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# Abortion Rights

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## 1 Abortion – a trade union issue

- 1.1 Access to free, safe, legal abortion is crucial to women's economic, educational and social advancement. Barriers to reproductive rights are barriers to full social, economic, political and workplace equality. The trade union movement has a proud history of advancing women's rights and defending reproductive choice whenever it has come under attack.

## 2 What the law says

- 2.1 The current law on abortion is based on:
- Abortion Act (1967)
  - Section 37 of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act (1990)
- 2.2 Abortion is allowed up to 24 weeks on condition that continuing with the pregnancy involves a greater risk to:
- the physical or mental health of the woman, or
  - the physical or mental health of the woman's existing children than having a termination.
- 2.3 When establishing the level of risk to health, doctors can take into consideration a woman's 'actual or reasonably foreseeable environment', which includes her personal and social situation. Abortion is also allowed if there is a substantial risk that if the child were born it would 'suffer from such physical or mental abnormalities as to be seriously handicapped'.
- 2.4 Abortion is allowed after 24 weeks if there is:
- risk to the life of the woman,
  - evidence of severe foetal abnormality, or
  - risk of grave physical and mental injury to the woman.

2.5 An abortion must be:

- agreed by two doctors (one in an emergency) and
- carried out by a doctor, and
- carried out in a government-approved hospital or clinic.

2.6 The 1967 Abortion Act only applies to England, Scotland and Wales. In recent years Guernsey, Jersey and the Isle of Man have all introduced their own legislation; some of this is more liberal than that on the mainland. However, in Northern Ireland abortion can only be obtained if the woman's life is at risk and in some cases of foetal abnormality. Consequently most women from Northern Ireland have to travel to England to obtain a private abortion. Unlike other British women, they are not entitled to an abortion on the NHS.

2.7 In June 2017 the British Government announced that it will fund abortions for women travelling to England from Northern Ireland.

### **3 Women's rights arguments in favour of abortion**

3.1 Here are some of the women's rights arguments in favour of abortion:

- women have a moral right to decide what to do with their bodies
- the right to abortion is vital for **gender equality**
- the right to abortion is vital for individual women to achieve their full potential
- banning abortion puts women at risk by forcing them to use illegal abortionists
- the right to abortion should be part of a portfolio of pregnancy rights that enables women to make a truly free choice whether to end a pregnancy

3.2 We should regard the woman as a person and not just as a container for the foetus. We should therefore give great consideration to her rights and needs as well as those of the unborn.

3.3 Pro-choice women's rights activists do not take a casual or callous attitude to the foetus; the opposite is usually true, and most of them acknowledge that choosing an abortion is usually a case of choosing the least bad of several bad courses of action.

## 4 What is UCU doing

- 4.1 UCU affiliates to Abortion Rights, the national pro-choice campaign.
- 4.2 We are also supporting the *Back Off campaign*, (<https://back-off.org/>) coordinated by BPAS, which aims to change the law to make it possible to establish protest-free zones around abortion clinics. The campaign is necessary due to an intensification of anti-abortion protests around clinics, including activists displaying distressing images, filming people entering and leaving clinics, and physically touching women, as well as shouting abuse. The issue has got so bad that one clinic was forced to close in the summer of 2015 (<https://humanism.org.uk/2015/07/21/anti-choice-campaigners-force-closure-of-abortion-clinic/>).
- 4.3 We supported an open letter to the Secretary of State for Health on the issue (<https://humanism.org.uk/2015/07/27/public-figures-write-to-jeremy-hunt-to-demand-protection-for-abortion-clinics-under-threat-from-hardline-religious-activists/>).
- 4.4 We supported the **SREnow** campaign to call for comprehensive sex and relationships education in all schools. This legislation was subsequently passed in March 2017.

## 5 How trade union branches and members can get involved

- 5.1 Trade unionists play an important role in taking an active part in the pro-choice movement. Every trade union branch and individual trade unionist can make a difference. Some simple steps that you can take to raise awareness, lobby MPs not to bend to anti-choice pressure, and help build a pro-choice movement capable of defending women's crucial reproductive rights:

- **RAISING AWARENESS – EXPOSING ANTI-CHOICE MYTHS**

- Write an article or letter to circulate to your branch members or for publication in your trade union newsletter or website.
- Organise for a link to be posted on your website to Abortion Rights website and up our key campaigning materials
- Write a letter to your local press
- Organise a branch discussion/event on the issue and invite Abortion Rights to speak

- **LOBBYING**

Trade unionists have an important role to play in influencing their local MP. This can be done in the following ways:

- Contact your MP

- Organise for your branch to distribute postcards/emails to all its members with a briefing to explain the issues.
- MPs are disproportionately influenced by face-to-face meetings. You could make a real difference by arranging delegations to meet with MPs.

- **BUILDING SUPPORT**

You can help by:

- Joining Abortion Rights yourself and encouraging other trade union colleagues to join.

- **SUPPORT FOR MEMBERS**

- Working to pass pro-choice policy in your trade union branch and affiliate your branch to Abortion Rights.
- Negotiate local policy to support women members who have had or are planning to have an abortion (this could include paid time off to attend appointments related to pregnancy-decision counselling and abortion procedures).

## **Further information and support**

*Abortion Rights*

<http://www.abortionrights.org.uk/>

*Abortion Support Network*

Abortion Support Network provides financial assistance and accommodation to women travelling from the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland and the Isle of Man

<https://www.asn.org.uk/>

*BPAS – British Pregnancy Advisory Service*

<https://www.bpas.org/>

*Marie Stopes UK*

<https://www.mariestopes.org.uk/>