

# Stand Up for Abortion Rights!

**O**n April 16, 2009, a 19-year-old Cairns woman was charged under Queensland's Criminal Code for procuring her own abortion. Her 21-year-old partner was charged with importing Mifipristone (RU486), a drug widely used in 35 countries to induce a miscarriage. Their committal hearing is set for September 3. If convicted they face imprisonment of up to seven years for the woman and 14 years for her partner.

## Stuck in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

Queensland's Criminal Code dates from 1899 – 110 years. The sections relating to abortion come straight from English law, going back to 1861. This is the first time in at least 50 years that a woman has been charged in Australia for having an abortion. In Queensland, this is the first abortion-related prosecution since two doctors were tried in 1986.

As in other states, abortion in Queensland is available under restrictive guidelines. The 1986 ruling in the two doctors' trial has allowed a termination if a pregnancy endangers a woman's physical or mental health. The Australian Capital Territory and Victoria are the only places in the country where abortion has been decriminalised (in 2002 and 2008 respectively).

Queensland's Premier Anna Bligh stands by the prosecutions – defying her own party, the Australian Labor Party, which reaffirmed at its state conference in June that the archaic laws must be repealed. Twisting logic beyond recognition, Bligh argues that the issue is the illegal importation of a drug. If that's so, why are the couple being prosecuted under the anti-abortion laws?

Queensland's antiquated laws do not cover “medical” (as oppose to the traditional surgical)

abortion. Bligh is bowing to a tiny, but well-financed and powerful, anti-choice minority that wants women's access to abortion *eliminated*, not extended by this increasingly popular method. The case against the couple prompted two Cairns doctors — the first to be authorised to use RU486 — to stop prescribing the drug, fearing the risk of prosecution both of themselves and their patients. This could also mean that practitioners in other states, where laws haven't yet been brought into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, face a similar threat.



**The People vs Premier Bligh, Brisbane Qld, May 2009.**

Photo by Owain Jones. [feminismandsocialism.blogspot.com](http://feminismandsocialism.blogspot.com)

The solution is simple. Queensland's legislators only have to bring the state's abortion laws into line with what most of the population thinks: that abortion should be available for every woman who chooses this option. All the ALP has to do is direct its

parliamentary members to vote according to party policy, as it does on all other issues – no “conscience vote.”

**Queensland is not unique.** Until November 2008, Victoria's abortion laws were just as backward. After 50 years of dogged campaigning — principally by grassroots activists and, to some extent, by pro-choicers within parliament — a resistant ALP government finally initiated a bill to decriminalise abortion. In defiance of strong popular support for abortion on demand at all stages of pregnancy, the Brumby government opted for a 24-week limit. Even then, parliamentarians were allowed to vote according to their personal beliefs, not their constituents' will. Through this undemocratic “conscience vote,” the legislation passed *narrowly*, despite more than 80% of Victorians supporting the woman's right to decide.

**Victoria's law under fire.** Laws are as enduring as the fight to keep them. For Victoria's *Abortion Law Reform Act*, the ink hadn't dried before the Catholic Church announced a legal challenge, claiming that the law breaches the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which enshrines the freedom of conscience. The legislation requires anti-choice doctors to refer any woman seeking an abortion to another health provider. The Church has blitzed parishes, schools and libraries with a glossy publication expounding its pro-family, anti-abortion dogma.

In the United States, religious healthcare providers have used the same "conscientious objection" argument to find a legal way to refuse requests for abortions, reproductive technology and birth control. Several states have enacted a "conscience clause," allowing pharmacists to refuse to fill prescriptions for the emergency contraception because of "moral objections." Before leaving the White House, George W Bush extended the clause to cover health professionals who don't want to perform abortions.

Meanwhile, Melbourne's two main abortion providers are hounded relentlessly by religious fanatics. This past March, Youth 4 Life conducted a 10-day "revelation tour," harassing clinics from Sydney to Melbourne.

**Anti-choice onslaught is global.** In 2001, a fanatic strapped with explosives threatened Melbourne's Fertility Control Clinic and murdered the security guard. The 2009 assassination of Dr George Tiller, Wichita Kansas abortion rights champion, was an outrageous reminder of the lengths to which the religious and far right will go to drag women back into "their place." These forces are emboldened by a

crashing economy that hits workers hard, especially single mothers, independent women, queers, immigrants, people of colour, young people and the unemployed. At the front of this line of scapegoats are women. Women independently deciding the direction of their own lives is an abomination to the fanatics. More important, it would sound the death-knell for the profit system, which could not survive without women's free service in the home, underpaid labour in the workplace and reliable breeding of the future generations of workers. This is why politicians, including Bligh and Brumby, answer to the anti-choice minority.

**Defenders of East Melbourne's Fertility Control Clinic keep harassers (Left) well away.** Photo by Noel Hannibal.

**(Below) CWRR campaigned for abortion decriminalisation in Victoria.** Photo by Michelle Reeves.

**For women's freedom to choose, everywhere!** Over the past five years, Campaign for Women's Reproductive Rights (CWRR) has organised the monthly defence of the Fertility Control Clinic in East Melbourne to stop harassment by religious zealots. This clinic

has been targeted by anti-abortionists since its establishment in 1973. Defence of the clinic shows that anti-abortionists can be stopped wherever they show. The pro-choice majority must prevent the small anti-choice movement from becoming as strong as it is in the United States.



CWRR also fought for abortion decriminalisation in Victoria. We stand with the pro-choice campaigners in Queensland who are fighting to drop the charges against the Cairns couple and decriminalise abortion in that state.

CWRR believes that full reproductive rights, affordable housing, free childcare, education and healthcare, decent jobs and expanded social services are inseparable and cannot be won on their own.

**If you agree and want to get involved, join the monthly clinic defence every fourth Saturday. For details, contact CWRR on (03) 9388 0062 or [cwrr.solidarity@hotmail.com](mailto:cwrr.solidarity@hotmail.com).**