

Rally 4 Choice successfully sees off annual anti-choice parade in Ireland

Andrew Flood

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Every year in either Dublin or Belfast the pro and anti choice movements come head to head around the so called 'Rally for Life'. This year it was Dublin's unwilling role to play host to the bigot parade. It mattered more years than many as a referendum on the hated 8th Amendment that bans abortion is promised for next year. It could be that the next Dublin bigot parade scheduled for 2019 will come after they have suffered a major defeat.

The anti-choice movement isn't just concerned with maintaining a law that would jail women and other pregnant people for 14 years for obtaining an abortion in Ireland. It has a much larger hetero-patriarchal agenda that has suffered defeat after defeat over the last three decades. Access to contraception, equal pay, the end of the marriage bar (until 1973 in Ireland women had to quite public sector jobs if they got married), decriminalisation of sex between men, an equal age of consent, divorce, sex education in schools, legal recognition of trans people's gender — you name the issue and they have lost on it. The constitutional ban on abortion that they forced through in the 8th amendment back in the dark days of 1983 is almost their last stand and Saturday shows it's going very badly. They still retain control of schools and hospitals but that too is now being challenged. All this goes to show this isn't about 'life' but about protecting a deeply discriminatory society set up to favour straight men above everyone else as one mechanism for preserving capitalist class rule. (BTW If you were wondering what 'hetero-patriarchal' meant above, the rest of the paragraph might explain why it's a useful shorthand.)

With all that in mind WSM members were happy to take to the streets on Saturday as part of the Rally4Choice counter protest. The annual counter protest is always a bit intense, the idea is not to try to outnumber the anti-choice parade but just to make sure they understand they will be challenged. So a few hundred pro-choice activists gather to counter protest what is generally a few thousand anti-choice marchers. This is their really big effort of the year with a huge amount being spent on advertising and bussing people to Dublin. We are essentially there to spoil their party by contesting the public space they are trying to briefly claim as their own.

In Dublin we gather near the Spire as they march down O'Connell street and line both sides of their route with signs chanting pro-choice slogans. Each year they have some new gimmick to try to counter this, two years back they brought lots of huge banners they held sideways to

try to hide us from sight. The gimmick this year was a pipe band which unsuccessfully tried to drown out the chanting but only really succeeded in bringing their own march to a grinding halt.

This band is a good illustration of their broad agenda, it seems to be part of the Irish Society for Christian Civilisation which self describes as being “born from the idea of a Counterrevolution, a movement that would embrace every field of action, especially in art, ideas and culture.” This may be a section or off-shoot of the catholic quasi fascist Tradition, Family, and Property (TFP) organisation which literally opposes the “Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité” of the French revolution.

A lot of the turnout on the Rally4Choice is from isolated rural towns and villages. One of the positive aspects every year is the shock people who come to parade through Dublin or Belfast suffer when they discover they can't use the shame and abuse tactics that still maintain silence in some villages. The anti-choice organisations are given access to catholic schools to spread lies and as a result they recruit teenagers for that brief period between having what you believe is a 'strong moral opinion' and the reality of life happening and copping on. Every year a fresh crop of a few dozen are holding the front banner and shouting only to be long gone by the time the next march comes around. Essentially there are no twenty year olds that are not some form of religious fundamentalist and precious few of those once the front of the march passes, check out our video of the entire march for confirmation.

The experience on our side is different. The actual experience on the day is a combination of shock that there are indeed still a few thousand willing to march to maintain a law mandating the jailing of women followed by elation that they have once more been seen off. The strong emotional atmosphere of the counter protest and standing together is a positive bonding experience that helps us work through the other disagreements that are part and parcel of political organisation.

Saturday's march turned out to be relatively uneventful. Both their spirits and numbers were down quite considerably, they already have the smell of defeat. Most years known fascists are spotted taking part in their parade, fascists in general are doubly anti-choice. Following on from the nazis they want to deny abortion to 'white' women and impose abortions on others. In 1339 they made abortion illegal for 'Aryans', in 1943 they made providing abortion to an 'Aryan' woman punishable by death. In all countries today fascist organisations are linked to anti-choice movements.

This year we spotted two known far right activists and one woman who repeatedly gave the 'seig heil' fascist salute as she passed the counter protest. There was no intervention by stewards at the time and when we tweeted photos of her doing so the anti-choice organisers first tried to claim she was waving, then that she was pointing and then that the pictures were fake. When video was posted they retreated back to claiming she was waving and best of us that us pointing out this behaviour was off-putting (rather than the saluting!). There is material for a book in the attempts at denial and distraction around those photos. Justin Barrett did tweet / claim that his far-right National Party had taken part but no one spotted them (or him) on the march so if they did they snuck in at some point after the counter protest.

The main (and traditional) post-march controversy was over how many actually marched. The anti-choice movement was once very powerful because it had wealthy members in positions of power. This was in the 1980s and things have changed, but this allowed them to appoint people to powerful positions in state institutions. This perhaps explains why at protest after protest, RTÉ — the state broadcaster — reports as fact vastly inflated estimates of how many attended their protests.

It was no different this time, RTÉ headlined that ‘10s of thousands’ had marched and in the body of the report reproduced without comment a claim by the organisers that ‘70,000 had marched’. In fact, as we proved, it was more like 5,500. At the time of writing — 4 days later — RTÉ have yet to correct their report or even admit the numbers in it have been challenged but otherwise we are pleased with our role as the meddling kids who stopped them getting away with their outlandish claims.

The only heated confrontation we observed was when that far right religious pipe band on the march that was hoping to drown out pro-choice chants deliberately backed right up against one section of the counter protest. As photographers arrived to capture an image of this some of the counter protesters jumped in front of the band with placards. This led to some pushing and shoving and the arrival of more photographers, blocking the route of the march entirely. Eventually a cop ordered the band to march away and, looking somewhat crestfallen, they did so. Rather bizarrely, they must have then left the march and circled back because a few minutes later they marched through again, without stopping this time.

Some fresh comedy was provided this year by a crudely done banner with far too many words on it that tried to proclaim that anti-choice politics “has nothing to do with religion”. But all throughout the march there were priests, nuns, lots of people waving rosary prayer beads, pictures of catholic saints and the previous pope. Best of all towards the end was a sizeable bloc carrying a half life size statue of the ‘Virgin’ Mary on a flower strewn board at shoulder height while others waved larger posters of her. That whole bloc was reciting the ‘Hail Mary’ prayer as they marched past.

Once the anti-choice march had passed, the pro-choice counter demonstration joyously took the street behind them and followed the back of their march as far as Liberty Hall (about 500m away). There we stopped and dispersed with the sense of a job well done. The annual counter demonstration is not a major event but those who took part this year certainly came away with fresh determination for the campaign to repeal the 8th Amendment and fight for bodily autonomy for all.

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