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Sex Work, Sexism and Unionism

Black Flag Sydney

8th June 2021

This article discusses sexual violence.

As news emerged in April that Nationals MP Michael Johnson had raped a sex worker, the Liberals and Nationals didn't flinch in moralising over the employment of a sex worker to distract from the crisis of sexism pervasive in their parties, and in the ruling class as a whole. But why could the government so readily scapegoat sex work to distract from sexism? And what role does sex work play in Australian society?

We can find the answers by looking at why the ruling class uses its cultural and material power to reinforce gender roles in the nuclear family. Sex work is best understood as a form of "social reproduction", a type of work whose product is the reproduction of workers and their capacity to labour. This type of labour is as diverse as housework, to childhood education, to sex and the raising of children, to the cultural reproduction of the nuclear family. Like other forms of work, sex work has existed for centuries alongside class societies, but has changed substantially under the the nuclear

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family arrangement, which was a necessary part of the growth of capitalism.

Oppressive gender difference in social roles exists in class societies as a method of reinforcing the class system. These diverse forms of gender differences were kneaded and exacerbated by in the transition between feudalism to capitalism including in methods of capitalist expansion like colonialism and imperialism, dividing the feudal peasant or colonised subject into the male wage worker, and the female 'housewife' who tended to his needs. This division of work continues to this day, as working women still fulfil the majority of social reproductive tasks across capitalist societies, regardless of their individual employment status.

With this analysis in mind we can understand what unites sex work as such a diverse industry, which includes camming, Only-Fans subscriptions, stripping, full in-person service. In general we can theorise all these activities as an intensive form of feminised service-driven entertainment: it's not only about satisfying a direct sexual desire, but it's about providing a sense of intimacy and human interaction that is alienated under the social stranglehold of capitalist life. In this sense sex work is 'social reproduction' work as its an industry predicated around alleviating social alienation, thereby alleviating the negative effects of unmanaged social alienation on the labour force.

Whilst sex workers perform a social reproductive function the industry subverts the very nuclear family that capitalism built to make women bear the cost of social reproductive labour without payment. This gives it a contradictory position as a form of labour: as fulfilling a 'reproductive' need, whilst being criminalised and suppressed in the name of 'family values'. This explains both why sex work has continued to persist despite the oppression by state criminalisation and workplace violence. It also helps explain the existance of gay sex workers, male stripping and sex work by non-women, as sex work as work is about alienation; the terms of that alienation and the conditions of work are determined by sexism.

So called radical feminism poses the argument that sex work is an inherently oppressive act as it involves 'selling the body' of a woman to a man. This ignores that under our current system, all labour requires 'selling your body' for a wage, and that there is nothing more inherently oppressive about the nature of sex work than there is about domestic labour, nursing, or teaching. Given sex in abstract isn't oppressive, then the commodification of sex cannot be oppressive beyond what labour and social conditions are placed on that commodification. Therefore the real oppression within sex work lies in the conditions of work that are imposed on these feminised industries, which has often meant wage gaps between feminised and non-feminised industry, but in the case of sex work has meant an increase of legal controls over the work, rather than anything inherent to the activity. The criminalisation of sex work, proposed as a solution to 'liberate' women from the industry, instead makes cops the bosses of sex workers and leads to further exploitation by the state and sex workers more vulnerable to violence in general.

However it's not enough to declare that sex work is work, our task is to develop a strategy to give sex workers power over their own industry and lives. The approach of the radical feminists - to try to eliminate sex work via the legal and police system - has not only failed but is inherently flawed, precisely because sex work will continue to have a purpose under capitalism, and also as its premise rests on the false assumption that sex work is inherently more exploitative than other wage relationships. Instead, our strategy should not be to abolish, but transform sex work. We do this by winning reforms that decrease the power of the ruling class to oppress workers: by fully decriminalising the industry and ending police control over sex workers, and to organise industrially with workers to support and protect themselves. Looking to our immediate future, we have to fight with sex worker calls for changes to the Anti-Discrimination Act, to make it illegal for sex workers to be discriminated for their profession, and to oppose the threats

posed on self worker autonomy and safety by the Online Safety Bill, which could permit suppression and marginalisation of sex worker voices and work. Beyond that, we should be looking to build industrial unionism for sex workers - to topple the state oppression, fight against exploitative bosses, and unite with other workers to smash the entire system.