Reproductive Rights Under Attack

A Perspective from San Diego

In the midst of the rise in violence against abortion clinics nationally, this article discusses who in San Diego is attacking the reproductive rights movement, and focuses on the organizing efforts of a local women's health care clinic, Womancare, to meet the challenge of right wing violence —

by Galen Ellis

1984 was year of opportunities as well as set-backs for the nation's reproductive rights movement. In this election year, American society became markedly polarized. The Jesse Jackson campaign brought progressive demands into mainstream political dialogue. Recognizing the growing significance of the "gender gap," politicians of both major parties courted the woman's vote as never before; and for the first time, a woman was nominated for Vice President. At the same time, however, right wing harassment and violence against womens' health care providers escalated. In the past two years there have been 35 clinic bombings, 23 of which occurred in 1984, in addition to hundreds of incidents of harassment, intimidation, and vandalism suffered by clinics, clinic staff, and clients.

Right Home in San Diego

In San Diego, the Right has a history of participation in local politics, as well as in vigilante organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan and the American Nazi Party. In 1980, Tom Metzger, a grand dragon (state leader) of the KKK won the democratic primary and ran for Congress in the 43rd Congressional District, which covers Rivers, Imperial and north San Diego counties. He lost the race, but his win in the primary alone would have allowed him to appoint six people to the Democratic State Central Committee had he not been formally expelled from the Democratic Party. He was ousted from the local governing panel because of his demonstrated racism as a leader of the Klan.

San Diego county is also home of the LaHaye family. Rev. Time LaHaye, president of Christian Heritage College in El Cajon, is also the state chairman of the Moral Majority. His wife, Beverly, is national president of Concerned Women of America, and foe of the ERA, lesbian/gay rights, and abortion. In January of 1981, she was appointed to the county's Commission on the Status of Women by Supervisor Paul Fordem. Richard LaHaye, offspring of Rev. and Mrs. LaHaye, ran in the Republican primary for Congress in San Diego's 44th Congressional District in the 1984 elections.

While the Right in San Diego has vied for local power in recent years, grassroots anti-abortionists have focused on legislative activities. They have built their movement by education, massive letter-writing campaigns and lobbying. Their efforts have been supported by national organizations such as the Moral Majority, the Religious Roundtable, Chrisian Voice, the Library Court, the National Conservative Political Action Committee, the Committee for the Survival of a Free Congress, the Heritage Foundation, and others. In both of his campaigns, President Reagan was the candidate of the New Right, and benefited by the endorsement of these groups.

Until 1984, the religious right in San Diego picketed women's health care centers no more than two or three times a year. University Hospital and Family Planning Associates, two local abortion providers, were picketed more often than Womancare, a small clinic with strong ties to the community. Perhaps these large institutions were perceived as being a more visible threat. The San Diego Pro-Life League and the San Diego Medical Pro-Life Council organized yearly rallies on the anniversary of the *Roe vs. Wade* Supreme Court decision which made abortion legal. These demonstrations often attracted more people than the pro-choice forces could muster in this period. The Birth Control Institute (BCI) also suffered several vandalism attacks when locks were glued shut and a hose was put through a window and left on over a weekend.

1984 Brought Increased Violence

In 1984, anti-abortion activity in San Diego and across the country rose dramatically. Beginning in the last week of March, Womancare was besieged by loud, aggressive, and intimidating picketers from the Bible Missionary Fellowship (BMF) of Santee in east San Diego county. They regularly encircled clients who were entering the clinic, attempting to prevent women from having abortions. From the end of June through early October, the clinic was picketed regularly each Saturday morning and Wednesday evening. In early April, BCI was harassed by the same picketers who returned each weekend throughout the summer. On May 26, both clinics were invaded. Anti-abortionists tried to dissuade clients from having abortions and they slipped their literature into waiting-room magazines. They also wrote letters to the clinics' doctors asking them to "stop killing babies," warning, "We will do everything we can to stop you."

Womancare Takes Action

Womancare has had widespread community support since the right-wing fundamentalist attacks began. Members of NOW were the first to call for volunteers to provide escort services for clients. Soon afterward, men and women from the neighborhood as well as members of women's, lesbian and gay, and civil libertarian organizations came "on call" every Saturday morning and Wednesday evening throughout the summer and early fall to provide escort services and to surround the building to prevent entry by the anti-abortionists. A phone network was organized by Womancare supporters for an "action alert" to maintain the consistent community response to the attacks and the clinic trained volunteers to act as buffers against the hostile picketers.

Local businesspeople supported the clinic by offering services, money, and physical presence. Many of them resented the anti-abortionists' intrusion and wished "they'd all just go back to Santee and stop harassing our community."

In early August, Womancare filed a civil suit against members of the Bible Missionary Fellowship, headed by Rev. Dorman Owens. The first step was to apply for a temporary restraining order which was granted on September 10, legally preventing picketers from "yelling, screaminig, touching, pushing, obstructing passageways, obscenities (sic), and from taking photographs of the staff and clients of Womancare from a distance of less than 50 feet." Two weeks later, Woman was granted a preliminary injunction, upholding the temporary restraining order and extending the restrictions, prohibiting "picketing and/or preaching any closer than across the street from the plaintiff's property" and "tresspassing upon the property of Womancare."

Early in the morning of September 13, BCI was firebombed and the clinic wing of the building was destroyed by smoke and water damage. For BCI, the cost was $80,000. For Womancare and other abortion providers in San Diego, the cost was augmented security in response to "you're next" and death threats from anti-abortionists. Immediately, Womancare supporters organized an all-day vigil at the clinic. By October 14, Womancare organized a successful benefit which raised $1000 for a Clinic Defense Fund. Many supporters were eager to help with logistical functions such as security and ticket sales. The Fund, initiated by the Council for Reproductive Choice, which includes Womancare, BCI, Planned Parenthood, and NOW were then able to subsidize the lighting, alarm systems, security guards, and legal expenses for the clinic under attack. The Fund also received an additional $3000 in donations from individual supporters and organizations. The benefit program appealed to a broad spectrum of people and had active support from local Democratic Party regulars, with endorsements for the Fund coming in from Congressman Jim Bates and Supervisor Leon Williams. Republican Mayor Roger Hedgecock was a keynote speaker and most presentations linked the issue of reproductive rights with the women's and children's health, lesbian/gay rights, civil liberties and basic freedom.

SDPD "Crossing the Picket Line?"

During the crisis, Womancare established good relations with the San Diego Police Department. However, the initial response from officers present at the pickets was negative toward the pro-choice supporters. For example, a woman had asked for a police escort and the officer refused because he felt that he would have to give equal time to the picketers by walking in their picket with them. Lt. David Spisak, the Public Relations officer, explained that this situation was just like a labor dispute: "We can't escort scabs across the picket line." Cindy Pearson, executive director of Womancare, preferred to put pressure on neighborhood police officers, rather than work directly with Lt. Spisak, who had already shown insensitivity to the gay and lesbian community's effort to counter right-wing attacks and police harassment. Pearson also mobilized community supporters to put pressure on the Mayor's office and Councilperson Uvaldo Martinez. When these officials expressed concern to the SDPD, police relations with Womancare improved. First, the police began to enforce an existing ordinance that prohibits shouting "with

the intent to intimidate." Once the temporary restraining order and the injunction were obtained, the police enforced them.

After the BCI fire, with public opinion against the picketers, the SDPD cooperated with Womancare in their struggle to enact a city ordinance that would cover all the provisions that were obtained in their injunction, and apply to any abortion provider, birth control and family planning service and other medical services protected by the Right to Privacy Act. The SDPD took the lead in working with the City Council to get it passed. The proposal was stalled, however, by the City Manager who would not approve it. Womancare attributed this to insufficient lobbying, and the general atmosphere of uncertainty in the Mayor's office surrounding his trial.

Army of God Above Investigation

At the end of November, someone identified as a member of the Army of God, called into a Cleveland radio show and targeted 25 locations where abortion facilities would be bombed before the end of the year. San Diego was one of them. Only days later, FBI director William Webster stated that clinic bombings did not fit the FBI's definition of terrorism. Therefore, the FBI would not give priority to investigating the bombings. The agency's definition of terrorism is "the unlawful use of force or violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population or any segment thereof in furtherance of political or social objectives." Webster insisted that in order for the FBI to accept clinic violence as terrorism, it must be carried out by a group or an organization. Womancare strongly condemned Webster's statement and Pearson pointed out the contradictions in it. "Not only has a group identifying themselves as the Army of God taken credit for many of these attacks, but we also see a clear pattern in the bombings. Many clinics that have been bombed have had organized groups picketing them for a period of time beforehand. There is a grouwing threat to women's rights and everyone's civil liberties happening here. There danger of right wing terrorist attacks threaten the basic rights, property, and freedom of Americans. We demand immediate action from *all* levels against this clear threat."

In the face of the Reagan administration's tacit approval of anti-abortion terrorism, Womancare recognizes the importance of actively supporting any legislative effort to support the right to abortion. January 22 of this year marked the 12th anniversary of the *Roe vs. Wade* decision in which the U.S. Supreme Court held that a woman's choice of whether or not to terminate a pregnancy is protected by the constitutional "right to privacy." The Council for Reproductive Choice commemorated this landmark case by focusing on the passage of the Reproductive Health Equity Act (RHEA), introduced last session in Congress by Rep. Bill Green (R-N.Y.) and Rep. Vic Fazio (D-CA). This Act would refund five categories of federally funded health programs which have had restrictions placed on abortion. The local campaign has consisted of a petition drive and a reception for Rep. Green to raise money for a reproductive rights Political Action Committee (PAC). Womancare recognizes two approaches to gain support for this campaign. The first is to emphasizer the discrimination against 43,000,000 Americans who do not have access to abortion. The second is to highlight the question of severe budget cuts to basic human service programs. This links the abortion issue to the broader issue of funding human needs.

While the picketing at Womancare has abated, anti-abortionist violence and right-wing activity continue to increase. The strategy of Womancare and supporter of a woman's right to choose has been and will be to take this issue into local politics. In Washington, D.C., Mayor Marion Barry publicly condemned the violence, stating that an attack on one group's civil rights is an attack on all. "We must insure that our government upholds the law and the Constitution," states Pearson of Womancare. "Those that don't should

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