

Bigots send for sherrif

Student Unions ordered to fund SPUC's anti-choice case

Louise Tierney

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THE FIGHT between SPUC and the student unions over the provision of abortion information has entered a new phase. SPUC's solicitors, are now seeking costs from the student unions for the earlier stages of the case. This is despite the fact that the legal case is ongoing. In fact this is the first time in the history of the Irish state that one party has been awarded legal costs over the other while the case is still being disputed. Talk about impartiality!

What this means is that SPUC will be able to use this money to fight the later stages of the case, as well as providing resources for its other anti-choice agendas, while the student unions will be left stuck for cash if not financially insolvent. All this for fighting for a woman's right to choose.

The sheriff has been called in to collect the amount involved, £29,000. At the time of writing he has sent several final notices and even made appointments to collect the money. The last one of these was on August 30th at the Union of Students of Ireland (USI). Having been given 24 hours notice the students assembled journalists and photographers to cover the story. That morning USI received a phone call asking if they had any assets of value in their office. When they replied that they had not the sheriff said he wasn't coming.

RELUCTANT STATE?

This would seem to indicate a reluctance on the part of the state authorities to test the public climate. Nonetheless the students response to all of this has unfortunately been quite weak. Given the current weakness of the student movement it is possible that they will decide to pay the money involved. In the absence of a large campaign of support, not to pay the money would inevitably mean the loss of the student unions through the legal liquidation process.

However they have not decided to fight in any meaningful political manner. The "X" case was successfully fought by spreading the campaign to as wide a number of people as possible. The students appear to be concentrating their efforts on raising money through reliable but narrow channels.

The three student unions involved have combined to set up a student trust with the sponsorship of noted liberals like Nuala O'Faolain and David Norris. While these individuals can be quite good at raising money within certain sectors, e.g. university lecturers, they do not see any necessarily to spread the political campaign to the widest number of people.

COURTS OR CAMPAIGN?

With many trade unions supporting a woman's right to information, arguably the most effective way to do this is to work on trade union involvement. This can be done by providing a model motion for union meetings, putting posters on union noticeboards pledging support to the students, asking union executives to distribute information packs to members. In this way political support and money can be raised to support the students and to solidify support for a woman's right to information when the government brings in its legislation next year.

After all a majority of the country's population voted for a woman's right to have information and to utilise that information by travelling abroad for an abortion in last November's referendum. SPUC is seeking to penalise organisations for fighting for these rights. The courts are unlikely to

be responsive to polite liberal appeals, having imposed the costs in the first place. More recently they refused to lift the injunction on the Well Woman Centre and Open Door Counselling which prohibits these organisations from providing information.

The more support the students gather now against this penalty for providing information, the stronger the pressure will be on the government to provide a broad framework for the provision of information.

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