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Sex, work and sex work

Red and Black Leeds

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December 3, 2017

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job opportunities. Instead of offering sex work listings discreetly and respectfully, and potentially getting some of the long-term unemployed into work, they continue to throw dozens of applicants at one part-time retail job. We need a fundamental challenge of the Tory-led government's brutal attacks upon the poor and disabled; this challenge requires a powerful and united social movement against austerity. With the stakes so high, there is no room in that movement for well-intentioned moralism.

As for Grayling, he is now the Justice Minister, and has recently distinguished himself by banning parcels for prisoners²⁰ a month before Christmas. Not only is he not fit for purpose, he isn't fit to lick my thigh-high PVC boots.

²⁰ <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/chris-grayling-branded-a-scrooge-for-banning-festive-parcels-for-prisoners-9023211.html>

Introduction

This pamphlet is a compilation of interviews with and articles by members of Red and Black Leeds (RABL), giving an anarchist-communist perspective on sex work, from the perspective of anarchist-communist sex workers. Some were written before our group existed, when we were members of the Anarchist Federation, others have been published on the New Syndicalist blog or the website libcom.org, however most are from our blog.

We have found perspectives on sex work and prostitution tend to fall either into condemning the industry and condemning the workers in it, or supporting the workers and supporting the industry. The former dismisses sex workers and refuses them assistance in their struggles, and the latter subordinates the interests of sex workers to the needs of the industry and their employers. We reject both of these positions. We support sex workers organising to defend themselves and advance their own interests as workers, in opposition to their clients, their bosses, their industry and the state — the same way we support all workers. Those of us who are sex workers are actively organising in this way.

- Red and Black Leeds

Response to: “Prostitution is not compatible with anarchism”

November 05, 2011

*This article was written by a member of the Anarchist Federation (afed.org.uk), now a member of RABL, and posted on libcom.org. It was published in the magazine of the AF, *Organise* #78, in Summer 2012. The leaflet that it is a response to is reproduced in Appendix 1.*

This is a response to the authors of the leaflet distributed at the “Sex work and Anarchism” workshop at the London Anarchist Bookfair 2011 (the original leaflet is reproduced below). The leaflet

was written and distributed by people who were in no way connected to the organising of the workshop. It did not clarify on the leaflet who the authors were or from what organisation they were from and merely said “London Anarchist Bookfair 2011” under the title. As it was handed to people coming into the room my comrade asked the woman handing it to her who had written it and the woman responded “We did.” This response was at best vague and at worst misleading. Most people handed the leaflet assumed it was written by the organisers and consequently it skewed the discussion until we were able to clear this up. I am a sex worker and was part of organising this workshop. The content of this leaflet concerns me and I would like to respond to some of what is written in it. I’m writing this purely in an individual capacity.

In my response I’m going to attempt to counter individually each argument which is used in the leaflet to undermine the collective organising of sex workers. My point overall is that critiques of sex work in no way amount to a justification to attack sex workers self-organisation as ideas about how things ideally should be do not amount to a rejection of attempts to deal with the way things actually are.

The title of the leaflet “Prostitution is not compatible with Anarchism” hints at a confusion between an anarchist response to the present conditions and a vision of what an anarchist society will look like, which becomes more explicit upon a further reading of the leaflet. Our appeal for an anarchist analysis of sex work, an anarchist mode of organising around sex worker issues, and the support of other anarchists when organising around these issues, in no way implies that sex work is in any way compatible with an anarchist-communist society. While most anarchists would consider the abolition of all work to be an eventual aim, we need to struggle within the system we have now to move forward and to improve our conditions in such a way that lays the foundation for this change. An anarchist analysis of the problems in the sex in-

ity Duty and practical solidarity. Women’s Aid and the like need to stand with us sex workers; bringing us into the mainstream, giving us equal rights and fostering our own work in building solidarity can only help in the essential struggle against sex trafficking in the adult industry.

Sex work can be an incredibly uplifting job or an awful one. I am well aware that as sex workers go, I am extremely lucky; I was raised an upper middle class Jew in Midwestern America and have a good education. Moved by nothing worse than a wish to be the author of my own life, I left an interesting office job and a blossoming career to pursue hedonism and kink. I am not trafficked or coerced, and my earnings, after tax, are enough to pay the bills. I’m also lucky to live in the south west of England, a region that is home to a vibrant kink scene. Living and working here, I’ve made friends who step into and out of sex work as casually as they might pick up a second job as a barista.

These are young people in their twenties and thirties who graduated university and found little or nothing in their professional fields to sustain them. Sex positive and kink aware they, and the current students who will soon join them, are part of a growing minority who see sex work as a way to make ends meet. Sex work has its pitfalls and drawbacks, but it’s one way to avoid the degradation and harsh conditions of today’s zero-hours contracts wasteland. To my friends, food and fuel insecurity are far more frightening prospects than the stigma of sex work.

In 2011, Grayling suggested that sex work needed to be removed from job listings in order to ensure that jobseekers would not feel compelled to apply for these positions. Of course nobody should be forced to apply for an escorting position, but nobody should be coerced into applying for any job that does not suit their abilities. But this is alien to the ethos of today’s Jobcentre. The current DWP spends its time cutting the benefits of the disabled and threatening jobseekers with destitution, ignoring the reality of recession and austerity, not providing meaningful training and

for violating the terms and conditions for employers¹⁶ at the Department of Work and Pensions–run site, which allows listings for ancillary roles in the adult industry, like selling sex toys or tending bar at a strip club, but forbids any directly sex-related roles, such as escorting or stripping.

As a professional dominatrix, I’m irked by this. Sexuality is a basic human need, and leaving my perfectly legal category of work off Jobmatch is just one more subtle way in which moralists push sex and everything associated with it to the edges of society, and make sex work more dangerous.

In 2003, sex shop Ann Summers took the DWP to court and won the right to list advertisements for shop assistants. The resulting ruling opened the door to sex work ads, and for years, jobseekers who enquired could be shown these listings under Jobcentre Plus regulations, without any benefit-related sanctions for refusing to apply.

In 2008, DWP launched a consultation¹⁷ about the listings, with results published in 2010. In 2011, then-Work and Pensions Minister Chris Grayling decided¹⁸ that any job involving “sexual stimulation” would be barred from job listings. Unfortunately, he felt quite encouraged in his moralism, as mainline women’s rights organisations such as Women’s Aid had felt¹⁹ that to carry advertisements for sex work would go against the government’s Gender Equality Duty, as sex work perpetuates stereotypes against women and is rife with harassment.

Sex work can certainly be full of harassment, stereotyping and objectification. Unfortunately, so can being a till clerk at Tesco. Feminists, though, know the difference between a Gender Equal-

¹⁶ <http://jobvacancies.businesslink.gov.uk/terms/dwpterm.aspx>

¹⁷ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/220326/adult-entertainment-jobs-consultation.pdf

¹⁸ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-10838933>

¹⁹ <http://www.womensaid.org.uk/domestic-violence-articles.asp?section=00010001002200220001&itemid=2080>

dustry and what problems in our society it feeds into, in no way precludes this.

The authors set up a straw man in the first paragraph. They attribute to us the claim that it is sex workers supposed choice to sell sex which justifies our concern for sex workers safety, ability to earn money, and persecution by the state.

However, workers safety is important in and of itself. Sex workers are in no better a position to choose not to work than anyone else and many workers, including many sex workers, have had little choice in what job they have to do to survive. Though there are some people who may claim that sex workers have chosen this particular line of work, this obviously does not apply to all of us and even those who chose this job over others are merely choosing which form their exploitation is going to take. The authors claim that 90% of sex workers want to exit, and cite a reference that refers specifically to a 1998 study of San Francisco street prostitutes and is not in any way comprehensive. Even if we were to accept this statistic as generally applicable, it still changes nothing. As someone who has only ever worked in low-paid, unrewarding, service industry jobs, I am fairly confident that anyone asking my colleagues whether they would rather have been doing something else, would be looking at at least that percentage. However the need of workers to organise collectively to better their material conditions is one anarchists should support irrespective of whether the work is chosen or not. Workers who would rather be doing a different job are not in less need of better conditions.

The authors contrast sex workers unions with “workers unions (that) are necessary for essential production.” However, it is not for the sake of the work, or whatever commodities that we happen to be producing at a given moment, that workers should organise. If we are organising for the benefit of the production process, then we’re missing the point. We organise for ourselves. The work we are directed to perform is relevant mainly for tactical reasons — striking workers in “essential” industries use this to their

advantage, whilst managers try and use it to theirs. Whether or not the industry we work in is essential or in any way beneficial to us does not make our material interests as workers any less important. The leaflet begins by rightly criticising the liberal notion of choice when it comes to the work that we are coerced by capitalism into doing, yet the same notion is implicit in the authors expectation that workers should just choose to work in an essential industry to deserve our support in fighting to improve our conditions — a frequent argument trotted out by neoliberal ideologists when low paid or otherwise particularly badly treated workers seek to use collective action to improve their immediate conditions.

One argument the authors make is that sex is freely available even under capitalism and that therefore the act of paying for sex is not about sex. People pay for many things which they could find for free even within capitalism. They pay for a number of reasons, for example the convenience, or for the ability to be more specific about the product they are after. While this may be generally problematic, and in the case of buying sex, arguably even more problematic, it does not mean that it is not about sex, even if other factors are present. The authors also claim that because sex is available for free that it is not a commodity. Sex is a commodity when it is being paid for, and it is not a commodity when it is free. Nothing is inherently a commodity. Rather it is commodified. As depressing as it is, under capitalism nothing is spared commodification. Exactly how disturbing it is when a certain thing is commodified depends on what that thing is and how we relate to it, as a society and as individuals.

The authors criticise those anarchists who fetishise the exchange of money for sex. The idea that there is something liberating or empowering about sex work is lacking in an analysis of the nature of work and is possibly a reaction against the stigma associated with sex work. This results in the sex worker being constructed by some as a subversive queer identity. As with most attempts to counter stigma by embracing the stigmatised

If women have limited choices, men aren't doing them a favour by paring [sic] them for sex: just give them the money. People who think that prostitution is a service for socially isolated men should offer to have free sex with these men. People who think prostitution is the same as any other manual work, but better paid, should try to earn a living wage from it on the Romford Road. (The majority of women are not working as "highly paid escorts"). Those who fetishise [sic] the exchange of sex for money are not Anarchists... or radical in any way, but promote human beings [sic] alienation from each other.

An afterthought on feminism

Feminism brought the notion of "the personal is political" into consciousness. The requirement from a feminist analysis to examine interpersonal interactions as either supporting or challenging gender hierarchy results in the same conclusions: the act of men purchasing sex makes them complicit in the subordination of women as a group.

Appendix 2: Mistress Magpie: Hey Jobcentre — sex work is work!

January 03, 2014

This is the text of the article responded to by "Sex work and sanctions: A response." We disagree with it and reproduce it for reference purposes only.

Sunday's *Mirror*¹⁵ reported a recent advertisement for an escort position on the government job-search website Universal Jobmatch. The ad, which was taken down a day later, offered the shockingly low-paid position as "no experience necessary," with the stipulation that the successful applicant "must like sex." It was removed

¹⁵ <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/job-seekers-government-website-publishes-2968598>

Solutions: Men should be encouraged to relinquish their hierarchical power, not supported in maintaining it.

2. The question: Why do men pay for sex?

Analysis: Prostitution is “a financial transaction for sex.” Sex is freely available, even in the current capitalist system! Consensual sex can be negotiated between any adults with no financial exchange necessary. Therefore the act of paying for sex serves another purpose: it allows the man to assert power and control over that which he has purchased. The assertion of power and control by the man, and the domination of the woman are part of the transaction. It is not about sex.

Solutions: Men who buy sex should be challenged on their abuse of power and control over women.

3. Question: Are unions or collectives of “sex workers” the answer?

Analysis: The majority of women sell sex primarily because of lack of alternatives. 90% of women involved in prostitution want to exit, but have limited choices (Farley, 1998). When people are exploited, we support them, not the exploiters. Workers unions are necessary for essential production: sex is not a commodity – it is freely available to everyone. Unions or even collectives of people selling sex to men ignore the issue that the act of purchasing sex is problematic within an Anarchist analysis. Normalising power imbalances and inequalities does not make them reduce or disappear; they are only reinforced.

Solutions: People should have equitable choices in how they live their lives. The majority of women in prostitution do not have a range of equitable choices. Men who purchase sex do have choices. Anarchists should challenge the status quo of gendered power hierarchies by questioning men’s right to purchase sex, rather than supporting ways that makes [sic] it easier for men to exert power and control over women, and thereby alienating themselves from human nature.

Other radical ideas

behaviour as an identity, countering shame with pride, we become trapped by the structures that oppress us. Attempts to legitimise sex worker activism by insisting that sex work will continue to exist in a post-revolutionary society are neither promoting a desirable outcome nor one which is in any way a pre-requisite for support in the here and now. However the authors attack on these ideas doesn’t uphold their conclusions. Were the anarchist movement not to be infested with identity politics we could still reject the notion that we should be ashamed and we would still expect support from our comrades. The false dichotomy between “sex work is good and so sex workers should be supported in their struggle” and “sex work is bad and so sex workers should not be supported in their struggle” ignores the actual material needs of sex workers in and of themselves.

Attempts to abolish sex work before any other work is as naive as the war on drugs but with the additional logistical problem that it involves a commodity which can be produced at any time by anyone. Given that society is organised the way it is, with a large group of dispossessed wage workers, with poverty and unemployment, and with the gendered division of humanity and all that entails, its no surprise that some workers, overwhelmingly women, end up selling their capacity to perform sex work. While everything is infected and distorted by capitalism, an analysis of how sex is affected by this does not invalidate the need for sex workers to struggle to improve their conditions. We should be able to rely on our comrades support in this as solidarity between workers is a vital part of the struggle against capitalism.

Interview: Your job “after the revolution”

May 03, 2012

This response was published on libcom.org,¹ on a thread canvassing for anarchist workers to give accounts of the industry they work in and how it would be different “after the revolution.”

1. What do you do?

I work as a rentboy and advertise mainly on gay cruising sites. My job description covers pretty much everything a client wants to do during the time they’ve booked me for, but I make exceptions for things I believe would damage my health. That’s almost always means some form of sex but if they want to talk (or watch tv, or play monopoly) then I have to look equally enthusiastic about that.

2. How does your industry function today and how is it structured?

I’m not sure where my industry begins and ends, and it’s hard to see what’s going on with it as so much of it is a cottage industry. Regarding just prostitution there are some people working in brothels. There are other people who are employed by agencies. There are some people working independently, who advertise on websites, magazines, phonebooths etc. There are some who have individuals (pimps) instead of an agency. Some work on the street. Most rentboys seem to be independent but you can try and get employed by an agency with various advantages and disadvantages. Some of the industry is totally legal but much of it is criminalised (as in not the actual selling of sex but things surrounding it like soliciting or brothel-keeping). And many parts of the industry fall outside of most employment legislation including a lot of other parts of the sex industry in general (webcam work, porn, etc). The lines between legal and illegal aren’t always that clear with many legal escort agencies run by organised crime.

3. What would change now if you had the chance?

I’m more able to talk about the area of sex work in which I work. I’m sure there are many things that need changing in other areas too.

¹ <https://libcom.org/blog/your-job-after-revolution-26042012>

An anarchist response should demand the eradication of all exploitative practices and not suggest they can be made safer or better.

Anarchist Perspectives

Anarchism comes from a Greek word meaning “freedom from domination.” It is premised on “the essential decency of human beings”; a desire for individual freedom and intolerance of domination (Woodcock). It calls for radical and revolutionary social change, not reformism. Underpinning beliefs include:

- Opposed to domination and all hierarchies, including gender hierarchy (Goldman)
- No state apparatus is needed. (Kropotkin)
- Social justice is part of our human nature. (Godwin)
- Social change will occur through collective action. (Bakunin)
- Those with power will surrender it for the common good. (Godwin)
- Mutual aid and reciprocity results in an exchange between equals. (Proudhon)
- Humans can be sovereign individuals who participate in voluntary association (ie not for payment). (Kropotkin)
- Women’s emancipation must come from themselves “First be asserting herself as a personality, and not as a sex commodity. Second by refusing the right to anyone over her body.” (Goldman)

Questions from an Anarchist Perspective

1. The question: Why do men believe they have a right to buy sex?

Analysis: Gender is a power-based hierarchy and prostitution is one manifestation of that power inequality. The overwhelming purchasers of sex (from women or from men) are men. The entitlement for men to purchase sex is dependent on their privileged hierarchical position and the subordinate position of women. Women from poorer socio-economic backgrounds are overrepresented in the sex industry.

women to avoid marriage by selling sex to men piecemeal instead, and it can help the worker draw a line mentally between work sex and non work sex. Also I know a lot of people who were bisexual but now men remind them too much of work, so they pursue relationships exclusively with women.”

Then we moved on to a question and answer session where, amongst other things, we discussed how LGBT organisations could support sex workers more. The whole conference was excellent and SWARM continues to be a very valuable organisation for myself and other sex workers. Check out the fresh new website, launched on mayday, for more info:

<https://www.swarmcollective.org/>

Appendix 1: Prostitution is Not Compatible with Anarchism

October 22, 2011

This is the text of the leaflet responded to by “Response to: ‘Prostitution is not compatible with anarchism.’” We disagree with its perspectives on sex work and anarchism and reproduce it for reference purposes only.

LONDON ANARCHIST BOOKFAIR 2011

The concept of women’s “choice” to sell sex is constructed in line with neo-liberal and free-market thinking; the same school of thinking that purports that workers have real “choices” and control over their work. It suggests that women chose to sell sex and we should therefore focus on issues to do with “sex workers” safety, ability to earn money, and persecution by the state. Whilst women’s safety and women’s rights are paramount, the argument for state regulated brothels and unionisation is reformist at best, naive and regressive at worst. Even the proposal for “collective brothels” ignores the gendered nature of prostitution, and its function in supporting male domination.

In all of the sex industry it would be a lot easier to demand safer sex practices without pressure from bosses and clients. Escorts² wouldn’t have to fear being attacked at work. All escorts would be in contact with other escorts to share information.

One of the most constant hassles for specifically for callboys/girls is the number of people who waste their time, for example by asking loads of questions and even making bookings and then not turning up. Some of them presumably can’t make it but the sheer number of them indicates that most of them probably just enjoy planning the booking but have no intention of turning up. From my own experience and from other escorts I’m in contact with I’d guess about 20% of the people who get in touch actually end up meeting. Most networking of escorts I’ve come across consists mainly of blacklisting timewasters. Ideally we would somehow eliminate this problem completely.

4. What do you think might need to stay in the new utopia, and what would have to go?

My job wouldn’t exist. I basically see it as financially coerced sex. There would be sex but no work so there would be no sex work. People would still have sex, as they do now, but without the financial compensation for having sex you don’t want to have, there would be no prostitution.

Having said this I should think there would be changes to the ways in which people express their sexuality in general, and hopefully some of the technology currently wasted on the sex industry could be better spent on facilitating this, or helping people find other people who want to join in with the things they’re doing.

For example, there would presumably still be exhibitionists and maybe rather than posting pixelated videos from their phones onto user generated content sites, they might get together with people

² I say escorts rather than sex workers because I’m referring specifically to people who are paid by clients to have sex with them, and not to dancers or cam workers. I think the word escort sounds like you’re paying someone to have dinner with you but apparently some people find the word prostitute offensive.

who are good at filming and lighting and make good quality, consensual porn. This is my hope, at least.

I'm often aware of how many of my clients could be matched up to each other. For every person who wants to do something to someone there's another person who wants that doing to them. People often call asking to top in a sexual act that the week before someone else wanted to bottom in. If they didn't have the belief that they're entitled to sexual activity which revolves entirely around themselves, on demand, provided by the exact body type they are currently in the mood for, then they could easily satisfy each other.

There would still be people who take a particular interest in studying sexuality who become sex columnists, sex therapists etc, but they would be no more obliged to have sex with the people who came to them for advice than anyone else would be. Not that I'm convinced by the claim that the sex industry is providing an educational service. If you're paying someone to fake enthusiasm and to make you feel good, and who hopes you'll pay for it again, then asking them whether they had a good time is not the best way of encouraging constructive criticism. From what I can tell clients are just reinforcing bad habits. So with the abolition of money I can see a lot more opportunity for the kind of honesty necessary for people to learn about sex.

The new utopia would presumably be post-patriarchy and as such also post-gender. So I'm guessing cottaging/cruising would no longer be the domain of men who sleep with men but would be practiced by people of all variations of sexual orientation. By which I don't mean to imply that there is a "need" currently satisfied by callgirls which would then be covered by post-patriarchal free love, or something, as the existence of the commercial section of cruising sites already indicates that these are very different things. What I mean is that without economic pressures to engage in sexual relationships, and without a system which panders to men's sense of entitlement to access women sexually, and without the game of cat

so for a lot of us so-called transactional sex (whether for money, food, or shelter) becomes a way to survive.

The connection between destitution and sex work is an important one to make in our arguments for decriminalisation. If you have nowhere to sleep you can go on the pull and go back to someone's place, but maybe they're just going to want to have sex all night, maybe you're not even going to get any sleep. Or you could have sex for money, then when it's over and you've got the money you can pay for a room in a hostel with it where you can actually get some sleep. Similarly you can work as a prostitute and use the money to pay for your own house and your own bills, or you can get into a sexual relationship you don't want to be in or stay in one after you want to leave. You could categorise all these as some form of transactional sex. Personally I prefer to spend an hour with a client and then pay for a room where I have some peace, than have a man waking me up whenever he wants some sex. And it's bad enough spending any time with my clients, the prospect of sharing a home with someone I feel that way about is horrific to me. But it's the most formalised versions of transactional sex that get criminalised, and often this is the versions where the "worker" has the most control. No one is trying to criminalise going on the pull for somewhere to crash, or getting married for financial security, or staying in a bad relationship when you can't afford a place on your own. But the criminalisation of what is more easily identified as sex work pushes those of us with limited options towards transactional sex where we have less control, and are less able to state concretely what our prices and limits are. I'm an anti-capitalist and though I usually have nothing good to say about wage slavery, it has advantages over slavery.

I'd like to note that in working class lesbian history this connection has often been recognised (though as women have become more accepted in other workplaces it's been forgotten). Many sex working women were (and still are) in relationships with each other. It used to be more recognised as a way for lesbian

to have, and are fighting for that, but in the mean time we don't want to add dealing with the police to the many grievances and indignities that we face at work.

Queers, Poverty, and Transactional Sex: Notes from the Sex Workers Festival of Resistance

August 05, 2017

This article was originally published on the RABL blog.

A couple weeks ago I attended the Sex Workers Festival Of Resistance in Glasgow, a 5 day conference organised by and for sex workers, with sex worker only sessions where we organised and shared skills, plus public sessions on various issues. The conference was organised by SWARM,¹³ until recently known as SWOU.¹⁴ I was on the panel for a public event entitled "Sex Work and LGBT," and these were my opening comments:

"For me personally the connection between being LGBTQ and a sex worker is a clear one in my life. I started selling sex because I was unemployed, homeless and needed to get the money together to put a bond down so I could start renting, and being queer was a significant factor in how I'd ended up at that point.

In general I think we need to be aware that there is a clear connection between poverty and sex work. And this is something that I think really gets lost when sex worker is seen as a subversive identity rather than a type of job. LGBTQ people are disproportionately represented in sex work, not just for the reasons that people often assume, (because we're apparently so sexually open minded) but because we're more likely to get disowned, become homeless, be unemployed, and so on, in comparison to cisgender heterosexuals,

¹³ Sex Worker Advocacy and Resistance Movement

¹⁴ Sex Worker Open University

and mouse that is the traditional heterosexual mating ritual, there would be more room for people to honestly explore what they want, in conjunction with what the people they're interested in want.

5. How would this reshaped industry be structured and how would it relate to the twin pillars of local community and wider society (eg. the postal worker above talks about how workers would need to balance the demands of local groups with the needs of everyone else)?

If you consider the industry to be just people offering sexual services of any kind for the benefit of others then there wouldn't be one. If we consider it to also to include sex toys, sex clubs, and so on, then as a luxury it would be something that people contributed towards when they felt inspired to.

I think a lot of this would still exist on the internet, not only with people having webcam sex or uploading videos but also with people finding each other to meet IRL, or to form groups of common interest.

However, I imagine that with the breakdown of sexual taboos that would come with an end to patriarchy and the commodification of sex, more interaction would move from the internet into our local communities. So for example, currently a munch (ie a meeting of BDSM enthusiasts for a non-sexual social in a cafe) in most cities might just about get double figures attending, whereas there are thousands of people contributing to internet forums on BDSM in any city. Presumably a lot of this has to do with the anonymity of the internet to discuss sexual practices. So I think a lot more people would meet in local venues to form groups of common interest or to get to know each other. Also I think there would be more sex clubs as I mentioned cottaging above but a lot of the reasons for meeting in a park are to do with anonymity due to sexual taboos and to do with the fact that you have to pay to get into sex clubs or to use hotel rooms. I think a lot of people would prefer to cruise in a club (or somewhere indoors) and would be happy to put in the effort to make that happen.

Sex work and sanctions — a response

July 12, 2014

This article was originally published on the RABL blog, and was republished on the International Socialist Networks blog. The article that it is a response to is reproduced in Appendix 2.

This is a response to an article on the International Socialist Networks blog³ which I've found pretty concerning. Mistress Magpie writes about the government's decision not to allow escort ads on Universal Jobmatch, the jobcentre's website. She seems mainly concerned with what this implies in ideological terms, less so with the real material consequences of having or not having escort ads on the website, for claimants and sex workers. I understand that Mistress Magpie is no longer in the ISN, and has moved on to a gig writing for the Guardian. She's since noted the effect that her position of relative privilege might be having on her writing and welcomes constructive criticism. So it's in the spirit of comradely debate that I'd like to pick apart some of the problems in this blog post and outline an alternative perspective.

Mistress starts by stating that sex is a basic human need. Though I would agree that the moralising around sex work has dangerous consequences for sex workers, I don't think arguing for the necessity of sex work from the perspective of clients is a productive place to start in countering this. As a sex worker, I have no interest in trying to justify the industry that profits from my labour, nor in defending the sense of entitlement my clients demonstrate towards my body. My interests as a worker are in improving my conditions and my pay. Very often this conflicts with the interests of my clients who would like to demand I take whatever risks with my health they desire, for as long as possible and for as little pay as possible. As workers our demands to be

³ <http://internationalsocialistnetwork.org/index.php/ideas-andarguments/fighting-oppression/313-mistress-magpie-hey-job-centre-sex-work-is-work>

exploitative jobs, is not something to be condoned, as this author seems to.

I have no wish for the sex industry to develop and expand or be promoted. The fact that I think those of us working in it should be permitted to advertise independently, or work from the same premises, does not contradict this. The author makes a distinction between the freedom of the individual and the freedom of the industry, as if we're all confused about the fact that our bosses interests are not the same as our own. Yes, selling sex is legal in the UK. Transactional sex in general is legal, and is in the nature of capitalist patriarchy whatever the laws surrounding it are. Hooking up so as to have a place to sleep will continue to be legal, staying in a bad relationship because you have nowhere else to go will be legal, sex with your dealer to sustain your habit will be legal. It is no surprise that for people faced with these options, putting a fixed price on the sex they're willing to have, then taking the money and paying for a room, a home, some drugs, etc themselves, gives them a greater degree of autonomy. Many of us find it pleasanter to spend a fixed amount of time with a client than move in with him. Capitalism is horrendous, but it has some advantages over serfdom or slavery. People advocating for restrictions on sex workers ability to sell sex are pushing many of us towards the kind of transactional sex that gives us less control.

Just as we can critique capitalism while continuing to have jobs, we can critique the sex industry while continuing to work in it. And just as the struggle for better conditions in other industries doesn't need to undermine our struggle for the abolition of work — in fact I would argue that it's the same struggle and that collectively taking action empowers us to aim higher — so our struggle for better working conditions in the sex industry doesn't need to undermine our struggle for the abolition of sex work. Sex workers' struggles are often painted as uniquely short-sighted and reformist by those on the left that push for anti sex worker policies. But many of us long for a world where no one needs to have sex they don't want

at work is impeded rather than bolstered by the “work” aspect of sex work, as any other self-expression at work is impeded by the “work” aspect of the activity being performed. This is the nature of alienation under capitalism, and I would expect nothing less than that sex worker advocates without a critique of capitalism would tend towards denying this. However critiques of the sex industry don’t translate to an argument for setting the cops on us.

The issue of “choice” and what it means comes up a lot in these discussions. Choice is apparently only something that the most privileged of sex workers have, which is why many advocates of the sex industry choose to only present these workers, and why many sex work prohibitionists argue that these are the only people arguing in favour of decriminalisation. In fact, those of us who are less privileged have no more desire to be locked up, stalked, deported, and harassed, by racist misogynists enacting state-sanctioned violence. The limited options of many sex workers are framed as simply a lack of choice. No matter that these sex workers will weigh up their options, between sex work and destitution, and make a conscious choice for sex work. Removing the option of sex work does not result in more options falling from the sky, and it’s disgustingly patronising to decide for a sex worker that the destitution they face is in fact a better option. While prohibitionists will claim that it’s the most vulnerable and marginalised workers who they’re advocating for, in fact the inevitable worsening conditions that come from criminalisation will drive workers with other options out first, and leave those with limited options hanging on as long as they can.

Stigma is not the greatest issue we face, but it doesn’t help, and it’s very general issue which unifies the sex worker movement. Sex workers discussing their grievances with other workers in their workplace or specific role, will be talking about something else. Stigma against clients doesn’t bother me, neither would stigma against exploitative bosses in any industry. Stigma against sex workers, much like stigma against workers in particularly ex-

able to work free from criminalisation, stigma, and violence need to start with our own material needs. Were our work actually necessary (and I’m not convinced it is) that might translate to a certain amount of bargaining power in real terms. However when workers in vital industries and caring professions strike for better conditions, their supposed responsibility to continue working for the good of society is used as an argument to undermine solidarity towards the strikers from other workers. It shouldn’t be necessary to refer to the notion of the sad sex-starved clients to explain what is wrong with, for example, police violence against sex workers. We don’t need to justify our work to legitimise our struggle.

Mistress continues to argue for the legitimacy of our work by making the case for working in the sex industry. She says “Sex work has its pitfalls and drawbacks, but it’s one way to avoid the degradation and harsh conditions of today’s zero-hours contracts wasteland.” For many sex workers it is both, the pitfalls and drawbacks of sex work, but also degradation in their job as a sex worker, and being self-employed, sometimes for a boss who doesn’t need to guarantee a wage but still gets all the benefits of an employer. She says “To my friends, food and fuel insecurity are far more frightening prospects than the stigma of sex work.” Once again there are many people experiencing both. The sex industry doesn’t deserve to exist because it is pleasant to work in, it needs to be pleasanter to work in because, for better or for worse, it exists. Whether it represents a choice between a cush office job and a fulfilling job in the sex industry, or a choice between not being able to feed oneself (or ones kids) and doing a job in the sex industry that they detest, workers will continue to opt to be a sex worker when it seems to be the best of the options available to them. Rather than singing the virtues of work in a particular industry, we need to demand more options for everyone, childcare for working mothers, a decent income for sick and unemployed people, better wages, and better conditions in all work, so that we aren’t constantly choosing between a bad option and a worse one.

In reality putting escorting positions on the job centres website provides the opportunity for further coercion in the form of sanctions. Mistress is aware of this, “Of course nobody should be forced to apply for an escorting position, but nobody should be coerced into applying for any job that does not suit their abilities.” As it is though, they would be forced into applying for an escorting position as claimants are forced into applying for other jobs. The level of control that jobcentre staff have over claimants is already shocking. They can print out any job and demand the claimant applies for it under the threat of sanctions. I imagine some job centre advisers also frequent brothels, and would have an interest in harassing their choice of claimant into a job there. Poverty is one reason why some people are forced into the sex industry against their will, and the jobcentre website including those jobs just provides another route by which people can end up coerced into it. Whatever our feelings as sex workers about sex work in comparison to other work, we can’t ignore the fact that being forced into sex work is likely to be a lot more distressing for people who have no experience of it than being forced into most other industries. At this point also, a lot of sex work jobs have appalling conditions, partly due to many businesses in the sex industry operating semi-legally. Much as we can say it shouldn’t be like this, it is.

The concern about whether the jobcentre includes escorting ads is a concern over their implied position that they don’t view it as proper work. I don’t particularly care what the government or the job centre think sex work is, I care about the ways in which they make it more dangerous. I’m not trying to win them over ideologically, they’re already a lost cause. I just want them to give us what we need. In this case, there are no practical benefits to a demand that they allow escorting ads on their website, and would make things worse. Supposing Mistress were to convince the government to put escorting positions on their website, she’d be putting people in a less privileged position at risk for the sake of making an ideological point about how she wants her own work to be viewed.

attempt to indicate that this is the standard, the author also refers to some speculation about Coyote, an American organisation. The author neglects to mention the existence of UK based, actual sex worker organisations, like the Sex Worker Open University, Scot-Pep, X-talk and the English Collective of Prostitutes, all of whom are in favour of decriminalisation and are far more active than the IUSW.

This is done to support the implication that decriminalisation favours brothel-managers in general. In fact, brothel-managers, sex industry bosses, pimps, often benefit a great deal from criminalisation. Many of them are opposed to decriminalisation as they are able to extort their workers to protect them from cops, as well as clients. Bosses have the resources to bribe the police that independent workers working from the same flat for safety just don’t have. Take, for example, the women in Bradford¹² who left their long-running brothel on the grounds of bad working conditions, and shortly after setting up their own co-op were raided by cops. Irrespective of an understanding of the specifics of sex work, any grasp of the nature of criminal enterprises confirms that the criminal nature benefits the owners as they don’t want competition from legal enterprises. Does this author imagine that during the prohibition in the US, the Mafia running the alcohol trade wanted it to be made legal?

As for the weak neo-liberal arguments in favour of decriminalisation, yes they are frustrating, no they’re not representative. The sex industry is, for the most part, pretty fucked up. This is perfectly legal for me to say, and, contrary to the impression this author is under, sex workers are not trying to make it illegal for me to say it. I have nothing good to say about the experience of trading sex for money. I can confirm that sex work is not an expression of the workers sexuality, or at least that any attempt to express sexuality

¹² http://www.thetelegraphandargus.co.uk/news/10822630.Police_were_greeted_at_Bradford_brothel_by_half_naked_woman/

have both good and bad arguments for a good thing, so this isn't really enough. Decriminalisation, to be clear, is just the removal of laws that criminalise sex work specifically (trafficking, rape, etc would continue to be illegal within sex work as outside of it). So the least one might expect of an article making the case against decriminalisation, would be any arguments at all in favour of any type of criminalisation. However these are noticeably absent. Where are the arguments in favour of us being harassed by cops? There are none because there's no country in the world where the cops are that well-disposed towards sex workers that giving them more powers has not resulted in worse conditions for us.

The author uses the terms decriminalisation and legalisation as if they're interchangeable, indicating that they either understand approximately nothing about the legal models being discussed, or that they're purposefully trying to conflate an option which benefits sex workers with one which doesn't. Legalisation of sex work involves another set of laws criminalising specific parts of the sex industry by criminalising those sex workers that can't or won't jump through the various hoops demanded by the state. This criminalises the most marginalised and vulnerable sex workers — those without the right papers, those that can't afford to pay fees to the government, those that can't come out as sex workers, etc — and increases the power of the state and state-sanctioned brothels. It is entirely disingenuous to imply that this is what sex worker organisations are advocating.

The author also chooses only to slate examples of organisations which are essentially industry lobby groups. Many industries have lobby groups for their industry and also have unions comprised only of workers, and as you might expect, the sex industry is no different. The UK branch of the International Union of Sex workers is indeed an industry lobby group. It has kicked out members who argued for workers being permitted to organise away from our managers at any point. It represents the interests of certain bosses in the sex industry who aspire to a level of respectability. In an

Making the point that sex work is work is one that we need other workers to understand. We need our unions, political organisations, communities, to include us as workers. We need to build a class consciousness that recognises that we all need to fight against harassment, bullying and intimidation from bosses, the risks of precarity, fees demanded to be able to work, wage theft, unsafe working conditions and all the other perils of work that we have in common. We need to support other workers in their struggles for better conditions and appeal to them to in turn support ours.

Interview: What does a union mean to you?

July 04, 2015

This interview with a sex worker who is a member of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) union and RABL was carried out by New Syndicalist, a grouping of IWW members, and posted to their blog newsyndicalist.org as part of a series of interviews.⁴

1. How would you describe your work?

For lack of a better word I describe myself as a prostitute. I understand that independent full-service sex worker is a term used (and often preferred) for this role too. I'm self-employed. My job is essentially having sex with people for money, but most of the hours I put in aren't actually spent doing that, and it took me a while to realise that these hours were also "work" and not just "trying to find work." I create profiles and ads on the internet. I respond to inquiries via email, phone calls, or various messaging services or features on websites. I lurk around on adult websites and in chat rooms, waiting for people to approach me. I take bookings, and prepare for those bookings, which sometimes involves travelling some distance. This pays off every now and then and I meet up with people and they pay me money. Then I need to stick around for as long

⁴ <https://newsyndicalist.org/2015/07/04/what-does-a-union-mean-to-you-1/>

as they've paid me for, and do whatever takes their fancy (minus the activities that I've already clarified to them I won't do because they're too dangerous).

2. What do you like about your job?

The absurdity of it all mostly. It's not polite to say so, but I find myself genuinely entertained by the types of calls and messages I get, even a lot of the horribly offensive ones. I'm constantly gaining new insights into capitalism and patriarchy, and the fucked up way they play out in our interactions with each other. I don't generally get bored when I'm actively doing the work that's involved, only when I'm waiting around for it.

I like the flexibility that comes with self-employment, even though it's a bit of a double-edged sword with the other edge being a very unpredictable income and the constant nagging feeling that I should be doing more to find clients. But it's good knowing that I could take a day off if I needed to, without sacrificing the whole job, but just a potential amount of money.

I also enjoy giving a bit of back-chat when I've established that a client is so horrendous, or a guy contacting me is so unlikely to ever pay up, that I need to write him off. I get a lot of shit, and sometimes it feels good to put people in their place who think the power dynamic between us is safely permanent.

3. What do you dislike about your job?

I'm not sure where to start. I suppose I dislike having sex with people who I don't think deserve to have sex, to be honest. I'm not a prude, but in my private life my minimum expectation of someone I'm going to have sex with is that they would not want to proceed if I wasn't interested. My clients, having already bribed me with the money I need, aren't in a position to be able to establish this and have no good reason to assume I actually want to have sex with them, so the fact that they've hired me automatically puts them in the category of people I wouldn't otherwise have sex with. I've long been able to stomach the actual contact though, so emotionally it just feels like work. Which is, when it comes down to it, exactly

workers on the basis of how people would like to imagine their work (because it's what gets you off, or because you just need to believe it to feel comfortable supporting us) has wider implications. Supposing that porn performers at a company all hated having to perform a certain act, and organised to the point of having the leverage to collectively demand of their boss that they no longer had to do it, I would expect of people to support that demand as fellow workers. Working class solidarity towards sex workers is not based on what you would like the sex industry to produce for your own sexual pleasure, or what you think it should produce for the good of society, but on the recognition that sex work is work, and that sex workers are fellow workers.

Prohibition, the sex industry and the state: A response to the Morning Star

August 02, 2016

This article was originally published on the RABL blog. The article it is a response to is available on the Morning Star website.¹¹

The Morning Star has once again published a politically incoherent piece of writing which counters cherry-picked, neoliberal arguments that happen to reach favourable conclusions for a marginalised group, and once again undermines the safety of this group. It's possible to find feminist arguments in favour of trans-inclusivity, or communist arguments in favour of the decriminalisation of sex work, but rather than grappling with nuance these authors choose to burn a reactionary strawman representing an entire group and declare themselves the most radical.

The article argues against a handful of unconvincing arguments that are in favour of decriminalisation. Of course it's possible to

¹¹ <https://www.morningstaronline.co.uk/a-5077-The-prostitution-debate-has-become-mired-in-libertarian-thinking>

ing something I enjoy. I am not at all fussed about trying to make my job a sexy experience for myself. The possibility that the work aspect of sex work might result in sex workers having different priorities than you would expect of people having sex just for fun, was, as is often the case, noticeably absent from the debate as sex (work) positivity and neo-liberalism joined forces again to demand that the sex industry be portrayed as sexily as possible.

Interestingly, much has been made of the ban on female ejaculation. Though it's in the interests of many workers in porn to be allowed to depict it, often the pressure from bosses, clients, the market, etc to show physical signs of arousal, puts a particular strain on sex workers, as to authentically display them requires a certain amount of manipulation of one's own sexual predilections. It's one thing to have one's sexual activity decided by market forces, but having to mould one's personal desires to fit those activities goes a step further. It's no coincidence that urination is often claimed to be female ejaculation, it's not just those stuffy government ministers not understanding the difference. It is generally easier to urinate on demand than ejaculate on demand. A feminist view of porn should at least distinguish between the portrayal of female pleasure and the actual documentation of female pleasure! The portrayal of female pleasure is of feminist interest in as much as the stories told in porn affect it's consumers and with that society, but aren't of particular interest to the performers. And whether any pleasure is actually experienced is, frankly, not necessarily as much of a consideration for many workers as the rate of pay, how exhausting the work is, how damaging the work is and how long the hours are. A pro-worker perspective of porn should concern itself with these at least. The inability to comprehend that actors are acting, and the projection of aspirational middle class values onto sex workers, that forgets our more immediate material concerns and wishes only for our jobs to be fulfilling for us, is not helpful or realistic.

So what difference does it make if this law is detrimental anyway? Not so much in this instance. However, the "support" of sex

the only problem I have with my job. I dislike it because it's work. Were my clients not compelling me to work I think a great deal of what I'm doing would be stuff I'd like to do anyway.

I dislike the way that my job effects the way that I feel outside of work. My clients' level of entitlement seems to know no bounds. Of course they expect me to be on call 24/7 and I will regularly wake up to numerous missed calls and from someone wanting to see me at 4am, for example. But additionally they demonstrate to me that where I live, how I live, what I do with my body etc, are decisions that should be made with their individual wishes in mind, which they invariably believe are representative of all potential clients' wishes. Body-positivity, for example, is a very theoretical concept for me. I want my body to look however my clients want it to look, because I want to be able to pay my bills. I judge myself harshly for not meeting conventional beauty standards, and what I would otherwise like, want for, or accept about my own body are things that have become so immaterial that they're barely relevant or even identifiable to me.

4. Is there anything you do on the job that makes it easier/safer/more enjoyable?

Sure, as a lot of workers, I'm constantly finding ways to save myself time and effort, like copying and pasting stock responses to my most commonly asked questions, or trying to operate in a way that weeds out some time-wasters.

I do as much as I can afford to to keep myself safe. For example, I make my friends aware of when I'm working, where I am and with whom. I get into some sketchy situations sometimes, so I keep myself fighting fit.

I entertain myself in a few ways, like for example phrasing my lies to my clients in such a way that they're not technically lies but that my clients will understand them in the way that they want to understand them. I'm paid to make my clients feel unconditionally good about themselves, which is entirely incompatible with hon-

esty, but I make a game out of expressing things ambiguously in combination with an unambiguously positive demeanour.

I find that how easy, safe, and enjoyable I can make my work, is directly related to whether I can survive on what I'm currently making. For example, if I wanted to save myself a lot of time I could demand a deposit off every client before planning a session with him, but even genuine clients are put off by the prospect of losing a deposit if something goes wrong, so I would lose more of my income than I can afford to. Or if I wanted to make myself safer I could only take clients who are willing to provide a certain level of identifiable information, but again I wouldn't be able to survive on just them so I don't. I might be safer (and would find my work more enjoyable) if I refused any clients who make their disrespect for me clear immediately, but I know exactly where I can afford to set the bar on what I need to tolerate. If I haven't been paid in weeks, I need to accept clients who sound more dangerous than I'd usually be willing to risk.

As something always has to give, I try to make it my time more than my safety. The common fantasy of escorts who only take bookings from people they're "compatible" with is so far removed from the reality of my work that the idea of making my work more enjoyable by picking clients who are actually pleasant to spend time with is a joke to me. I enjoy my time with them by spending it planning my next meal.

5. What does solidarity in your work mean for you?

Solidarity in my work means workers sharing information on abusive clients and time-wasters. It means backing each other up when a client is sending abusive messages, and making it clear that we're not as isolated as they think we are. It means helping each other out with tips, being there for each others safety, and making our resources available to each other. It means taking direct action together against attacks and theft. It means realising that we're stronger together than in competition with each other. It means not trying to distance ourselves from stigma by throwing each other

has been, whether consciously or unconsciously, from the perspective of consumers, or at least people who want to believe the sex industry is a happy sexy place. Or pieces⁹ written by porn company owners pandering to the consumer in the name of sexually liberated empowered feminism. If you can accept that the fact that someone is at work means it's very possible that they don't want to be there, then you're in a better position to support them than if you need them to pretend they enjoy their work because you can't cope with reality. Sex workers can contribute a lot to the discussion on consent, and though I won't expound on this too much myself, I would recommend Charlotte Shane's article "'Getting Away' With Hating It: Consent in the Context of Sex Work,"¹⁰ which I found very relatable and insightful myself.

With the vomiting example, it's vital to distinguish between the wish that it be legal for people to depict it as pleasurable, with the assumption that when they do so, it actually says anything at all about whether they're enjoying it. They might, they might not. Equally when we discuss the fact that depicting spanking is legal if there is a slight reddening, but no longer legal if there are "bruises or welts," it is not enough to just argue that some people enjoy it when they have bruises and welts after a flogging session. For people who are motivated solely by the money to take a beating, it is quite plausible that they would like their resulting injuries to disappear as soon as possible. For myself, if I'm given options during work sex then I try to avoid activities that put a strain on my body, and I particularly avoid those activities that I indulge in in spite of this strain when I'm having sex for fun. This is because I much prefer to be able to put that particular strain on my body later, rather than being too sore or tired after work to spend my time off do-

⁹ <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/the-new-uk-porn-legislation-will-turn-erotic-film-into-boring-unrealistic-male-fantasy-9898052.html>

¹⁰ <http://titsandsass.com/getting-away-with-hating-it-consent-in-the-context-of-sex-work/>

camera, where women are portrayed as having their own sexual desires, that could have a positive affect on people watching it.

However, this perspective has also been presented as being pro sex worker rights. Don't get me wrong, this legislation is a problem for a lot of sex workers. People making their own porn clips in the UK are no longer allowed to portray certain acts, which can affect their income. Cam sex workers can now cross a whole bunch of services off their list, and will likely lose custom to cam workers in other countries who can still provide those services. Whereas previously they could announce "Come and see me squirt!" now this could, under some circumstances, put them on the wrong side of the law. This legislation has real material consequences for people working in the sex industry, and should be denounced due to the restrictions it puts on the acts that workers are able to offer, whether because they enjoy them, or because they're able to charge more for offering them. But the idea that it's infringing on the otherwise fun sexy time we were having at work, is not the most fundamental and in my opinion not the most pressing issue.

Personally I've done some cam work and some porn but mainly what is referred to as "full service escorting" otherwise known as getting paid to have sex with people (off camera). Much of the responses I've seen to these legislation changes have been very reminiscent of my clients' idea of being good to sex workers, ie wanting us to enjoy having sex with them. To be clear, if you want to have sex with someone only if they're genuinely interested in having sex with you, and you want them to feel free to refuse if they aren't interested, then that is a basis for establishing enthusiastic consent. If however you'd like someone to appear to enjoy the sex that they're obliged to be having with you anyway, then you're merely demanding an extra layer of work on top of what they're required to perform, the "affective labour" or "customer service with a smile." If additionally you expect this performance to be genuine, then you're suffering from delusions as to how things actually work, and are demanding too much. Much of what I've seen written about this,

under the bus with "I'm not your stereotypical prostitute, I don't take drugs," or "I shouldn't be pitied or stigmatised, because I enjoy my job." It means focussing on our common goals while not imagining that we're representative. It means always reaching out to each other, and finding ways to deal with our problems together.

Some of this happens more, some of it less. I'd like us to build on the ways we support each other individually and have more confidence to take action collectively.

6. What does a union mean to you?

So so much. While I'm generally marginalised and stigmatised in society for my work, seen mostly as a less valuable human being for it, or occasionally as something fascinating and exotic, in my union I feel like I meet people on equal terms. We're all there for the same thing, whatever our circumstances. It's refreshing for my job to be seen as a job, and not who I am as a person.

While some organisations might preoccupy themselves with why's and what if's, debating the ideological implications of our work, when and how our industry could be abolished, and what, if anything, is socially useful about our work, I can depend on my union to be beautifully practical instead. My fellow workers in other industries ask me about my actual current conditions, what I want to do to improve them, and how they can support me, without expecting me to justify myself first.

Being in an organisation that's about workers supporting each other gives me confidence in standing up for myself at work. Sex workers can be fairly isolated and clients try to use this to their advantage. I don't want to back down when it comes to my health and my safety, and I love that I'm in contact with other workers who will have my back if I experience repercussions for standing my ground. The effect this has, both practically in my ability to assert myself at work, and emotionally, in the way that I view myself, is invaluable to me.

Porn, Sex Positivity, and Working Class Solidarity

September 18, 2015

This article was originally published on the RABL blog.

The UK's gradually expanding porn law restrictions have been going on for years and eventually came to a climax the end of 2014, when previously existing restrictions⁵ were applied to all pornographic material made in the UK. Though I still see the occasional protest against this, and a few campaigners are still trying to overturn it, the flurry of outrage⁶ has largely died down. My aim here is not to defend the ban, but to critique the way this has been discussed, so we might be able to distinguish in future between what some members of the public want the sex industry to be, and an expression of working class solidarity towards those of us who work in it.

It's obvious to most people that the list of banned acts represents pure moralising, and that the people who made this list seem to have a particular idea of what normal sex is and should be (part of which, as a number of people have noted,⁷ seems to be based on the idea that sex is something that women do for men). The legislation is clearly not about what should or shouldn't happen on a porn set, but is entirely about what should be depicted and how. This is no mistake, the changes are part of the Obscene Publications Act, designed to outlaw any material that "tends to deprave and corrupt." The fact that some of the banned acts are also things that many workers will want to avoid at work is coincidental and not the purpose of the ban. This becomes apparent when we see

⁵ <http://mylesjackman.com/index.php/my-blog/106-the-following-content-is-not-acceptable>

⁶ <http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2014/dec/12/face-sitting-protest-outside-parliament-against-new-porn-rules>

⁷ http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2014/12/02/uk-porn-law-sexist-female-ejaculation-ban_n_6254678.html

that vomiting, for example from facefucking, is something that is acceptable "if it is not performed as part of the sexual act, and is not visibly enjoyed by the participants." The important phrase is "visibly enjoyed," as the issue is not whether or not the worker is actually enjoying having the back of their throat hit until they vomit, but whether or not they have the inclination or acting ability to portray someone who does enjoy it. And according to the OPA they should not appear to enjoy it as it might give people watching the idea that this could be fun. However if your work involves occasional uncontrolled vomiting and you look suitably unimpressed by it when it happens, then as far as this legislation is concerned that's fine and nothing to worry about.

Whether consciously or not, a lot of the responses⁸ to this have mirrored the same attitude in the sense that they've not been about what the work is like for those people having sex on camera, but about what consumers think should or shouldn't be depicted, and how it should be represented, and what porn should look like to portray sex in a certain way to society. Progressives all over the UK have complained that they want female pleasure to be depicted and so are against the ban on female ejaculation, that they want women to be shown as empowered in sex and so are against the ban on face-sitting, that they want a variety of sexual acts to be represented so we aren't conditioned to masturbate only to the same tired misogynistic porn formula. This is fair enough. It's not only films and high art that influence our society and how we think, but all the media we consume. Even if all the porn actors on set were to be bored out of their minds, hate each other, and feel disgusted by the thought of having to get it on for the camera, if they produce a work of fiction that depicts the healthy negotiating of consent, where the people having sex are smiling at each other while on

⁸ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/sex/11270359/Porn-laws-Banning-spanking-is-bonkers-and-downright-frightening.html>