**Roe V. Wade V. UK?**

Dear member,

In June the US Supreme Court overturned Roe v Wade. This has left millions of women in the US without the means to access safe, legal abortion. In some states abortion is now banned, even in the case of rape.

Unison has already put out two strong articles on the topic nationally, both of which are worth a read:

<https://www.unison.org.uk/news/article/2022/07/unison-backs-abortion-rights-and-decriminalisation/>

<https://www.unison.org.uk/news/2022/06/abortion-is-a-trade-union-issue/>

Today I am writing to you to show you why this international issue isn’t necessarily confined to the US and why it is relevant to all of us.

**How did this happen?**

The constitutional law and legal battles are complicated. The short summary is that the historic case of Roe V. Wade meant that the Federal Government controlled the law on abortion, since this was overturned by the Supreme Court in June, abortion laws are now decided by individual states. 13 states already had ‘trigger laws’ which would enact immediately to heavily restrict or outright ban abortion, with a significant number of others currently writing anti-abortion laws.

**What does this mean and how does it impact those women?**

In states with bans, women must now travel hundreds of miles to other states to gain access to abortions. This is a class issue, as poorer working-class women are less likely to be able to afford to travel so far or even take the time off work, unlike the well-off. These bans will leave large numbers of the poorest women left to bear the physical and emotional trauma of carrying an unwanted or risky pregnancy to term. Regardless of personal opinions and legality, people will always seek access to abortion, so criminalising abortion leads to people using unsafe and non-medically supervised methods. There is also a huge impact to society when people aren’t ready, mentally, financially or socially to support children, are forced to carry a pregnancy to term. In fact, during the US debate, 154 economists presented evidence to the supreme court that legal access

to abortions is essential to women’s participation in society and is correlated to women achieving higher levels of education, professional careers and reduces child poverty overall. Removing access to abortion not only increases the burden on the individual, but society as whole.

This choice of whether to have an abortion is clearly a difficult and personal one for a pregnant person to make. The issue is that these are the personal views of a few powerful people which are being enforced upon the rest of the working class – the Supreme Court is unelected and multiple national polls in the US show this decision to be vastly unpopular with the majority. They argue that the Supreme Court is increasing democracy by sending the decision back to elected state governors, but when only 9 of the 50 US state governors are female and gerrymandering is rife within the US, are women’s views and rights really being represented?

**How does this relate to Britain?**

At first it may seem like our countries are very different, but when you consider the circumstances that led to the abortion bans, there are clear parallels and forces who would work to steal away women’s rights.

Currently, abortion is not legal under The 1861 Offences Against the Person Act – a Victorian law passed 67 years before women won the right to vote. It is only permitted under The Abortion Act 1967 within specific criteria after approval by two registered medical practitioners. Typically, it is liberal interpretation of clause *1(1)(a), where continuation of the pregnancy would result in physical or mental health injury to the pregnant woman or existing children, up to 24 weeks of pregnancy.* Around 98% of terminations in the UK use this clause due to its vague nature, but there is concern that future governments could redefine what exactly constitutes physical or mental injury, leading to a higher threshold for abortion.

In Northern Ireland, their abortion laws were only changed in 2018, allowing similar reproductive freedoms to the rest of the UK. Even so, the DUP are still blocking efforts to access abortions and there are currently still no facilities for surgical abortions in NI, forcing many to fly to England to regain control of their own bodies and lives – 161 women had to make that journey last year. The DUP is the same party that the Tories gave £1 billion in 2017 to buy their votes in a ‘confidence and supply’ agreement. Last month, 61 Conservative MPs voted against extending abortion rights in NI and 190 abstained, both examples of how they value holding onto power over women’s rights.

Here in Great Britain, it is these same people on the right-wing, steering the country away from women’s reproductive rights and further towards patriarchy. It’s notable that in parliament only one quarter of Tory MPs are women, whereas it is around half in Labour. Though it isn’t just men such

as Jacob Rees-Mogg who are trying to control women’s bodies, the Culture Secretary Nadine Dorries and (ironically) the Women’s Health Minister Maria Caulfield have both campaigned to reduce the upper time limit on abortions. Worryingly, Dorries previously claimed that 90% of Conservative backbenchers supported reducing access to abortion.

**US pressure groups in the UK**

Jacob Rees-Mogg has gone on record saying he doesn’t believe abortion should be allowed even in cases of rape or incest and, along with a dozen or so other Tory MPs, is a patron of Right to Life, an anti-abortion pressure group. Many anti-abortion groups in the UK are funded through the US and have links to right-wing Christian organisations, for instance Tory MP Fiona Bruce has been paid for speeches by ADF International, which is the European wing of Alliance Defending Freedom – an American anti-abortion, anti-LGBT pressure group. Another UK group, the SPUC, which lobbies against abortion and gay marriage, managed to get listed on the NHS directory services, offering ‘abortion counselling services’, before being found out and taken down. This group has also been found to have secretive US donors and recently brought legal challenges to try and block abortion in Northern Ireland.

Some of these think-tanks and pressure groups are less overt. The Heritage Foundation is a huge US radical right-wing pressure group, which had many staff installed in Donald Trump’s white house. It lobbies governments with the dog-whistle of ‘traditional conservative values’ such as climate change denial, (whilst being funded by oil firm ExxonMobil), opposing gay marriage and celebrated the repeal of Roe V. Wade. This foundation has links to many Conservative MPs and party members including Liz Truss, Sajid Javid, Dr Liam Fox, Daniel Hannan, and Owen Paterson. The Heritage Foundation even has a ‘Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom’, an odious example of our ‘special relationship’ with the US. According to YouGov polls, around 85% of the British public agree with free access to abortion, but these well-funded US pressure groups hope to subvert democracy by lobbying our policymakers directly.

The UK government recently released a multinational statement affirming women’s rights internationally, which was originally co-signed by 22 countries. After the conference, the government caused controversy by removing references to women’s ‘sexual and reproductive health and rights’ and ‘bodily autonomy’, classing them as a ‘minor’ change. 14 countries pulled out of the statement after this change, the only new country to sign-up since the change is Malta, where abortion is banned even in cases of incest and rape. A clear example of our government compromising on women’s rights to court the favour of other countries. The special envoy at this

conference? Fiona Bruce, who is notably also co-chair of the all-party parliamentary ‘pro-life’ group of MPs.

**Recent incidents on the ground**

These organisations spend an incredible amount of money ensuring US culture will drift over here, but it isn’t simply harmless rhetoric. Some abortion clinics have needed ‘buffer zones’ to keep

back anti-abortion protestors who intimidate their patients, to which there are anti-choice organisations campaigning against these buffer zones under the guise of free speech. People undergoing some of the most difficult and traumatic experiences of their lives are being shamed and harassed by these protestors.

Recently, a woman in the UK was arrested after suffering a stillbirth whilst still in hospital. This was under suspicion that she had an abortion after the 24 week cut-off point. She was held in police custody for 36 hours then released without charge. She now has PTSD - all because of the criminalisation of abortion in UK law. How is this an acceptable way for our state to treat a human being?

**Our view**

Unison’s view is that the reversal of Roe V. Wade is a step backwards in women’s reproductive rights, which is part of an internationally organised broader effort by the authoritarian right-wing to attack human rights. Bodily autonomy is a fundamental human right and abortion access leads to greater gender equality. The right to have a safe abortion, in private and with dignity, should not depend on where you happen to live. Unison supports decriminalisation of abortion in the UK and recognises it as a healthcare issue first and foremost.

**What can we do?**

Access to abortion is a global and local working-class issue that we must defend as it affects us all, regardless of our sex or gender. This is a battle to be fought, not only in the courts, but also the polling booth and the crew room, lest the UK suffer a similar fate to the US.

Just by taking the time to read this article and staying informed, you are taking a positive step. We urge you to pay attention to the national debate on reproductive rights as well as women’s rights in general. Vote for politicians who advocate for protection of reproductive rights. Research your MPs voting record and write to them, calling for decriminalisation of abortion. Be wary of the dog-whistle language such as ‘traditional family values’ that opponents use to argue against bodily autonomy. Be an ally and challenge regressive views on women’s rights where you hear them.

Note –This article often refers to the rights of pregnant women, this is because most pregnant people affected by inequalities in society are women. However, I’d like to highlight that not all

pregnant people are women, for instance people who are non-binary or trans men. Unison wishes to support and empower people of all genders and identities. We are all workers together.

In Solidarity,

Dan Cooper