

Clinic “obstruction” bill clears U.S. House

The House has voted 246 to 182 to approve the Freedom of Access to Clinics Act (FACE), a bill which prohibits the obstruction of abortion clinics. The measure makes it a felony to threaten, use force or obstruct abortion clinics. Under FACE, the penalty for first time offenders can be up to one year in prison, while repeat offenders are subject to as many as three years of jail time.

Congressman Christopher Smith (R., N.J.) criticized the House action, calling FACE a deplorable infringement on the freedoms guaranteed by the First Amendment. Smith offered a substitute amendment to the bill, which would have limited federal penalties to those committing violent acts, rather than targetting those engaged in peaceful, non-violent sit-ins as FACE does, but the amendment was rejected by the House.

Smith noted several inequities inherent in FACE including the fact that the bill singles out abortion protestors for “unique persecution” while ignoring other activists who routinely engage in civil disobedience. “This bill makes a mockery of our cherished tradition of ‘equal justice under the law’,” Smith said. The bill exempts any hostile actions taken by abortion supporters, but applies only to actions by pro-life demonstrators.

Representative Henry Hyde, the Republican congressman from Illinois also spoke out vehemently against the bill, stating, “If these pro-life groups were in front of another killing place – let’s say Auschwitz – you would be honoring them, you would not be making them felons.”

FACE is supported by the Clinton administration and final passage of the bill is expected next year.