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Interview with Ana Lopez from the International Union of Sex Workers

Workers Solidarity Movement

10 March 2007

Red & Black Revolution interviewed Ana Lopez, one of the founders of IUSW who as a sex worker in London when she finished her masters and wanted to start a PhD. *“In supporting this kind of initiative of sex workers organizing, you don’t necessarily have to agree with my view that sex work is a legitimate type of work, and that it’s not inherently exploitative”*

WSM: Can you please introduce yourself and the union you are part of and helped start.

Ana: My name is Ana Lopez from the International Union of Sex Workers (IUSW). I was one of the founders of IUSW. I was working as a sex worker in London when I finished my masters and wanted to start a PhD. Since I was working in this area, I decided that I would do research for my PhD within the sex industry. I don’t believe in science for science sake, I believe that any kind of research should be engaged and useful for the people you have studied. I started doing what we call strategic research, where you

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ask the people you want to study what they think is an interesting topic or area that needs to be studied and what kind of information they need to gather to respond to those needs.

I did my pilot interview with people from different sectors of the sex industry: from prostitution, street workers, pornography models and actors. And I asked them these kinds of questions. What I found out from this initial group of people was that one of the main complaints was that they felt very isolated and they didn't have a collective voice. They were telling me they needed a collective voice in order to eliminate the exploitation that they faced. This group of people didn't feel that their work was inherently bad or immoral in any sense, but they felt that they were forced to work in exploitative conditions because of the legislation and because of the stigma attached to their work. They also wanted to respond to the way the media portrayed them. The general public only has the media to understand what sex work is all about and they show a very black and white picture that doesn't do justice to the realities and multiple experiences within sex work.

When I heard all of this I interpreted it from my activist background that they weren't giving me a topic of research but a call for action. And I thought that I had the responsibility to have this action happen with their help. So I called my pilot interviewees for a meeting in my flat over tea and cookies and we talked about this kind of research. I asked them if they were really serious about this and if they would like to create this type of platform and collective in which we can demand our rights.

When it was clear that this was what people wanted, we then defined our mission statement and what we were there for. We decided that we were there to fight for rights for all types of sex workers, especially labour rights. We felt that what was wrong with the way people saw sex workers till then was that it was discussed within the realm of feminism, gender and morality. What we were saying was that it was work, and the reason all of us are in this industry is that we need to pay our bills at the end of each month.

from different industries, and I tried to pass a motion calling for decriminalising prostitution. Then people got to speak either for or against the motion. And one of the most interesting comments was from this lay member of the GNB who worked in Sellafield, in the nuclear plant. He stood up and said, I work in Sellafield and a lot of people in this room would have a serious problem with what I do and the type of things I produce. But the difference between myself and a sex worker is that I have full labour and human rights, I'm legal and I have health and safety regulations and protective equipment and so on and a sex worker does not have any of that. And I thought that was a really good argument, whatever it is you think about prostitution, whether you think it's morally wrong and so on you should still join in solidarity with this group of workers and support our fight for rights.

being pushed onto drugs and such things. My point is that they have a different status in society, they are viewed as successful women, young women strive to be like them, and they are all over mainstream magazines. So I ask what is the difference, why can they enjoy respect and a positive view from society and sex workers can't.

When you do sex work you are in danger of getting very emotionally involved, clients are very close to you, your body and so on. There are many professions where this happens. I think if I was a psychiatrist for instance I would not be able to deal with people's emotional problems and switch off at five o'clock in the evening. Yes you have to learn to deal with all this emotional baggage that comes with it.

The other thing that is interesting was that I had to tell my mother my work. My mother for many years was a child minder, that was commodification of child care, which in our society is viewed as even more sacred than sex -the mother's love is something that is very sacred. Under capitalism even that is made into a commodity. My mother used to organise five of these women doing this work, their work was to take care of other children for the day and at the end of the day they go home. And I told my mother you are the equivalent of a brothel mother, you are organising groups of women to do something that in our ideal society would be done for love and not for money. And it is also something that triggers a basic instinct, of motherly love. So these women would love these children for money for a few hours, and then these children would disappear. The biggest difference between my mother and the women that work for her is that they are legal, they are actually seen as doing something good in society's eyes and they have rights and a sex worker doesn't.

In supporting this kind of initiative of sex workers organizing, you don't necessarily have to agree with my view that sex work is a legitimate type of work, and that it's not inherently exploitative. When we were in the union meeting there were different members

So if we treat it as any other work, as a labour issue, then we can find solutions. And solutions are to be found in eliminating the exploitative conditions and not eliminating the industry altogether. That what you do in other exploitative industries also applies here. Women and transgender people get exploited in many other industries unfortunately. But the response of the feminist and trade union movement in relation to those other industries is to eliminate the exploitation and not the industry itself. We wanted to get in line with all other workers. Basically that's how it got started.

WSM: How have you gone about getting members in to the union, outside of your personal network?

Ana: At the beginning we started by publishing a magazine, we called it RESPECT! (Rights and Equality for Sex Professionals and Employees in Connected Trades). This magazine has articles written about sex work and by sex workers. We were able to go to different places where sex workers operate, we had something to offer and something to talk about. We also set up a web site and a discussion list. These two things were instrumental in making this group international. When we started we called ourselves international, but we started as a small group based in London so we were not international. Through the web site people have joined from all over the world, we have more than 2000 members on the discussion list.

WSM: Would you have members from all different aspects of sex work?

Ana: The two most dominant groups are people who work in prostitution (I mean all types of prostitution; people who work on the streets, people who work indoors, people who work in S&M, escorts) and people who work in dance — strip tease, pole dancing etc. Those are the biggest groups, but we also have models, actresses and phone sex operators.

WSM: In terms of the work that is legal at the moment, what are the rights you are fighting for?

Ana: The right to have a proper contract, having a proper code of conduct in the place you work so it is clear what you are allowed and not allowed to do, for the managers and clients to know what they are allowed and not allowed to do. It is important that these are written down and made very clear, and if someone breaks those rules there must be mechanisms to address that and penalise the one who broke the rules. So it's very important to have grievance procedures like most other work places. Now there are a couple of clubs that are unionised and you can find these things.

Also Health and Safety rights, something that is basic in most other work places that is ignored in the sex industry. People are using their bodies in their work, they are dancing and wearing high heels. For instance, you can't expect dancers who are wearing high heels to be going up and down stairs, it is not safe at all. You cannot expect them to dance doing floor work if the floor is not clean. And you can't use abrasive cleaning products to clean poles because people are going to use those poles to lean against.

WSM: How about the illegal aspects of sex work, what is the union trying to fight for there?

Ana: We are calling for the decriminalisation of sex work, prostitution specifically, since all the establishments in that area are illegal. Prostitution itself is legal but everything around it is illegal. There is hardly any way you can do this as a profession and without breaking the law somehow. That is what makes it such a dangerous and underground activity. We are using the political clout of the union to put pressure on governments to decriminalise prostitution.

WSM: Would the goal be to eliminate street prostitution and have safe legal indoor spaces?

Ana: No, that is something that the general public thinks would be a good idea, and unfortunately politicians as well, but that wouldn't be a fair type of situation. That kind of idea comes from people thinking that no one would work on the streets if they had the choice. That's not true, many people would prefer to work

WSM: You mentioned that part of your struggle is fighting capitalism and I was wondering if in your ideal society capitalism didn't exist and society was self organized, do you think sex work would exist and if so how would it be organised?

Ana: I think that in my ideal utopian society people would not have sex for money, but people would not do teaching for money, they would do everything for love because they wanted to. That is what I'm working for. While we have to live under capitalism, I think it's really unfair to pick on sex workers. We are all selling ourselves, we are all selling our labour under capitalism. So don't pick on sex workers and expect sex workers to do something different from what everyone else is doing.

I think there is a revolutionary potential among sex workers because they are the most oppressed and marginalised of workers, and if this group is able to stand up for their rights and take control of the huge industry it would be an inspiration for all. Because it's underground there is lots of corruption, if we can manage to take control, then any worker can do that.

You were asking me a question of sex work being like any type of work and I didn't really address that. I think sex work is a specific type of work, in a sense it is not like any other type of work. There are many other industries that you are using your own body and that doesn't mean you shouldn't have the full range of labour and human rights and that you shouldn't be respected. I'm thinking about an industry that is marginal to the sex industry and that is the fashion industry. A few years ago when Miss World was held in London, we went to the place where the competition was taking place with banners and leaflets inviting the contestants to join the union, because they also are working with their bodies. They are also working in a corrupt industry. But they have rights, not full rights — that's why we are asking them to join the union. They are still very much exploited, they can make lots of money but the ones organising the fashion industry are making much more money. And they experience many of the same problems such as

own industries. When people realise that, then we can get rid of capitalism and have global revolution.

WSM: You mentioned in your talk that the people that were part of your pilot interview all made an informed decision to work in the sex industry, do you think this represents the wider community?

Ana: They were a network of friends many of whom were involved in other forms of activism as well, so I would not generalise this across all those in the industry. Yet I can say after five years of activism and working in the industry and so on that that it is a great majority. It is only a small minority that doesn't make an informed decision to enter this industry.

WSM: From many women I know, they have said they consider going to into sex work at some level, let it be phone work and so on due to feeling extreme poverty. And other women have said that in the back of their minds they knew it was always an option because they were a woman. I would not consider these situations to be informed decisions, but rather desperation.

Ana: Yet that applies to any other industry. I wouldn't consider working in McDonalds because at this time I'm not desperate. Let's say this year or the year after I'm really desperate for money, maybe I would work at McDonalds or clean toilets, things that I would never imagine myself doing. Things that I think are more undignified and humiliating than working in the sex industry. People have different images of what they want to do, and different ideas of what is humiliating and what is an ok type of work. I think that poverty is not enough to explain sex work because on one hand you have people in poverty who do not work in the sex industry, who choose to do other things, and many people who do work in the sex industry who are not in poverty and have many other possibilities. I know many people in the industry who have degrees who have left other careers to work in the sex industry and so on. What you cannot do is generalise in this industry, you have multiple realities. People come from different situations and social and economic backgrounds.

on the streets because there is freedom attached to that; you are independent, you don't have a boss, you decide what type of hours you want to work. For many people that is very important. What we would call for is legal establishments so that people can work in those establishments legally. In that situation you would have less people working on the streets. And for those who choose to work on the streets, the idea is that they can work in safety, in safety zones. It might not be the ideal but there are examples where it is working really well in the Netherlands and in Edinburgh, so that is the model we have been pointing to. These areas are appointed by the local authorities as areas that prostitution takes place in and police will be there to protect the sex workers rather than arrest them. These areas would be well lit so there are less chances of being attacked by potentially dangerous or violent clients.

WSM: On your web site you say that the percentage of women who experience trafficking is quite low, yet in the media it would seem that this is a huge problem, can you speak about that?

Ana: This is an industry where lots and lots of people want to migrate. Sex workers are often the most entrepreneurial people within their company. In this industry there is always a need for new faces, so to be a successful sex worker you have to move from one place to another. If you want to earn money you are going to move to another country where someone told you where you can make more money. People often just want to move for the sake of moving.

So there is a lot of migration, very often people do not have the opportunity to migrate in a legal way so they will need a third party helping them in this process of migration. Because it is an illegal industry, an illegal process of migration, this leaves many opportunities for these third parties to exploit sex workers. In migration it's a process you can compare to a lottery; some people are very lucky and they make a lot of money in the country they migrated to. Some people have very bad stories to tell. There is a continuum of situations. In one extreme you have people who

have been successful and in the other extreme you have people who have experienced exploitative situations, such as slavery. We cannot let this happen, even if it's one person it's not acceptable. There is a sense that the media makes this into hype, a moral fear. You would have the impression that all migration is trafficking and it's not. Those situations with exploitation and where people have no freedom of movement are in a tiny minority if you compare it to the phenomenon that is migration. To look at this you have to look at migration first.

WSM: On the web site, in debunking myths about prostitution and showing the positive role prostitutes have in society, you talk about the prostitute's role with people with physical and other disabilities that for whatever reason can't masturbate themselves and/or are unable to have sexual relationships with other people. It would seem that that aspect of a sex worker's clientele would be quite small and it would be more the rich white businessmen who are using the service and maintaining the power and hierarchical dynamics in the rest of the society. Can you speak on this?

Ana: Possibly they are not such a small minority as you imagine. I know many sex workers that make most of their money with the city workers and businessmen so they can have time to dedicate to clients who have disabilities so they don't need to charge as much. These are areas that are growing.

There is a demand for whatever reason for sexual services. I believe the market is growing because until recently the only people who had economic power to use sexual services were businessmen, male, with high economic status. I think things are changing and more and more women have economic power to access sexual services. There is still a lot of stigma attached to that. I think when women are accessing sex workers it's through the internet so they are not seen as using these services.

I don't see much of a division between the entertainment industry and the sex industry. In my grandmother's time if you chose to be a theatre actress it was as good as being a sex worker. You

would be labelled as a whore and a slut and you wouldn't have a high status in society at all. And this has changed tremendously, now singers and actresses have very high status.

WSM: It seems like prostitution is not like every other type of work. It is many women's experience to be treated like they are prostitutes, that they get treated as an object to be used and that they are expected to use their body to repay a favour that a male has done for them. And women get treated like prostitutes every day with out having made the choice to go into that profession.

Ana: Thank you for asking this question, it is one that no has asked me in a long time and it is the reason for my activism. No woman is free till all sex workers are free. It is exactly that stigma, that we can call the whore stigma, that is not limited to sex workers. We sex workers feel that every woman on the planet at a certain point feels that stigma, since it is attached to all women. So that's why I think that all women should join in solidarity to fight for our rights. Because at any point you can be called a whore, if there is no reason for that to be a stigma then we all can be free. That will stop being an insult when sex workers are treated with dignity like any other worker and when no sex worker is in this industry against their will. And that is the role of the union and sex worker self organisation, to make sure that no one is in this industry against their will and those that are in the industry can work with full labour rights with dignity and respect. I think sex workers organising should be inspiring for other workers. Because we work with our bodies it is obvious that no one should control our bodies, and that we should be able to do what ever we want with our own bodies.

And if we manage to organise and do our work on our own terms, and have control of our industry in the least organised and the most marginalised of workers, then any worker can do that, and I hope this inspires other workers to see that no one should have control over their body and their work. They should control their