

What is the Progressive Anti-Abortion Uprising (PAAU)?

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The recent organized effort to protest at pharmacies by the group Progressive Anti-Abortion Uprising (PAAU, <https://paaunow.org>) has prompted a closer look at who this group is and how we should understand their emergence. As I will review below, I have reason to believe PAAU is presenting themselves in bad faith. However, I will start with an engagement of them in good faith, as many drawn to their banner may be taking them at their word, and there is some important education we can do around in addressing the distinctions.

If We Take PAAU in Good Faith.

PAAU frames its work as both honoring “fetal lives,” as well as opposing factors that may contribute to an individual’s feeling coerced into seeking an abortion: economic disparities, inequality in the workplace, ableism, racism, and anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination.

They do correctly identify that some people who want to be parents may feel they cannot due to respectability politics (this latter is my framing, not theirs, but their statements evoke this). As we have seen historically in policies of forced and coerced sterilization and eugenics, as well as an emergence of shaming families and single mothers of many children as irresponsible, “welfare queens”, and the like, this is an issue that has affected communities of color, poor folks, indigenous folks and Tribes, and disabled people. The bourgeois feminist movement (sometimes called white feminism or the mainstream women’s movement) has failed to address this and to understand the broader reproductive politics affecting these communities (a pretty broad swath of the working class!). As such, this framing of abortion politics may be expected to find resonance with a good number of people.

Importantly, activists in the Reproductive Justice movement like ourselves also understand this complex history, and we distinguish ourselves by valuing the bodily autonomy of pregnant people! For example, we understand that abortion is an integral part of trans healthcare for individuals who may become pregnant but whose gender identity and expression would be violated with continued pregnancy.

They take what they call a strong stance opposing capitalism, decrying Economic Exploitation, Pregnancy-Based Discrimination, Partner Abuse and Gender-Based Violence, Reproductive Racism, and Ableism. Their response to these is a program to “Divest from Big Abortion and Invest in People” with investments in: Safe and Affordable Housing, Access to Clean Water and Food, Comprehensive Healthcare, Financial Freedom from Abusers, Pregnancy and Postpartum Education, and Community-Based Action Against Discrimination. Notably, they argue that the means for dismantling capitalism are to be found elsewhere but support the endeavor since it will stop **abortion!** (from <https://paaunow.org/stances-capitalism>)

Again, we can respond to good faith engagement on these topics through education about Reproductive Justice and distinguish ourselves.

It is notable that PAAU is ambivalent on contraception and whether abortion ought to be permitted in the case of rape, stating that they have “members and leadership of both mindsets.” They say that they oppose contraception that could be considered an abortifacient, while also pointing to two pro-life blog posts (by an oral surgeon) to suggest that neither the Pill nor Plan B likely prevent implantation and as such are likely not abortifacients. (*But they tolerate opposition to these facts.* <https://paaunow.org/stances-the-rape-exception>, <https://paaunow.org/stances-contraception>)

Appearances of Bad Faith on the part of PAAU Founder & Leadership Team.

Beyond the equivocation on contraception and rape, other contradictions in their understanding suggest weaknesses in their stated analysis.

Firstly, their wording is deliberately inflammatory and misleading, such as using the phrases “Abortion Industrial Complex” and “Abortion Justice.” They claim that “Larger providing companies, such as Planned Parenthood, refuse to build clinics in rural areas because they won’t receive as much business there. Former patients have testified that clinics overcharged them for abortions, often refusing poor clients if they could not afford the procedure” (<https://paaunow.org/stances-capitalism>). By failing to acknowledge the impact of anti-abortion state laws that place requirements on facilities, or the impact of the Hyde Amendment and restrictions on funding of abortion (as compared to other health care), they create a narrative that suits their ends, instead of taking responsibility for the unequal impact of the anti-abortion policies they advocate. (They of course also fail to acknowledge the expense of giving birth! -- which is charged after the fact, not upfront, and is FAR more costly.)

Secondly, they do not address at all the existence of Reproductive Justice as an idea or a movement, which was pioneered and developed by women of color. Given that this has been the predominant space in which people have worked to understand the various needs and issues that PAAU purports to raise, it is telling that they do not engage with it at all and seem to act as though it simply does not exist.

Digging deeper on the background of the people involved suggests this is a deliberately crafted message and that the group’s entire premise is based on market research rather than personal conviction.

Prior to founding PAAU in October 2021, Terrisa Bukovinac formerly founded Pro-Life San Francisco in September 2017. Leading up to this, she spent several months in Summer 2017 working at Support Circle Pregnancy clinics, where her main role was soliciting large donations from “high net-worth individuals” (Bukovinac’s wording on her LinkedIn profile). Before working in the pro-life space, Bukovinac worked for multiple retailers/brands in sales and marketing. Bukovinac also served as president for Democrats for Life of America (DFLA) and is on the advisory board of Rehumanize International, which opposes not only abortion but also capital

punishment, euthanasia (i.e., assisted suicide), war and torture. Most of Rehumanize's work is focuses on abortion, so it appears that they are listing these other things primarily to create false equivalences.

PAAU Director of Activism Lauren Handy made news for storing fetal tissue in her freezer. She and the group claimed to have "recovered the remains" of 115 fetuses, but police only ever found five; later the group stated that the other 110 were buried, and they have pictures online of a Catholic priest supposedly performing rites for "recovered fetuses." Handy formerly worked with Red Rose Rescue, which uses direct action tactics. (Such as trying to talk people out of abortion procedures and going so far as to enter waiting rooms and going limp to avoid being escorted out. Several members, including Handy, have been arrested by police for harassing patients.) Handy calls herself a Catholic anarcho-mutualist and prison abolitionist.

Kristin Turner, the director of communications at PAAU, is also the current executive director of Pro-Life San Francisco and she previously founded the nonprofit Take Feminism Back in 2020.

The multiple involvement of leadership team members with so many groups appears to show PAAU as just one more pro-life nonprofit entity. The PAAU brand isn't restricted geographically by their name, so they can use this banner to organize actions further afield. Most of the events listed on their website take place in Washington, D.C., and some of their leadership is located there; others are in Seattle, Boston, Indiana, Austin, and San Francisco.

Finally, leadership team members are alternately Catholic or secular/atheist, liberal/Democrat or anarchist. The repeated self-label of liberal undercuts the strength of their actual opposition to capitalism. Similarly, many right-wing libertarians have taken to calling themselves anarchists and appropriating associated cultural motifs, such as punk, to advance their own reactionary agendas with a "revolutionary lifestyle" aesthetic.

Are they dangerous?

PAAU is probably not any more violent than the average aggressive pro-life group. They like to take an in-your-face approach to protest with their megaphones, and may feel emboldened to do that more in our current landscape (versus staying in a relegated zone across the street and praying, like some abortion opponents do). That said, it is always good to keep in mind that we don't necessarily know who will decide to get involved with any group. (For example, right wing extremists have been known to infiltrate left-led protests in order to frame anti-fascist and Black Lives Matter protesters as dangerous.) As such, we should remain vigilant and maintain security policies for all our actions.

The most dangerous aspect to the group is political. If people take their value statements at their word and have not heard about reproductive justice, letting PAAU work unopposed cedes the group some perceived moral ground in their minds. Continuing to raise our demands for comprehensive reproductive justice and directly opposing PAAU is our best defense to their deceptive agenda.