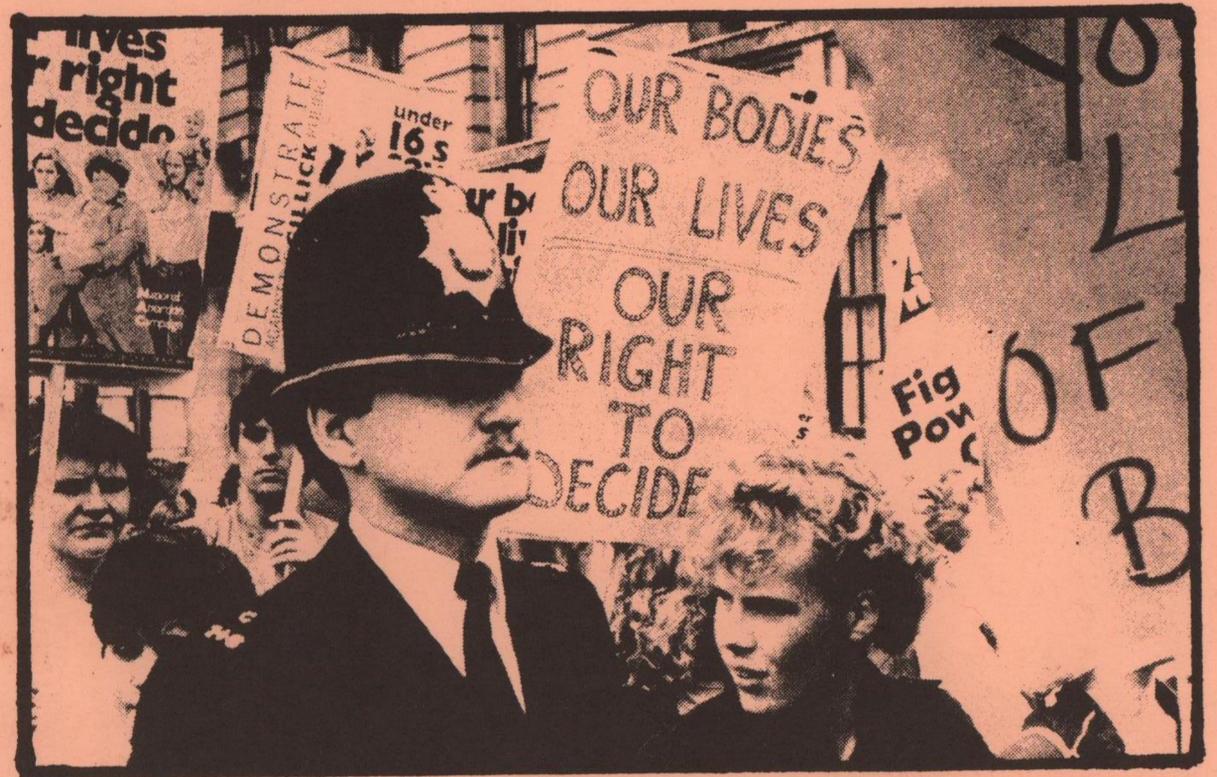


# FIGHT ALTON 30p



## FIGHT FOR ABORTION RIGHTS!

Produced By **SOUTH WEST LONDON  
DIRECT ACTION MOVEMENT.**

## INTRODUCTION

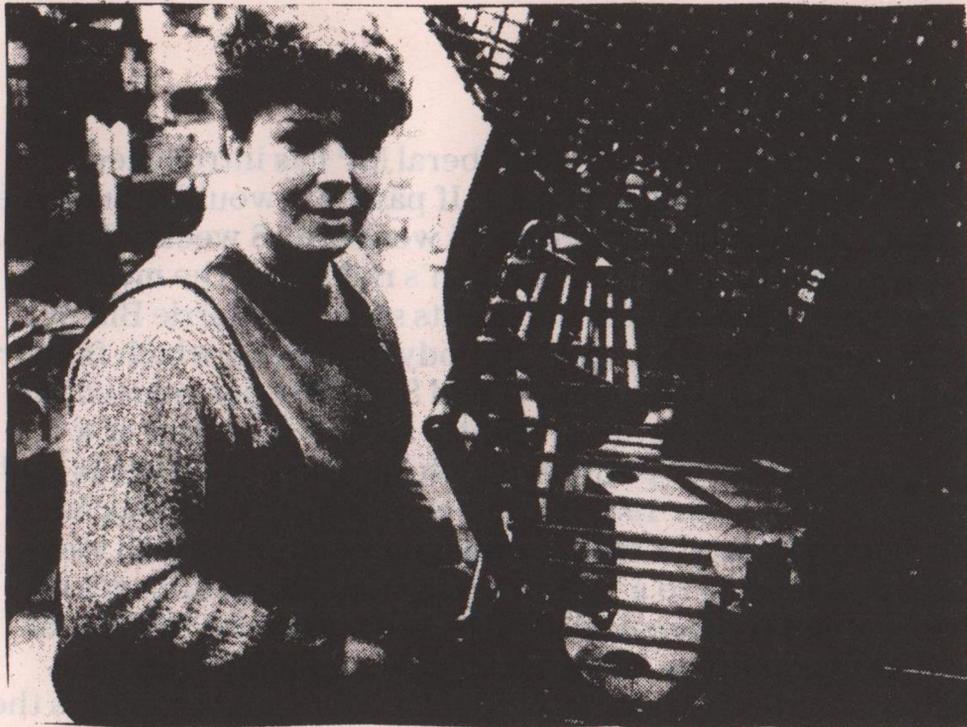
David Alton, Roman Catholic and Liberal MP has introduced a Private Member's Bill to Parliament. If passed it would reduce the upper time limit for abortions from 28 weeks to 18 weeks. This constitutes a massive attack on women's rights and the most serious threat to existing abortion rights since the Corrie Bill in 1979. Alarmingly there is a growing body of opinion which favours some reduction in the time limit. David Steel who introduced the original 1967 Abortion Act has recently spoken in favour of a reduction to 24 weeks, a position which Margaret Thatcher is said to support. In December 1987 a number of influential medical organisations published a report which opposed Alton's 18 week proposal but conceded to a 24 week limit. The Royal Colleges of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, GPs and midwives, the British Medical Association, the British Pediatric Association and the Clinical Genetics Society stated in their report that 24 weeks is the 'boundary below which the baby's lungs are not expected to function.'<sup>1</sup>

What are the implications of any reduction in the time limit? Why are abortion rights under attack now? How do we fight Alton? This pamphlet sets out to answer these questions and explain why revolutionary anarchists are against any restriction on women's access to abortion.

## WHAT WILL ALTON'S BILL MEAN?

In 1986 5,665 women had abortions after 18 weeks. If Alton has his way a similar number of women each year will be forced into continuing unwanted pregnancies or dangerous backstreet abortions. The women most likely to be immediately affected are young women; women from other countries where abortions are difficult to obtain; women going through the menopause, women who have either been misdiagnosed or who have encountered delays due to NHS cuts; and women who have to wait for the results of tests for foetal abnormality.

Although abortions after eighteen weeks only make up 2 to 3% of the total abortions that are performed, the ideological effect of Alton's bill would be very serious indeed. David Alton has admitted that he has set the proposed limit at eighteen weeks not because he thinks this is when abortion becomes murder, but because this is most likely to be passed by parliament; clearly David Alton's intention is to get rid of all abortions. If Alton's bill becomes law, it will make it that much easier for the complete illegalisation of abortion to occur.



## WHY ARE ABORTION RIGHTS SO IMPORTANT?

Under capitalism women play an inferior role in society. Women are not only responsible for child bearing but also for child rearing. Because women have to rear children and because there is no adequate state provision of child care, women have a severely restricted access to the labour market. Women must fit in their work around their child raising duties which means that they are forced into part time work. Sixty percent of women in Britain now work, and they make up 45% of the workforce. Women's labour is essential to capitalism as women are a cheap and flexible workforce. Because of this, any attack on abortion rights is in fact an attack on women's right to work, Cuts in the NHS which push patients back into the community means that women are forced to care for elderly and handicapped patients which were previously the responsibility of state services. Recent closures of nurseries are part of this same attack on a woman's right to work. The intention of these attacks is not to push women back into the home but to restrict women to part time work to correspond with the growth of part time and service sector work which has been occurring in the last few years.

## OTHER ATTACKS ON ABORTION RIGHTS

Although Alton's Bill presents a very important attack on abortion rights, it would be a mistake to see this attack in isolation. Since 1967 when the Abortion Act was passed there have been numerous attempts either to repeal or delay it. Apart from these legal attempts to restrict the 1967 Act, other attacks have taken place which are also very important. Cuts in the NHS and administrative delays means that it is near impossible to get an NHS abortion after 12 weeks. The let-out clause in the 1967 Act means that any gynaecologist or doctor who has a conscientious objection to abortion can refuse to co-operate, unless a woman's life is in danger.<sup>2</sup> Because of this, in some areas, for example in the West Midlands, it is totally impossible to get an NHS abortion.

Today it is almost impossible for women to obtain abortions after 24 weeks. In 1985 the eight nursing homes licensed to do abortions over 20 weeks, voluntarily agreed to stop doing abortions over 24 weeks except if there was risk to a woman's life. In February 1986 the government made such agreements a condition for the licensing of private clinics. The effect of this ruling on abortions over 24 weeks is quite marked. In 1986 only 29 abortions were done over 24 weeks whilst in 1984 there had been 96 such abortions.<sup>3</sup>

## NO RETURN TO BACKSTREET ABORTIONS

Amendments to the 1967 Abortion Act will not stop women having abortions. Instead women will again be forced to seek illegal 'backstreet' abortions. This would undoubtedly affect working class women hardest, as even before 1967 rich women were able to obtain safe abortions in private clinics.

Methods of backstreet abortions were often dangerous and barbaric. Women used a wide range of cheaply available drugs such as quinine tablets which could damage the foetus but also poison the mother. Various vaginal douches including iodine, carbolic soap, vinegar and turpentine were also used, as were sharp instruments inserted into the cervix such as crochet hooks, meat skewers, elm bark, coat hangers and knitting needles.<sup>4</sup> Not surprisingly many women died or were seriously injured by these methods. In the year before the passing of the 1967 Act, 98 women died as a result of backstreet abortions.<sup>6</sup> Even after 1967 illegal abortions continued. Between 1970 and 1972 38 women died, 55% of these followed abortions performed after 12 weeks of pregnancy.<sup>6</sup> Anti-abortionists would undoubtedly gain in confidence should the time limit for abortions be reduced to 24 weeks or 18 weeks. Further attacks on abortion rights are bound to follow and backstreet abortions must necessarily return.

## WHY THE 1967 ABORTION ACT WAS PASSED

In order to understand why abortion rights are currently under attack, it is important to look at why the 1967 Abortion Act was passed in the first place.

During the 1960s there was a boom in the economy, the labour market had expanded and women were needed to fill these new jobs. The so-called

liberal reforms, of which abortion was part, were not passed with any liberal intentions. Their prime purpose was to allow women, and most especially middle class women, a wider access to the labour market. The 1967 Abortion Act, as David Steel has said recently, was never intended to give free abortion on demand. The fact is that most abortions are not done through the NHS but by the private sector for a fee—this excludes abortion for a lot of working class women. Under the 1967 Act, abortion remained illegal except in certain circumstances. Section 1(1) of the 1967 Act stipulates what these circumstances are and includes a loophole through which most women have abortions at present. The doctor must decide whether 'the continuance of the pregnancy would involve risk of injury to the physical or mental health of the pregnant woman greater than if the pregnancy were terminated'. This is the so-called 'social clause' which is clearly open to the interpretation of the GP or gynaecologist. Thus prejudice in the medical profession has always been an obstacle to women obtaining abortions under the 1967 Act. A woman wanting an abortion has to get the written permission of two doctors first. She has to persuade them that she fits into the categories laid down by law: *Women do not have and never have had the right to choose.*

There were other motives behind the passing of the Abortion Act. One of the most important was public concern over back street abortions and the horrific results of these. The state considered that it was preferable to have control over abortions that were happening illegally already. That way, by establishing in law social grounds for it, it could also decide who and who could not have an abortion. In back street abortions the state had no say.

The idea of 'social planning' for incapable or irresponsible parents, became widespread in the sixties. Part of this concern was for women having too many children who would grow up into the same poverty trap. The Abortion Act was part of the state's solution to this.

Any opposition to the Alton Bill must recognise the inadequacy of existing legislation. Instead of defending the very limited abortion rights that exist now, we must demand what is necessary for women—that is *free abortion on demand*. Until abortion is provided free on the NHS, until any woman can get an abortion without her Doctor's permission, as early as is physically possible and as late as is necessary, then women do not have sufficient abortion rights.

## WHY ARE ABORTION RIGHTS UNDER ATTACK?

Since 1967 there have been concerted efforts to try and amend the time limit for abortion, all these have failed. However there are important reasons why Alton's Bill is more likely to become law. A recent Marplan poll in *The Guardian* showed that a majority of women favoured a reduction in the legal time limit.<sup>7</sup> So why is this so?

As capitalism has gone into a state of *economic crisis*, it has used reactionary morality to distract attention from its economic failures, and has used the nuclear family to hold up its *economic* and *political* system. The family has been used as an ideological tool to atomise and isolate working class people; a good example of this is the glorification of scabs, during the 1984/85 miner's strike, who put their individual family interests before those of their workmates and class. The recent AIDS scare, attacks on Gays, the Gillick

ruling to stop contraceptive advice, Enoch Powell's Embryo Research Bill and the general promotion of the Happy British Family are all part of this same ideological offensive.

Fifteen years ago such ideas would not have gained as much ground in the working class, but now, when the working class is on the defensive, when there is a low level of class struggle, people are more likely to be taken in by the ideas that the ruling class is presenting as a solution. When workers are fighting back, when the level of class activity rises, people realise where their interests lie, and they realise the truth behind the state's facile solutions. In 1975 the year after the miners brought down the Heath led Tory Government, 55% thought that abortion should be made legally available for all those who wanted it according to a national opinion poll for the *Daily Mail*.

The present political and economic climate is the perfect breeding ground for ideas like Alton's to get mass support and are therefore more likely to become law.

## HOW DO WE ARGUE AGAINST ALTON?

If we accept that women need abortion rights, that any attack on the existing legislation is an attack on women's rights and that women need *free abortion on demand*, then the only question is how do we counteract Alton's attack.

Perhaps the first thing to establish is how not to conduct a campaign. Much of the argument against Alton has centred on moralistic arguments. However this is the most dangerous ground on which to argue. To individual scientists the question of when life begins might well be fascinating, but to women the only question is between abortion or unwanted pregnancy. Whether or not a foetus can be kept alive on a life support machine at 28 weeks is irrelevant, it is women's rights that are under attack and women's rights that must be defended. Arguing on moral grounds only gives credibility to the bigots who support this Bill. As well as it being easier to give ground using these arguments, supposing it suddenly became viable for a foetus to survive outside of the womb at 18 weeks - would this make abortion rights any less valid?

For anti-abortionists life begins either at conception or at some stage in between conception and birth. The present upper time limit for abortions comes indirectly from the 1929 Infant Life Preservation Act. This Act made it illegal 'wilfully to destroy a child capable of being born alive.' Technically a woman could have an abortion on *medical grounds* at *any* time up to birth if the mother's life is at stake. The Alton Bill seeks to establish a legal upper time limit for abortions for the first time. This is why current anti-abortionist arguments centre around when a child is capable of being born alive or, to use the jargon, when a foetus is *viable*. For us life is defined by its *social characteristics* not just by the potentiality for life. If pro-abortionists concede the terms of the debate by allowing that a foetus capable of life should have rights then it strengthens the position of complete anti-abortionists like Alton. They will be the most consistent in their arguments because it is true that a fertilised ovum does have a potential for life. We would therefore refuse to enter into a numbers game argument about what week of pregnancy a foetus becomes viable.

We assert that life begins at birth unless a woman chooses to treat her

unborn foetus as a child and therefore already part of a social relationship. It is essential that a woman must decide when life begins not the Church or the State, or indeed a Doctor. A document presented to the 1987 National Abortion Campaign's Annual Conference expresses this concept quite clearly: ' . . . a foetus becomes viable when the mother so decides. So if a woman is 15 weeks pregnant and in danger of losing her much desired baby, then the Doctor's duty is to try and save it. If at 20 weeks handicap is diagnosed in that same baby and the woman changes her mind, the Doctor has an equal duty to abort it.'

## WHY DO WOMEN NEED LATE ABORTIONS?

There are various specific reasons why women need late abortions. It is possible to use facts related to late abortion to demonstrate that women only have late abortions because they are necessary. Methods of late abortion can be quite traumatic, methods which nobody would choose unless the reasons for women wanting abortion were far greater. The method of 'Induction' means a woman having to undergo labour, whilst the 'Dilation and Evacuation' method requires a great deal of skill on the part of the medical staff. Here vacuum aspiration which removes the foetus and placenta must be completed properly otherwise uterine infection or bleeding could occur.

With present methods of ante-natal screening a significant number of women need late abortions due to risk of foetal deformity. The most widely used screening method is the amniocentesis test which is used to detect such abnormalities as Down's Syndrome, muscular dystrophy, spina bifida and cystic fibrosis. In practice this test is not performed until 18-20 weeks of pregnancy and its results are not available until about two weeks after the test is taken. Many of those who want the upper time limit on abortion reduced would be prepared to make exceptions on medical grounds because of the risk of foetal deformity which underlines the dangers of relying on this argument to defend late abortions.

Delays in the NHS are another major reason for late abortions. A report published in 1984 found that 20% of women having abortions at 20-23 weeks had been referred by doctors before the end of the twelfth week.<sup>8</sup> This is why we argue that cuts in the NHS are attacks on abortion rights as much as parliamentary amendments.

The largest number of women needing late abortions are those who do not find out that they are pregnant until late in the pregnancy. Most of these are young women who either through fear or ignorance of obtaining contraception or abortion advice find themselves pregnant or seek abortions quite late. In 1984 more than 50% of abortions over twenty weeks were of women under twenty years old.<sup>9</sup> Other women who require late abortions include older women who mistake pregnancy for the menopause or women who had been misdiagnosed earlier in the pregnancy. Women from abroad who cannot obtain abortions in their own country often arrive in Britain quite late in their pregnancy and thus require late abortion. Of the 5,665 women who had abortions after eighteen weeks in 1986 some 2,694 were not resident in Britain, women from Spain and Ireland making up the greatest number of these.<sup>10</sup> Since the inadequacy of safe contraception is the major reason for



most abortions we must link up the demand for free abortion on demand to those of safe, free contraception on demand (to all women regardless of age), free pregnancy testing on demand, and improved sex education in schools. As we have shown late abortions are needed for various specific reasons which could all be avoided. However even if ante-natal screening could detect all abnormalities much earlier, even if early abortion on demand were available we would still argue that a woman should have a right to as late an abortion as she decides is necessary. This is because a woman's control over her reproduction is necessary before a woman can play an equal and independent role in society, whether at work, in trade unions or political organisations. Socialists have long understood that women must have control over their own bodies well before the rise of the women's liberation movement in the 1960's. Stella Browne who left the Communist Party in 1923 because they would not support abortion on demand argued clearly that: 'It is for them to choose whether they will have children or not; and if so, how many, at what intervals and with whom.'<sup>11</sup>

## THE STRUGGLE SINCE 1967

Ever since the passing of the 1967 Abortion Act right wingers have been organising to amend or overturn its limited concessions to women's rights. The Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child (SPUC) was formed in 1967 and has been campaigning ever since along with other anti-abortion groups like *Life*. A number of amendments to the 1967 Act have been put before Parliament and three in particular. James White in 1975, William Benyan in 1977 and John Corrie in 1979 came close to success. The Corrie Bill in particular shows what sort of campaign is necessary to stop Alton. The TUC backed the campaign against Corrie and mobilised in a massive demonstration in London on which there were about 80,000 people. Crucially,

abortion rights were seen as an issue of relevance to male workers as well as women. In a 1980 Marplan Poll for the *Sun* showed 68% of people in Britain were opposed to the Corrie Bill.<sup>12</sup> Despite this massive opposition, the Labour Party allowed a free 'conscience' vote on the Corrie Bill without using the party whips to enforce what had been party policy since 1976 (i.e. defence of the 1967 Act). By contrast the Tories used their whips to support Corrie yet the bill fell at its second reading.

Since 1979 the TUC has shifted to the right in line with 'new realism' and has failed to deliver any real support to the thousands of workers who have fought for their jobs such as miners, steelworkers and printers. Today the TUC is unlikely to mobilise on anything like the scale of 1979 but it is precisely in the organised working class that the power lies to defeat Alton.

## HOW TO FIGHT THE BILL

Since the Alton Bill is a parliamentary attack there are inevitably differing strategies for fighting it. The first strategy is oriented around the parliamentary process and sees the role of campaigning as that of petitioning and lobbying MPs. This strategy is similar to that used in the recent News International Dispute at Wapping in which the print unions tried to use 'public opinion' to force the hand of ruthless profiteer Rupert Murdoch. The failure of such a strategy shows that it is completely mistaken to have any illusions in the use of petitions as anything other than a means to engage people in argument in the streets and in workplaces. As revolutionaries we have to point out that whilst legislative power lies with parliament, the real power in society lies with the ruling class; with company directors, city financiers, senior civil servants, law lords and security chiefs. The only place where this power can be contested and seriously threatened is the workplace. It is here that working class people are forced to organise collectively and have the power to severely disrupt production. If their wealth and profits are threatened the bosses are likely to respond far more than 'moral pressure' or public opinion is likely to make them. For us the strategy of *direct action* is the more powerful weapon. The mass mobilisation of the working class is what really terrifies the ruling class and this is why we need to take the campaign to the workplace and win our arguments there. We take our inspiration not only from the many trade union banners on the anti-Corrie demonstrations but from the magnificent example of French students and workers who forced the withdrawal of the recent Education Reform Bill. They did this not by begging or lobbying but by mass demonstrations and threatening industrial action. Faced with the intervention of the working class, raising the spectre of France 1968, the French government ditched its plans for education reform. In the present political climate such working class mobilisation will be much harder to achieve but we would argue that it is only through the class struggle that any lasting gains such as full abortion rights can be won.

## WHY ABORTION IS A CLASS ISSUE

As we have indicated earlier the question of how we argue against Alton is crucial when it comes to organising against the Bill. Firstly we would say that any restriction on women's access to abortion is an attack on women's rights. We would argue that a woman's right to control her own body is not negoti-

able and therefore we would concede no ground to the moralists who uphold the 'sancity of life'. Secondly abortion rights are a *class issue*. Working class women do most of the State's unpaid domestic work in reproducing and servicing the labour force i.e. childcare and housework. Lack of control over pregnancy, together with non-existent childcare provision means that for working class women, unwanted children means up to 15 years of childcare, segregation in part-time and unskilled jobs and consequently an inferior position in society. Ruling class women who could afford private nurseries have always been able to obtain safe private abortion. For working class women restrictions on abortion mean unwanted motherhood or a return to dangerous backstreet abortions.

It is vital that we understand that abortion is a *class issue* because it is vital to get working class men to fight the Alton Bill in particular and for women's rights in general. Control over reproduction must be firmly in the hands of the working class not the state or the medical profession and working class unity is crucial to the success of any struggle for abortion rights. Thus any arguments against Alton must be linked up with opposition to NHS cuts, the closure of council services and the erosion of social services and welfare benefits. The effect of these attacks is that working class families have to shoulder the burden of social welfare during the crisis rather than the State.



Workers Protesting Against The Corrie Bill

## THE STRUGGLE MUST CONTINUE

Even if the Alton Bill is defeated the struggle for abortion rights must still continue. As we have argued earlier free abortion on demand is fundamentally what women need. The present abortion service on the NHS is also far from perfect. An NHS abortion can quite often be a harrowing experience as women are placed on ante-natal wards along with women fighting to save their unborn fetuses. The attitude of unsympathetic medical staff can also make women feel guilty for having an abortion. Although statistics are difficult to obtain it is widely acknowledged that black women and poor working class women are often forced into abortions and even sterilisations by bigotted doctors who have population control in mind. We say that State control over what a woman does with her body must be ended. This is why women must have contraception, pregnancy testing and abortion on request without a doctors veto. This in itself would require a massive expansion of public sector health care, something which capitalism is neither willing nor able to afford. The issue of birth control cannot just be restricted to the health service. Knowledge about contraception must be an integral part of sex education in schools. Finally if women are to fully enjoy the right to choose then society must provide the resources for women to have children as well as for not having them. This must involve the socialisation of childcare which would free women from the home and allow them to play an equal role in society. The anti-abortionists will rarely advocate any of these measures and are usually the same politicians who preside over nursery closures, NHS cuts and the erosion of maternity benefits.

## MODEL MOTION ON THE ALTON BILL

This branch/union believes that MP David Alton's Bill which would reduce the upper time limit for abortions is a serious attack on the right of women to control their own bodies. The bill would particularly affect working class women who would be faced with the choice of a child they could not afford to maintain or the risk of a backstreet abortion. Without control over pregnancy women cannot participate on an equal basis in work, in trade unions and all other spheres of life. We are against any restriction on women's access to abortion.

*Therefore we demand:*

1. **Free abortion on demand. A woman should be able to obtain an abortion without permission from a doctor.**
2. **Free safe contraception and pregnancy testing on demand to all women.**
3. **Comprehensive sex education in all schools.**
4. **A massive expansion of the health service. No waiting lists.**
5. **Maternity rights and nursery provision for all.**
6. **That the trade union movement mobilise in opposition to the Bill.**

## FOOTNOTES

1. Quoted from the *Guardian* 3.12.87.
2. Section 4(1) of the Act states that 'no person shall be under any duty whether by contract or any statutory or other legal requirement, to participate in any treatment authorised by this Act to which he has a conscientious objection'.
3. Quote from the Fight Acton's Bill, Women's Reproductive Rights Campaign National Meeting Briefing.
4. WRRRC National Meeting Briefing.
5. *Guardian* 3.12.87.
6. WRRRC National Meeting Briefing.
7. Opinion polls can be quite misleading. What is more significant is that the *Guardian* should give it front page coverage. Results of another Marplan Poll conducted at the end of September 1987 and published in *Everywoman* magazine showed that 79% of people thought abortion should be a woman's choice in consultation with her doctor.
8. Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists—Confidential Enquiry into Late Abortions.
9. WRRRC National Meeting Briefing.
10. WRRRC National Meeting Briefing.
11. *Hidden from History*, p.162, Sheila Rowbotham. Pluto Press 1974.
12. 'Twenty Years of Legal Abortion—What People Think'—published by the Coordinating Committee in Defence of the 1967 Abortion Act.



# DAM Aims and Principles

1. The Direct Action Movement is a working class organisation.
2. Our aim is the creation of a free and classless society.
3. We are fighting to abolish the state, capitalism and wage slavery in all their forms and replace them by self-managed production for need not profit.
4. In order to bring about the new social order, the workers must take over the means of production and distribution. We are the sworn enemies of those who would take over on behalf of the workers.
5. We believe that the only way for the working class to achieve this is by independent organisation in the workplace and community and federation with others in the same industry and locality, independent of and opposed to all political parties and trade union bureaucracies. All such workers' organisations must be controlled by the workers themselves and must unite rather than divide the workers' movement. Any
- and all delegates of such workers' organisations must be subject to immediate recall by the workers.
6. We are opposed to all States and State institutions. The working class has no country. The class struggle is worldwide and recognises no artificial boundaries. The armies and police of all States do not exist to protect the workers of those States, they exist only as the repressive arm of the ruling class.
7. We oppose racism, sexism, militarism and all attitudes and institutions that stand in the way of equality and the right of all people everywhere to control their own lives and environment.
8. The Direct Action Movement is a federation of groups and individuals who believe in the principles of anarcho-syndicalism; a system where the workers alone control industry and the community without the dictates of politicians, bureaucrats, bosses and so-called experts.

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