

Organising sex workers in the UK: what's in it for trade unions?

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The current attacks on workers and wide-ranging structural changes in the labour market underline the necessity for unions to adapt to the needs of vulnerable and precarious workers. In this article Ana Lopes of CESR and Jennifer Webber of the GMB union reflect upon the experience of organising sex workers in the UK in the context of union renewal and possibility of new forms of unionism. They point out that sex workers, far from being a small and unique group of workers, encapsulate many of the characteristics of the new constituencies in union renewal efforts. The sex worker activist base organises beyond traditional union boundaries and is deeply involved in community and self-organisation. Therefore, unions would do well to look at their experience and support their efforts.

The GMB Adult Entertainment Branch

In March 2002 the GMB, Britain's General Union, established the Adult Entertainment Branch, bringing sex workers¹ into trade union membership for the very first time in the UK. The branch recruited in several sectors of the industry: prostitution, pornography, dancing, and adult chat lines among others. This short article is based on two pieces of research carried out at two different periods in time. Firstly, an action research project whose core objective was the unionisation of sex workers in the UK. Thirty semi-structured ethnographic interviews were carried out, as well as participant observation in the sex workers' rights movement and the industry itself. The action element of the project consisted of setting up an informal association of sex workers and allies in the UK (the International Union of Sex Workers). This group subsequently affiliated to the GMB Union. Secondly, a decade on, a research study examined the subsequent development of sex worker trade union organising in the UK. The project involved observation and twelve semi-structured interviews with sex worker union members and two with union officials.

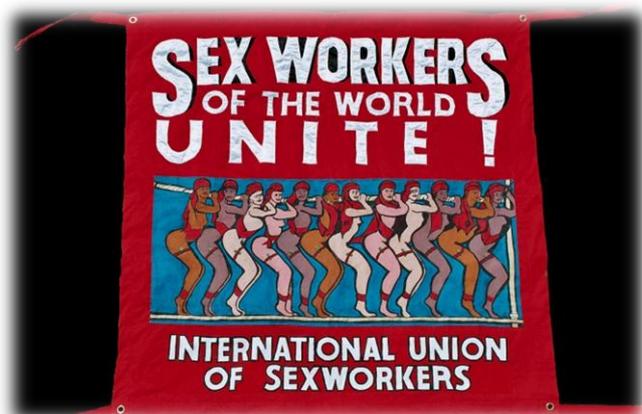
Although some sectors of the sex industry are semi-legal with many establishments operating clandestinely, others are legal (e.g. adult chat lines). The GMB sex workers branch was the product of two years of sex workers' independent organisation in both the legal and semi-legal sectors under the name of the International Union of Sex Workers. This independent group was mostly London based, but held an electronic discussion group that included sex workers and non-sex workers (supporters from other activist groups, women's groups, etc.) from different parts of the country and different countries. The group also published three issues of a

¹ Sex worker' is an umbrella term that includes a variety of workers in what can be called the sex industry. The term was coined by activist Carol Leigh in 1980. While at the time of its inception it carried a politicised value and was used by writers as a 'positioning device' (Koken 2010: 34-5) it has become largely accepted as the 'standard' term and seen as more appropriate than terms such as prostitute which carry negative and stigmatising connotations.

magazine, RESPECT (Rights and Equality for Sex Professionals and Employees in Connected Trades). From its inception, the sex workers' branch elected officers who received union training and met regularly in London.

The branch produced a union benefits leaflet tailored to sex worker members: benefits included discounts in self defence classes and lingerie products. Briefings were also produced by the Regional Health and Safety Officer covering relevant areas such as pole dancing. Branch activities included help in gaining qualifications for those who wanted to work in different fields. Members regularly added colour to trade union demonstrations with a banner that read 'Sex Workers of the World Unite!' The GMB also signed voluntary recognition agreements with table dance clubs, Majingo's in London Docklands area and Club Crème in Bristol.

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When sex workers in the UK first gained union membership² in 2002, the GMB was eager to embrace new and precarious groups of workers: casino workers, private hire drivers, restaurant and hotel workers, tattooists, chiropractors as well as migrant workers working in a range of occupations. Some work was done specifically to organise migrant workers; this included a dedicated branch in the Southern Region, 'Know Your Rights' courses, English language courses inside and outside the workplace, contacts with unions in countries of origin, attempts to organise within communities (through church and social events) and advisory groups at all levels of the union. With the new dedicated branches for these groups of workers (including sex workers), organising models and union structures were to some extent changed, moving away from structures based upon employers. For example, the hotel and leisure branch organised cultural events for Romanian and Polish members and their friends and families. Some education courses were arranged for members rather than for workplace reps only. The subject matters for education were widened to include language and skills classes for members rather than being based on purely representational issues.

Since then, however, branch, regional and national leadership has changed; a Coalition government came into power and the recession began to bite. The GMB retreated to prioritise the old core groups of workers and particularly public sector workers. Recruitment and numbers

² There have been experiences of unionisation within the sex industry in different parts of the world. Sex workers were first accepted as official members of a trade union when Australian sex workers joined the Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union (now United Voice) in 1996. In the same year workers of the Lusty Lady peep show club in San Francisco, USA, joined the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). In Argentina, AMMAR, the female sex workers' association, is affiliated to the CTA, a national trade union federation. In the Netherlands, the grassroots organisation De Rode Draad (Red Thread) is affiliated to the Federatie Nederlandse Vakbeweging (Dutch Union Federation-FNV). More recently, in 2006, a sex workers' organisation in India (the Karnataka Sex Workers' Union) has established itself as a workers' union and affiliated to the New Trade Union Initiative (NTUI). Sex workers in France established the independent union STRASS (Syndicat du Travail Sexuel) in 2009.

became a priority. Any attempts at innovative organisation were dropped and the union's regional leadership appeared to be reticent to promote sex worker organising.

This represents a missed opportunity since unions need to become more inclusive organisations (Colgan and Ledwith 2002) that speak to the needs not only of relatively privileged workers, but also of more 'vulnerable' labour groups (Verma and Kochan 2004) such as women (Stratchan and Burgess 2004), migrants (Lucio and Perrett 2009) and young workers (Hyman 2004; Tailby and Pollert 2011), those who are in 'atypical' employment (Heery 2005) or who work in the informal sector (Gallin 2001) and home workers (Burchielli, Buttigieg and Delaney 2008). The sex industry is varied and comprises many different activities and types of establishments. A significant number of those who work in this industry are women, migrant workers, LGBT and young workers. Many work from home, are atomised and isolated, are self-employed or work without contracts. Therefore, they share many characteristics, issues and problems with other vulnerable and precarious workers that unions need to become relevant to and include.

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Organising beyond the workplace and employer

Sex worker activism is also relevant in that it is characteristic of new forms of unionism, for example, community unionism. In addition to embedding themselves within the more traditional trade union movement, branch members are often involved in a number of activities outside of the union: attendance at international forums; international internet networks; the production of articles, videos and other cultural work. The sex worker branch is part of a wider community of sex worker activists.

Thus sex worker activists' way of organising is akin to community union organising. As with migrant workers and other precarious groups, identity and community are central to their activism and the union is missing an opportunity by failing to respond to these. Whilst valuing union membership and support,

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sex worker activists use other channels of communication and ways of organising that fall outside the traditional union modus operandi. They use community and IT networks as their primary methods of communication and organising to great effect; for example in the Sex Workers' Open University, a project of workshops,

debates and campaigning against the criminalisation of sex work. Other projects outside the branch, but initiated and led by branch members, include X:Talk, a co-operative that, alongside campaigning, organises English classes for sex workers (delivered by sex workers). There are several e-mail and Facebook networks operating as well. Thus a significant part of organising for sex worker rights has been done outside the branch and despite of the GMB union.

Our interviewees also expressed an interest in working with groups of migrant workers in order to organise and recruit to the union:

"I suggest that the union should bring precarious and migrant workers together. Many might work as waitresses, domestic servants AND sex workers. They may not identify as sex workers, but all their work is precarious."

A theme that emerged from our interviews is that there is a mutual lack of understanding between sex worker union activists and union officials. Activists are dissatisfied with the union's inability to take on board many of their issues, practices and ways of communicating.

Some sex worker members expressed disappointment that the union was so bureaucratic and appeared to be mostly interested in taking union dues from sex workers, but not necessarily provide the necessary support for their self-organisation:

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Our interviews also showed that union officials are reluctant to allow sex workers to develop their organisation freely and publicly or to pursue non-traditional methods of organising. In the words of a GMB official:

"Often people in the union don't understand the difficulties for sex workers. When they get up and speak at meetings they get a lot of abuse from other trade unionists and this puts them off unions. The London Regional Committee is very supportive; however there is sometimes a snobbish attitude within the region which doesn't want to promote the branch." (Regional Organiser)

Whilst there have been successes - for instance in organising with other unions through the Trades Council in Tower Hamlets against the council's proposal to refuse licensing for table dancing clubs which would have led to the loss of over 100 jobs - the GMB union has not always listened to sex workers' needs and demands. In the run-up to the 2012 Olympics, because of unjustified rumours that 40,000 undocumented women migrants would descend upon East London to work as prostitutes, the police undertook a number of raids which persecuted existing sex workers in the area. The GMB region was asked to speak out and support a campaign to support these workers, but the answer came back that the union would only support campaigns concerning 'membership', implying that sex workers were not members. (Letter from Regional Secretary in answer to a motion from L43 Branch)

Conclusion

The development of the GMB Adult Entertainment Group shows that although it is not easy to organise sex workers in unions, it is possible. Despite this much of the (limited) literature on sex worker unionising is rather pessimistic in its assessment of the possibilities and its effectiveness (West 2000; Gall 2006 and 2007)³, yet the burgeoning of sex worker activist groups and initiatives bodes well for this group of workers. Sex workers are not unique in being mostly self-employed, atomised and migrants. Unions need to listen to their demands as reflecting the needs of wider vulnerable and precarious groups of workers since these are critical for union renewal (and survival). Rather than curtailing sex worker modes of organising that fall outside of traditional union modes of organising, unions would do well to embrace new ways of organising that place community and self-organisation at their core.

³ For an exception see Hardy (2010)

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