

International Union of Sex Workers!

Presentation by Ana Lopes from the International Union of Sex Workers, London, UK

In the year 2000 I got a job in the sex industry and I realised that I had one of the best jobs in the world. But I had a few problems: I faced discrimination and stigmatisation, and I wasn't treated as a proper worker. I was appalled with this, and I thought, "why?" This is a brilliant job. I didn't know anything about the industry at that time. I didn't know that there was a sex workers' movement.

So I started speaking with other people in the industry. And then I called a meeting in my flat. We didn't have any money or any structure. We just got together—a few sex workers from different sectors and some allies, mostly friends from university who supported what I was trying to do. We decided that we needed an association as a platform to claim rights.

The International Union of Sex Workers—an informal collective of sex workers and allies—emerged in the year 2000. We first arose as a small coalition to plan a demonstration through Soho—London's red light district, on International Women's Day, in March 2000. We paraded through the streets of Soho accompanied by a samba band.

Since then we have made many contacts with sex workers from different sectors, and have begun publishing a regular bulletin, *RESPECT!* Our first issue features an article by Rona, recipient of the Sexual Freedom Coalition's "Sex Worker of the Year" award. Rona expresses pride in her work and makes a powerful case for social recognition and acceptance, which she hopes will lead to unionisation of the whole industry.

We called ourselves a "union" because we realised we were a collective of *workers*—and a collective of workers is a union. Since the beginning, we have been very clear that our main demands were the recognition of our work as legitimate, and the full

range of labour rights. And we called ourselves "international" because our industry has gone global, and it seems to make sense, if we are to respond effectively to the issues and problems we face, to organise on a global level too.

We started as a small group based in London but, having since set up a webpage and an electronic discussion list, we have truly become international. Nowadays, sex workers and allies from many different countries and regions of the world use the list to discuss issues of common interest, share information, etc.

Although we called ourselves a union, we weren't recognised as such. In 2001 we began approaching existing unions to demand that we be accepted as members. After

many negative responses, we approached Britain's General Union (GMB), which is one of the strongest trades unions in the UK.

Our strategy was to build on common ground. Knowing that the GMB had started to organise workers in sweatshops, we made them see that the arguments for organising sweatshop workers could also be applied to sex workers.

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Je suis fière d'être une pute!

PHOTO: Maj Christensen



CENTRE PHOTO: Ana Lopes (credit: Quentin Deltour, *Espace P*)

Human Rights, Labour and Migration, Brussels (2005)



PHOTO COURTESY: Ana Lopes

Sexing in the Street

Friday, March 8, 2000

On the same day as International Women's Day, March 8th, sex workers took to the street to celebrate the Sex Strike/Sex Pride carnival in Soho. The march began in Piccadilly at the statue of Eros, the god of love, and moved along to Soho led by samba drummers and dancers. The event was supported by the International Union of Sex Workers and the Sexual Freedom Coalition.



PHOTO COURTESY: Ana Lopes

IUSW at the Soho Carnival Parade, May 1, 2002

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In March 2002 we finally joined a fully-recognised union. This means that we have achieved what seemed impossible, only two years after our first campaign. We are now recognised by the TUC (Trades Union Congress). And we established one major basic labour right for all sex workers in the UK: the right to join and be represented by an officially-recognised trades union.

Obviously, we have a long way to go. Other industries have been unionised for a very long time, but major unions like the GMB have no experience in organising sex workers. Moreover, workers in our industry have few experiences of unionisation—although sex workers have been

unionised at different times in various parts of the world, the industry has never before been unionised in the UK.

The Sex Workers' Branch of the GMB represents male, female and transgender workers from all different sectors of the sex industry. Although other people who work in related trades (e.g., project workers, sex shop assistants, erotic writers) may join the branch, decisions are made solely by sex workers. Our branch is based in the London region and has 300 official members, who pay monthly dues. We'll soon form a national branch, and sex workers in other parts of the country can already join our branch. Compared to the total number of sex workers, our current membership is tiny. However, for a union branch, this is a strong membership. And given how hidden the sex industry is and that its unionisation is such a novel idea, our numbers are quite impressive.

A range of benefits can be gained from being in a trades union. Collective benefits include being able to use the union's political clout for lobbying. For instance, the UK's Home Office started a review of prostitution laws in 2004. Because we are organised, we were consulted on this; we have a voice.

Individual benefits include free legal advice, as well as various kinds of training. Members who desire improved working conditions can study self-defence, pole dancing, etc. Those who wish to leave the industry (or not) can take courses in language skills, resumé writing, information technologies skills, etc.

There are some problems that we must overcome, and some limitations to the potential success of our partnership with the trades union movement. First, it is not always easy to manage a partnership between a small grassroots group and a big, bureaucratic institution, such as a trades union. And sex workers may sometimes feel that union organisers and officers are "cold," or don't understand their issues. It's important for sex worker leaders and allies to function as "bridges" between the sex-work community and the trades union.

Although we are part of the GMB, we are a highly autonomous branch. That's a very good thing, as it means that we retain our identity and the power to make decisions. On the other hand, it also means that we can't expect lots of funding or other support from the union. So we'll need to find our own means of support.

Some sex workers may be suspicious about the idea of joining a union. There are certain barriers to recruitment, primarily because most of the work in this industry is semi-legal or illegal, which makes many of us want to remain anonymous. Although the union represents all workers, regardless of immigration status—and although personal data is kept strictly confidential and work names are accepted—fears concerning stigma and immigration status deter many sex workers from joining the union.

It is perhaps easier to organise sex workers within legal businesses. In fact, the GMB union has been recognised by two different table-dancing clubs in the UK. This has meant that union officers and volunteers can go into those clubs at any time; that workers have elected their union and health-and-safety representatives; and that work contracts have been negotiated with the union, and grievance procedures established. We have less power to act in flats/brothels, which remain illegal in the UK. Sex workers in illegal establishments can join the union and receive all the benefits available to any member, but have less power to negotiate with employers in these settings.

Finally, sex industry organising is complicated by the fact that many of us operate independently, isolated from other workers. These are not ideal conditions for fostering the sort of political consciousness that results in labour organising. And, as in any other industry, there is a degree of apathy among workers. Such issues have affected many unionised industries that have nevertheless achieved improved working conditions and a greater degree of worker control.

On a more positive note, our alliance with the labour and trades union movement has helped shift the debate about sex work from the feminist/moralist arenas into the labour rights arena—at least in the UK. There is more public acceptance of the reality that sex work is *work*; we have the support of the majority of the trades union movement on this issue.



PHOTO: Maj Christensen

Sex workers brought cameras to document the event.

When it comes to our own movement, unionisation brings particular advantages. Many small sex worker organisations struggle for existence, either because they lack funding and volunteers, or because of internal fighting and a dearth of democratic mechanisms.

When we joined the union we realised that here was a structure that would be very useful for us. There are democratic mechanisms and procedures to which branches are encouraged to adhere. To a certain extent, we can ask for help from other union branches. Thus, the degree of demand upon individual sex worker

activists is reduced, which has the potential to alleviate burn-out.

Sex workers have been mobilising and organising to fight for their rights all over the world, and for a very long time. Only in certain places have they chosen to unionise. Unions may be old-fashioned organisations and may not be right for every group of sex worker activists. But they may, in many cases, prove to be a good way to establish sex workers' rights. Without a doubt, unionisation can help protect sex workers' labour rights and legitimise sex work. □

♥ Ana Lopes, PhD is an anthropologist. She has worked as a phone sex operator and a striptease artist, and is the author of *Sex Workers of the World Unite! Organising in the Sex Industry*.

