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# Britain: The struggle for reproductive justice - Confronting the highly organised anti-choice lobby

Monday 25 April 2016, by [Feminist Fightback \(Britain\)](#) (Date first published: 23 April 2016).

**On 16 April the Feminist Fightback collective [1] led an action which prevented an anti-choice procession from reaching a local abortion clinic. Here the collective reports on the background to the action, tactics and the wider struggle.**

Now is a critical time in the struggle for reproductive justice. The movement to extend the abortion law that applies in Scotland, Wales and England to Northern Ireland [2] - where abortion is governed by legislation dating from 1861 - is gathering pace, bolstered in response to the prosecutions of Northern Irish women that used abortion pills which are available on the NHS elsewhere in the UK. A grassroots pro-choice movement is being built in Poland, which has recently seen attempts to restrict abortion law even further [3]. In England, whilst women have access to abortion, we are seeing attacks from the highly organised anti-choice lobby. Feminist Fightback believe that this activity cannot be left unchallenged and have been organising counter-protests against them.

We first became aware of The Helpers of God's Precious Infants, a religious anti-choice group, around four years ago when we heard that they were maintaining a regular presence outside some abortion clinics in London. We discovered that they were set up by the man who organised the March for Life in the US in 1974, who describes abortion as terrorism [4] and who draws a parallel between aeroplanes flying into the twin towers and the instruments used for abortion entering the womb.

Active in the 1990s as the Pro-Life Action Network (PLAN), they used overtly confrontational approaches, blocking clinic entrances and stopping women going inside. Since then they have re-branded and now use less antagonistic approaches in their mission to stop women accessing abortions. Their 'pavement counsellors' purport to be there for 'guidance', but they thrust graphic photos of late-term fetuses into women's faces and try to convince partners that accompany women to the clinic that what they are doing is wrong. They film women and staff going in and out and call couples 'mummy' and 'daddy'. Initially we tried to have conversations with them to try to tease out some common ground: for example, that money (or rather, lack of it) shouldn't be a reason for women to have an abortion. We put our energies into fighting for a better system in which women could enact real choice; they make women feel guilty for the decisions they feel they have to make. In their worldview women - their lives, their decision-making process, their desires - are totally irrelevant.

We have had a pro-choice presence outside a clinic in Essex for a number of years. We ask women if they want to be escorted to the clinic and try to be a cheery, supportive presence to women to counteract the dour, puritanical methods of the anti-choicers. Every few months the Helpers

organise a bigger march from their church to the abortion clinic, carrying a big statue of the Lady of Guadalupe. Feminist Fightback have tried to stop these bigger marches three times. The first occasion was in Essex where they used their statue as a battering ram against us, causing one of us to get a bloody nose.

In Stratford, East London, on 16 April our strategy was to try and stop them at their church to prevent them from reaching the abortion clinic. If they want to express their opinions about abortion outside an abortion clinic, we decided to bring our pro-choice opinions to their church. There is a campaign for 'buffer zones' outside clinics to prevent anti-choicers from peddling their lies and contempt for women. We think that if we want a 'buffer zone' we can create it ourselves, instead of allowing the state to restrict access to public space. We initiated a call-out to other feminists, and to groups from across the left, asking for their support in blocking the Helpers' access to the clinic. We wanted this broader support because we believe that this isn't just a feminist issue, but part of our ongoing struggle against capitalism, austerity and attempts by the state and the religious right to restrict our reproductive freedoms. We cannot talk about reproductive justice without also talking about the context in which women's choices are being made - these contexts are clearly different for richer women, who can often access abortion even in countries where it is illegal (e.g. by travelling to another country or having connections to, and the money for, private doctors) and working class women, who are facing further impoverishment through cuts to benefits and public services in the aftermath of the global financial crisis in 2008. Women's capacity to have children and bring them up is greatly affected by their class position, which depends on what is happening in the wider social, economic and political spheres. Feminist Fightback tries to connect these dots, which is why we use the term 'reproductive justice' rather than just 'abortion rights'.

We tried this tactic for the first time last year. We had a two hour stand-off with them, with minimal police intervention. We blocked the road so that they couldn't get past us until eventually the police escorted them to the clinic. By the time they arrived they were tired and the police had no incentive to remain, so they stayed for 10 minutes and then left. Not one woman was harassed in those 10 minutes.

We used this tactic again in Stratford, with even more people from across the London left. We shouted pro-choice slogans and banged pots and pans so they knew we were outside. They called the police but the police did not come. Without police protection they did not want to venture out. In the meantime we had some pro-choice karaoke, sang a pro-choice hymn and handed out leaflets, with feminist classics on our sound-system. We left at midday, knowing that was when their planned procession and 'vigil' - had it ever started- would have concluded.

There are harassment laws that cover "any form of persistent conduct which causes another alarm or distress". The anti-choice brigade's actions would definitely fit this definition but, as far as we know, the police have never used these laws against them. So it is down to us to make a stand. Our success last Saturday shows that it is possible to stop them. We just need to be willing to take some direct action, realising our own power and strength in numbers.

## **Feminist Fightback**

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**P.S.**

\* "The struggle for reproductive justice". rs21 on April 23, 2016:

<https://rs21.org.uk/2016/04/23/the-struggle-for-reproductive-justice/>

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## Footnotes

[1] <http://www.feministfightback.org.uk>

[2] <http://www.thejournal.ie/abortion-pill-laws-2698731-Apr2016/>

[3] 37696

[4] <https://www.lifesitenews.com/news/msgr-philip-reillys-vision-of-9-11s-connection-to-abortion>