

Sex Workers Join Britain's General Union!

Transcript of a presentation by Martin Smith, a labour organiser who helped set up an official Sex Workers' Branch of Britain's General Union (GMB)

Hello, I'm Martin Smith. I'd like to say a few things very quickly about the GMB and our culture. And then I think it would be useful to make a few comments about how we actually dealt with the challenges of getting acceptance for a sex workers' branch and won active support within the union, and also how we negotiated the autonomy of the branch within the GMB structure.

We're a general union, as Ana said, and I think we were formed in 1889, so we've been around an awfully long time. And looking back, culturally we've always been a union that set out to organise invisible workers across the UK—the kind of workers that polite society wants to marginalise and push away. Of course in terms of your industry, it's the most marginalised industry you can imagine. We also organise in casinos, home workers, and in the textile trade. However, 120 years ago those were different groups of workers than we organise now—120 years ago it was the gas stokers, the men who shovelled the coal into the coke retorts so that polite society could turn on their nice gas lights in their Victorian homes. Again at the time a lot of people argued that those people shouldn't be unionised. They were unskilled workers. They didn't look like the rest of the trade union movement. The argument the GMB has made for all its history is that groups of workers have the right to organise and push ahead.

Our position is that no work is illegal. We've gone further than that in terms of paperless workers, and call for amnesty for paperless workers. We think it's very important that we take the position that simply putting a roof over your head and feeding your children should not be illegal—in

any state, in any particular time, in any part of the world. We demand equal treatment for all workers in law, and particularly with respect to the nature of their work.

The right to self-organisation is absolutely critical and essential to what we've always tried to do. And the truth of it is, whatever industry it is—including the sex industry—we will say to workers

that we'll actually support and train and give leadership and our experience to any group of workers that approaches us to organise. But we simply cannot organise an industry for the group of workers. So the challenge to sex workers coming to us is to say, "We will support you. We will take you into the union—but you actually have to face up to the personal challenge and the collective challenge of organising your own industry." And like any other group of workers that means defining exactly where the balance point is going to have to be

in this industry, between personal liberties and individual rights, and the collective responsibility and collective action through strength and the type of strength of action we need to take.

So for all those reasons when I was approached—having spoken at a sweatshop conference—by Ana Lopes, and I had a few people in front of me out signing volunteers up to take to the streets of East London and take on these issues. And Ana Lopes came up to me and looked me in the eye and said, "I'm a sex worker—can I join your union?" And apart from being, I think, one of the few people who managed to not be speechless for a few seconds, you can see in terms of the course of the GMB that we had no other option but to say yes. There was no reason at all to say no to sex workers coming into our union. The deal is that we'll take on and tackle issues.

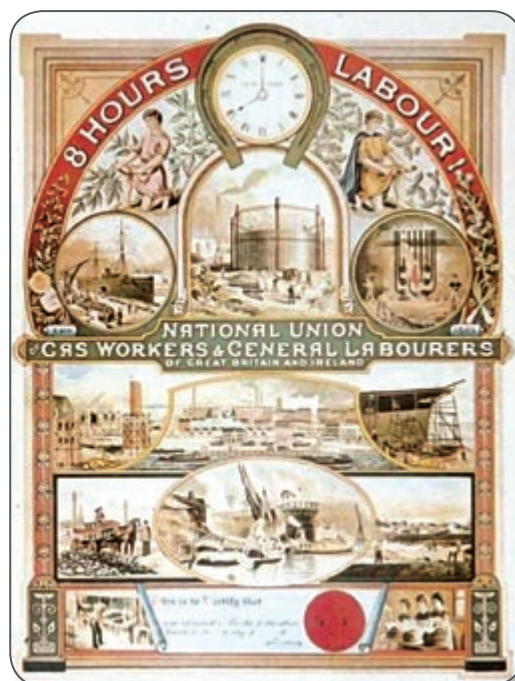


ILLUSTRATION: National Union of Gas Workers & General Labourers emblem commemorates their win of the 8-hour workday, 1889. © National Maritime Museum, London

We needed to create a level playing field at first. We needed to gain acceptance of this idea within the union, and we had to create safe space. It was very clear to us. We sat and we planned this very carefully. It was made clear to us that if we just approach our union open arms and said, “What do you guys think about organising sex workers?” without any kind of plan of how we’re going to manage the democracy of our union’s supporters, we would be shot dead at the first approach. We would have never been able to overcome the opposition. The core thing we did at the start was to decide to manage the media, and I think in hindsight that was very useful to do. When we actually announced what we were doing and we started bringing people together for the first meeting, the decision of the branch was that I would actually be the fall guy in terms of the media. Because we weren’t going to let the media get a hold of any of our members, of any of the activists, while we were still developing things. And I have to say, 90 per cent of the media that approached us, we bounced away as being not at all of any value to us, and that was the key, important point.

We had to approach this debate in the union, not on the assumption that just because we were passionate about the rights of sex workers and the right of sex workers to organise, everyone therefore would just fall in line, because of the strength of our passion and our commitment to the idea. What was key was that we recognised that opposition was going to be there. We had to make sure the opposition had nowhere to express itself, and it had nowhere to go. I think it was critical that we worked initially through the women’s committee—called the Equal Rights Committee—to make sure that we took the argument as it presented itself between feminism—or brands of feminism—and the labour approach to this. We had to tackle that very, very well, and, I have to say, I give a major credit to Ana for this. We got the support of all the women’s committees and all the active women in the union.

The TUC (Trades Union Congress) Women’s Committee is a committee in our trade union movement that wouldn’t necessarily have helped us enormously if they had voted for this in the end. But if we had taken a vote at this committee and lost it, it would have damaged us immensely. One of the proudest moments I had (not being at the meeting), was when Ana Lopes at the head of our delegation phoned me and said, “*Martin, I*

think we should move this motion.” I said, “*I’m not sure we should move this motion. If we move this motion and we lose Ana, you know we lose a lot.*” And she said, “*Martin, we’re going to move the motion, and we’re going to win.*” I have to say she was dead right, and I was immensely proud of that.

We also had to recognise that not all of the initial jokes and comments and ribaldry that came forward actually demonstrated real opposition, either. We actually had to consciously allow people to get used to the idea, and try and make a distinction between the real genuine opposition that was going to be a problem to us, and just people getting used to the idea. You have to allow people time on a very sensitive basis. And I think it’s a great credit to the way Ana has argued this within the union. That is to say, not that we believe there is no opposition in the union, and no opposition in the TUC, but there’s actually nowhere for it to go.

Another one of the proudest moments I had was when Ana moved the motion at our congress two years ago. Our union, although it’s over 50 per cent women membership across the country, it’s still dominated by men. And to see every single man in our congress—600 of them—stand up and applaud Ana coming down off the stage, and then vote unanimously in favour of it! It was, I think, something that Ana, even to this day, doesn’t realise the significance of that within the GMB. That wouldn’t have happened without some really detailed and hard, thought-through political manoeuvring.

In terms of the autonomy of the branch: we set up an adult entertainment branch, and we allow specific groups within that branch to organise in their area. If there are policies to be developed

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“Fierés” (Proud)

PHOTO: Maj Christensen





ILLUSTRATION: *Illustrated London News*, December 14, 1889
© National Maritime Museum, London

Gas Workers Protest, 1889

In March 1889, workers at the Beckton Gas Works were laid off. Gas workers all over London held protest meetings in response. At these meetings Will Thorne (a well-known public speaker from the Social Democratic Federation), suggested they start a union and the National Union of Gas Workers & General Labourers was born. Thorne became the union's General Secretary, and within a few weeks he had negotiated an eight-hour workday in the industry.

From the start the Gas Workers' Union promoted equality for male and female workers. Eleanor Marx, (Karl Marx's daughter) helped draft the union's rule book. Rule 2 stated: "*The union will seek to obtain for the same work the same wages for women as for men.*"

March of the Bristol "White Slaves"

The Gas Workers' Union had established a strong branch in Bristol by October 1892, when Sarah Edwards (with the help of Enid Stacey, a prominent socialist) approached the union about working conditions at Sanders Sweet Factory. Sanders had increased work hours and took away their 15-minute meal-break after the workers had protested the long hours and large fines. Edwards was fired. The 300 women workers (nicknamed "Sanders' White Slaves") joined the union and went on strike.

Members of both the Gas Workers' and Dockers' Unions regularly joined the women on their daily fundraising marches. Police became increasingly hostile, and, in December, the marches were banned after a conflict with police. The women obeyed the ban and instead went to the Horsefair to collect donations. That evening police and militia charged the crowds with batons, swords and lances. Unbelievably, no one was killed, but many were injured.

Still, the strikers remained undefeated. Financial support for the union rose dramatically. During the strike, 25 women were arrested and charged, but the union successfully defended every case. The strike lasted until mid-1893, when Sanders finally agreed to many of the workers' terms, and improved working conditions.

The National Union of Gas Workers & General Labourers eventually grew to become Britain's General Union (GMB).

SOURCE: "The Bristol 'white slaves' strike and the Gas Workers' banners," by Peter Carter. Working Class Movement Library ([Web: http://www.wcml.org.uk](http://www.wcml.org.uk))

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that relate to dancers, it's the dancers who make those policies. That's the principle we follow. The IUSW is part of the branch, but the branch exists as a branch of the GMB. The principle of the union as we organise in marginalised industries is to try and make sure we fit the union around the needs of workers, not demand that workers fit into the needs of the union. And that principle has informed what we've done. Generally speaking, I think it works, and generally speaking we try to give the maximum amount of autonomy to the branch to make policy.

I think there have been one or two occasions where the IUSW policy has been one thing, and GMB policy has been a different thing, and we've lived with that. We've found that actually the world doesn't come to an end because we disagree with each other. We don't have to control everything IUSW thinks, and they don't have to demand we stay on the same side. As long as we've accepted that difference, it's actually worked. At the end of the day, we have to stick to the fact that we are a union trying to organise to gain power for workers in this industry. It does mean people have to be members of the trade union. It does mean people have to be active in the trade union. It does mean people have to agree to the broad principles of the rule book of the union. It's very important that we take this industry seriously, and—once we create the level playing field for the workers in this industry—that we move ahead on the same basis that we would for any other.

So those were the points that I would add to what Ana said. I also wanted to congratulate the conference, and to say that maybe one of the greatest things that has happened here is that there was a very quick breakaway workshop of six trade unions in Europe. Just now, upstairs in the lobby, was the first time we've all met each other to say hello. Now I can't say we launched any major network or started any initiative, but this conference has been a vehicle for the six unions in Europe organising sex workers to say hello to each other for the first time. And maybe, just maybe, it's the beginning of a European network.

Thank you. □

♥ Martin Smith is a labour organiser with Britain's General Union. He lives in London, UK.