

Building a Sex Workers' Trade Union: Challenges and Perspectives

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It is a far from straightforward decision to found a union in a sector in which such an organisation has never existed before. For the most part, trade unions today have a (long) history: it may not be rare for workers to join a union, but it certainly is for them to participate in one's founding and initial building. It is acutely challenging when the work itself to be organised is not entirely legal; when most of the workers are migrants in very precarious situations, who are regularly arrested and deported; when the legal context overlooks, and contributes to, high levels of violence and exploitation; and when, as if all of this was not enough, those who should be showing solidarity are on the other side, fighting to increase the criminalisation of the workers' activity.

Despite all of these difficulties, this challenge has been taken-up by sex workers in many countries. Nowadays sex workers' unions are full agents in social and political struggle, raising a variety of issues, such as women's emancipation and anti-racism, redefining work and fighting against exploitation .

In France, in 2009, STRASS-Syndicat du travail sexuel (Sex Workers' Trade Union) was created. Despite harsh criticisms, it became a strong voice in the debates about sex work – its strength coming from its capacity to allow sex workers to relay the struggles they face in fighting for their rights.

Reframing prostitution as a sex work: theoretical issues

Prostitutes' revolts are documented throughout history, but it is commonly acknowledged that the 'modern' movement of sex workers was born in 1975 in France, when women in Lyon occupied Saint Nizier Church. The women were protesting against their daily arrests for standing in the streets, and the fact that many had recently been killed without any action from the authorities against these crimes. The occupation of churches by prostitutes extended to other cities, not only in France but also in England, where the English Collective of Prostitutes (ECP) had recently been founded. In the decades that followed, in the face of the AIDS epidemic, sex workers mobilised essential campaigns around community health organization, effectively learning to protect themselves against this new threat.

In 2002, the arrival of Nicolas Sarkozy at the French Ministry of Interior gave yet another dynamic to the movement: his 2003 Law on Internal Security introduced the offense of 'passive' solicitation, which was nothing less than an outlawing of street sex work. This law, still applied today, has been incredibly harmful, forcing sex workers to work in more isolated areas, where they are exposed to more violence, precariousness and health risks. It has also been used as a very efficient tool against immigration, legitimating the arrest and deportation of migrant sex workers.

It was in such a context that sex workers moved towards political action. They began to self-organise, particularly around mass annual meetings and workshops, at which they raised among themselves the many issues they face. Eventually, they decided to build their own autonomous organisation in order to make their voices heard, to try to intervene in the political discussions that concerned them and to encourage their colleagues to do the same, providing them with the necessary skills to engage in struggle. Some similar, small, organizations already existed, but a different perspective was raised in the new organisation: sex workers wanted to organise as workers, in a trade union. It was a perspective that would allow them to shed new light on the issues that concern them.

The reframing of 'prostitution' issues as (sex) workers' issues is not new. It is widely reported that Carole Leigh, sex worker and feminist activist, created the term 'sex work' during a feminist workshop in San Francisco in 1978. Marxist-feminists, especially those engaged in the Wages for Housework movement in the early 1970s, built a theoretical framework in which sex was considered as a part of reproductive work, and prostitution read as an externalised, commodified form of work – one that was also performed by housewives for free. Whereas talking about 'prostituted women', as many anti-prostitution feminists do, leads to categorising women who sell sexual services separately from those who don't, talking about sex work does not separate the 'good', 'honest' woman from the 'bad', 'fallen' or 'venal' one. This allows for a new basis to build solidarity among women in order to fight the exploitation they experience in all aspects of their lives.

In this perspective developed by STRASS, talking about 'sex work' not only works towards removing the stigma surrounding sex work – a stigma that threatens all women – but also serves to shed light on the political and economic factors causing the exploitation and violence experienced by sex workers. Indeed, when this exploitation and violence is used by policy makers to legitimate new repressive laws against sex work, it is necessary to recall that these working conditions are actually reinforced by a repressive and stigmatising context, against which workers should be able to organise in order to fight for their emancipation.

Starting a union at point zero: practical issues

It is a challenge to start any union; to start a sex workers' union is another thing entirely. Firstly, because of the semi-illegal status of sex work, reaching the people working in the industry is no easy task. In France, as in most European countries, sex workers are not allowed to share a workplace, and even when they do – in illegal brothels such as saunas, massage parlors, and so on – organising is hardly easy, as it inevitably involves attracting attention to their work, revealing the illegal activities taking place, and thus risking the closure of their workplaces. This is surely not any kind of solution for workers facing bad working conditions. In addition, as with much precarious labour, for many people working in the sex industry the job is temporary – and/or is considered to be so by the workers themselves, an attitude that can make workers, in all industries, reluctant to struggle for better working conditions.

Because of stigmatisation, the fear of speaking publicly as sex workers, and of facing troubles in one's personal and social life as a result, is also a big obstacle in organising sex workers. Such stigmatisation is also one reason among others that sex workers often have such bad experiences in their work: because 'whores' are so often depicted as passive objects, reduced to endure male desires, without bargaining power, many people, including those going into sex work, do not know that skills exist which can help to reduce or avoid the harms that can be caused by their work. Given that it is illegal to give advice to people entering in the sex industry – it is considered to be 'encouraging prostitution', which is to say 'pimping' – it is difficult to raise awareness.

Power dynamics are an issue not just between sex workers and non-sex workers, but between sex workers themselves. Anti-sex-work movements nurture divisions when they pretend to be working in the interest of trafficking victims as they push for criminalization. As a result of their campaigning, each generation of migrant sex workers are sometimes accused, by other sex workers, of being part of 'criminal networks', not knowing the 'business rules', or of undercutting prices. Such a divisive tendency also appears in some 'pro-sex' or 'sex positive' speeches that insist on the 'sexual freedom' issue: such a rhetoric ignores the experience of those for whom sex work is a traumatizing and exploitative experience, and who cannot therefore recognise themselves in this approach.

It is also the case that, because many sex workers work independently, and because of the increasing precariousness in the sex industry, there's a lot of economic competition between sex workers. The existence of a union as a place where people, including those in different sectors, who might not usually meet can do so (for example, street workers and escorts) has had very positive effects in this regard, allowing sex workers to find and practice solidarity instead of mistrust toward their colleagues.

Despite these difficulties, many by no means exclusive to the sex industry, trade-union work is not so different from that in other such organisations. Most of the activity consists of making sex workers aware of their rights, in order to help them defend themselves against the many abuses they experience, whether from the police or third parties; accompanying those facing administrative or penal issues; and fighting for more rights. In so doing, the union has helped create a situation where sex workers can self-organise, in or outside the union, building their own community structures - for instance, Chinese sex workers have recently created their own autonomous organisation - sharing information in order to react quickly and effectively to arrests, raids, or violence from a client.

Another central part of a union's work in the sex industry one very much needed, is to struggle against repressive laws by entering into political debates in order to make our voices heard.

Reclaiming sex workers rights : political issues

Once we consider the issues so far raised - sex work as part of reproductive work, the regulation and restrictions applied to sex work, the struggle for sex workers' rights - it becomes clear that sex work deserves much more attention than, and attention different from, that usually offered by discussions about the statistics of 'free' and 'trafficked' sex workers. It would be more useful to consider the regulation, or criminalisation, of sex work, with regards to the context of a neoliberal globalised capitalism in which this gendered and racialised industry takes place.

If we analyse sex work in relation, for instance, to the situation of other women participating in reproductive work, whether housewives or domestic workers, the criminalisation and stigmatisation of sex workers can be read as a way to constitute them as a reserve army of reproductive labor, guaranteeing a supply of cheap (or even free) reproductive labor, by the threat it poses to all women who would seek to refuse the terms of their work or marriage contract. From such a perspective, it becomes clear that the fight against whore stigma, which hurts not just those women who do not 'honestly' earn their living, but any who do not obey patriarchal rules of women's sexuality, should be a priority of the feminist agenda.

However, many feminists promote more criminalisation, perhaps believing that women's emancipation cannot happen without the help of repressive laws. Allegedly, they do not mean to target women selling sex, but rather clients or so called 'pimps'; but when a landlord has to make his tenant homeless because she's a sex worker, because he fears he will be arrested for pimping, we

must ask how such criminalisation can possibly contribute to women's emancipation. Furthermore, how do such feminists suppose clients or 'pimps' will be located without increasing the surveillance of women themselves? It must be noted that the majority of sex workers in the global North, as well as people working with them, are not white, so the fight against prostitution often contributes to the reinforcement of migration control and of the systemic surveillance and imprisonment of non-white populations.

While discourses promoting the criminalisation of sex work tend to individualise and essentialise the situation of sex workers – focusing on sex work as violence against women – a trade-unionist approach must seek to recontextualise this situation, in order to understand the dynamics from which it emerges. The issue of violence against sex workers, as well as that of 'trafficking', cannot be considered without taking into account what makes possible such situations and maintains them. It seems, for instance, naive to ask for state interventions against traffickers, without calling into question the restrictions on migrations that drive many third-world women to take on huge debts in order to migrate.

In many parts of the world, sex workers receive the strong support from (a minority of) feminist and LGBT organizations, and this is very encouraging. It is not a coincidence, since sex work involves sex, that groups engaged in campaigns for sexual freedoms increasingly support sex workers. However, if sex work involves sex, it also, and especially, involves work.

It is therefore very disappointing that much of the Left takes part in campaigns for increased criminalisation of sex work, on the behalf of the workers of an industry about which most of them know nothing, denying sex workers their rights as workers, and thereby demonstrating their inadequacy with regards to theorising women's work and, more generally, women's emancipation.

The rare integration of sex workers in general trade unions, however, continues to inspire sex workers here. They do not ask for permission to participate in the class struggle they are already an integral part of.

Merteuil's article is also available in Greek (from KollectNews) and Arabic (from Al-Manshour). We are republishing the version first published in Salvage.