be performed in accredited or approved hospitals. These hospitals must have a minimum of four doctors, three of whom must be willing to be members of the Therapeutic Abortion Committee, plus one willing and able to perform the procedure. No hospital is required to set up a Therapeutic Abortion Committee (TAC).

Worsening Situation

In Ontario less than 20% of the hospitals perform abortions, and those who do, have to respect strict quotas. Hospitals performing abortions are concentrated in big centres. Women from remote communities seeking an abortion have a long way to travel before applying for the procedure. If a woman's application is rejected by the TAC, she cannot appeal the decision. Postponing the decision brings the pregnancy to a later term, and makes the procedure more difficult and with a greater risk of complications. Only gynecologists perform abortions and most of them have opted out of OHIP, and charge on the average \$300 for the procedure, payable in cash before the abortion. Women are reimbursed only \$105 from OHIP.

The situation in Ontario is steadily worsening. When abortions aren't readily available, middle-class women can do elsewhere, either to Quebec or the U.S. But working class women, poor women, and economically dependent women, like teenagers, cannot afford the cost, perpetuating a situation in which the law is applied differently to rich and poor.

Since all women bear the responsibility for child-bearing and child raising, we should all have the right to determine if or when to have children. Abortion is illegal in Canada, it is still a crime under the Criminal Code, except under limited circumstances, and this does not answer women's needs. That is why we need abortion clinics that have been proven safer and less costly to make the procedure more readily accessible to all women. That is why we need to wage a struggle to legalize free-standing clinics providing medically insured abortions.

*A free-standing clinic is a clinic outside of a hospital where abortions are performed on an outpatient basis in an environment where women are treated with care and dignity.

We Need Your Support

There are many reasons why we are appealing for the support of the trade union movement. Abortion must be fully and rightly seen in the context of women's struggle for equality and independence. The right to control reproduction is fundamental to the liberation of women, and should be one of our most basic rights. It is linked with the struggle for "equal pay for work of equal value", the struggle for free and universal daycare, for maternity leave, and for an end to sexual harrasment, and many other struggles, all of which are waged to better our conditions of life, and to allow us to control our own bodies.

In Quebec free-standing abortion clinics are funded by the government despite the federal law. They exist because of broad public support for the right to choose. The CSN, Confederation of National Trade Unions, has played an instrumental role of support, providing clinics with office space when they were fighting the state. Standing in support of the women's movement, the labour movement in Quebec has also helped in developing information and education on freedom of choice. It has built strong links with women's movement, and we can do the same here.

Who Opposes Freedom of Choice?

As the Canadian Labour Congress resolution points out, highly organized and well financ_d organizations fight to further limit the access to abortion. They are the right wing Campaign Life, Coalition for Life, Renaissance International, Positive Parents, the National Citizens Coalition... They blame unions for economic problems, lesbians, gays and feminists for social problems, and immigrants for unemployment. They argue against the right to strike, and for the use of scabs. They support nuclear build up and promote racism. They argue that abortion is murder, and that it should be banned, they oppose certain forms of birth control and sex education in the schools.

Recently in the U.S. a survey of voting patterns shows consistently that those voting against abortion rights also generally voted against poverty relief, food programs and other welfare measures to help children, the elderly and other disadvantaged people

We don't accept that a minority political or religious code should be imposed on the majority of people. The state does not have the right to interfere with a woman's decision in this matter.

The Need for Unity Between the Women's and Trade Union Movements

The struggle for medically insured abortion clinics has followed a long and hard fought path. In 1977 and 1978 proposals for the establishment of clinics were submitted to the Ontario Ministry of Health. Both were rejected for invalid reasons. Because the state

has been deaf to our demands, we decided that the time has come to organize strong and militant action.

In this period of economic crisis when all sectors are under attack unity is the only way we can respond. The trade union movement has taken the offensive and is fighting wage controls and concessions, we must all support this. In the same sense, when women's rights are so heavily under attack all groups should join together and fight back with unity. There lies our strength. Over the past few years the trade union movement has joined with other groups in coalitions such as in the daycare struggle. The unions should continue to play this role involving themselves in issues not directly linked to the workplace. Women have defined the struggle for free standing, medically insured abortion clinics as a central issue, and it is crucial that the trade union movement help to oppose and defeat the restrictions that the state wants to impose on us. We are all fighting for a better life.

Abortion is a vital issue for the women's movement. And if we as trade unionists truly believe in the policies and directives we have adopted in the area of social justice and women's rights, we must stand up in this vital struggle that can not be lost if women are ever to achieve equality and independence.

How Can You Help ?

Your local can help a great deal on this issue. The most important thing to do would be to raise the question in your local. Education is a key element to bring about changes, and education of the local's members can take place in a local meeting.

If you are a woman in a predominantly male local, get together first with other women in the local and discuss the question collectively before bringing it to the meeting. If you are a man and hesitant to bring the issue forward, take this letter and information to the local's women's caucus or to the women's issues committee.

Your local can help in any or all of the following ways:

- pass the model resolution
- send in the enclosed endorsement of OCAC
- send a donation to OCAC, helping to build the pro-choice campaign
- if you are in the Toronto area, send a representative from your local to our bi-weekly meetings
- circulate the petition to your members and friends
- duplicate the letters to McMurtry and Grossman, or write your own send a copy to your MPP, get as many people as possible to sign it and mail them in
- sell the pro-choice button.

Thank you for your support.