

## **Sex worker collective organisation: between advocacy group and labour union?**

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### **Introduction**

Contemporary sex worker labour unionism in a number of major western economies (Australia, Britain and the United States) now faces an acute historical dilemma. Emerging from prostitutes' rights groups of the 1970s and 1980s, sex worker activist milieu moved to establish labour unions in the 1990s and early 2000s because of the perceived weaknesses of these aforementioned groups – this being believed to be their focus of their energies on civil, human, legal and political rights of prostitutes through the *modus operandi* of small elite groups comprising prostitutes, ex-prostitutes and their non-prostitute supporters (Gall 2006). But with the expansion of the sex industry and the relative organisational and goal achievement stasis experienced by these rights groups, labour unionism came into view as becoming more appropriate and effective for the expanded ranks of sex workers (exotic dancers, strippers, porn models and actors/actresses, sex chatline workers) because it focussed on economic, labour, union and worker rights through democratic and participative means of membership involvement (Gall 2007).

After the success of establishing these tiny, embryonic labour unions of sex workers for sex workers by sexworkers, these organisations have been forced (back) into acting a similar manner to their professed anti-thesis namely, the prostitutes' rights groups as a result of the loss of initial momentum. These reasons for this stasis primarily concern the issue of resources, such as the paucity of activists and the limited spread of a 'sex work' consciousness amongst sex workers, when set against the ambitious objectives and aspirations of the labour unions. Consequently, sex worker unions have concentrated on engaging in political lobbying on public policy, projects of legal reform of sex work, and helping provide individualised assistance to sex workers inside and outside their worksites on health issues, criminal offences and business matters. In the latter sense, the sex work labour unions have played an advisory role to sex workers on a par with that provided by Citizens' Advice Bureaux (in Britain) or welfare rights' groups that exist throughout western societies. This outcome is true for the sex worker unions in all the six aforementioned countries despite important differences in the legal regulation of sex work (*vis-à-vis* criminalisation and legalisation), and public policy on sex work and labour unionism.

This paper, therefore, examines the ways in which nascent or weakened labour unions in the sex industry have been 'forced' – or with limited options, chosen to operate - onto a terrain of acting as politically and as pressure groups concerned with work issues in a way in which other pressure groups operate on non-work issues, thereby forsaking a key characteristic of labour unionism, namely, the focus of collective self-activity in and on the workplace and from a basis on having a tangible presence in the workplace through membership amongst workers. In other words, the sense in which collective bargaining, whether formal or informal, in the workplace as the quintessential characteristic of labour unionism is inverted, not because of strategic or ideological choice but because of the result of an extremely unequal balance of power enforced upon the sex worker milieus. This suggests that the form and methods of contemporary labour unionism must be seen as being historically contingent and contextualised. Whether the development of extra-workplace political leverage can subsequently help facilitate the creation of workplace industrial leverage remains an open question for sex worker unionisation projects. Throughout the paper the relationship between agency and environment is stark as is the project to recalibrate the balance between the two through the agency of activism.

The paper begins by outlining the research methods deployed, and then providing summaries of the sex work discourse, the pre-history of self-agency organising projects and an overview of the economy of the sex industry which are essential for providing a foundation upon which to analyse contemporary sex worker labour unionism. A survey of developments on a country-by-country basis is laid out prior to considering a number of thematic concerns to explain the loss of momentum.

## Research methods

Studying unionisation amongst sex workers presents a number of difficulties. Most sex workers are not visible for the purposes of contacting them. Street working prostitutes represent, as it were, only the tip of an iceberg. Moreover, some sex worker union activists are involved in this activity in transient manners, where they move on to other locations of work because of victimisation for these activities, leaving no union presence behind them and making them hard to track down. Access following identification is also difficult for sex workers often wish to retain their anonymity. Nonetheless, fieldwork has been undertaken through structured email dialogues and face-to-face interviews with leading lay officials and activists in a number of the relevant sex worker union organisations in some of the six countries under study (primarily Australia, Britain and the United States). This has been supplemented by documentation and writings of sex workers for sex workers themselves have been extremely active in writing about their own work experiences and debating their analyses of these with each other as part of their desire for self-expression and self-understanding and, most crucially, as part of their struggle to have 'sex work' recognised as legitimate work by other sex workers and wider society. These writings have spanned the range of sex work, rather than just being about prostitution. Sex worker union activists have been particularly prolific in their writings, largely because these have formed a key medium by which to attempt to reach other sex workers with a view to unionisation and union mobilisation. Reflecting the desire to reach other sex workers and to gain legitimacy for the sex work discourse, sex worker union activists have sought to use the media to their benefit. The media, in turn, has been keen to take up these overtures by dint of 'sex' being deemed newsworthy because it is 'sexy' and interesting. Some of this interest comes from titillation, some from genuine curiosity, some from new feminist concerns and some from concerns about the 'lot of the workers'. This material has been accessed through the specialist websites of sex worker and sex worker union organisations and an electronic database of newspapers and magazines. Of course, using these secondary sources has disadvantages whereby agendas set and areas covered emanated from the sex worker themselves, not the researcher for the purpose has been debate and proselytising. Moreover, media coverage can be sporadic, often being a response to press releases of sex worker union activists and not independent enquiry. Yet, the extent of these disadvantages was relatively limited because the specific agenda of the objective of unionisation set the parameters of the writings and coverage, and triangulation and further probing of issues was facilitated by fieldwork means.

## Sex as work: work as sex

The intellectual paradigm for organising sex workers is the discourse of viewing sex workers as workers whose labour, whether regarded as emotional, erotic or physical (or a combination of all three) is deemed to have three fundamental qualities (Bell 1987, Delacoste and Alexander 1987, McClintock 1993, Pheterson 1989). First, 'sex work' is of a sufficient level of moral legitimacy to be deemed worthy of, and acceptable, to organise. Second, sex work has a social worth as a form of employment that is seen as to be seen to be comparable to other forms of labour and paid employment. Third, sex work is characterised by conventional forms of work organisation such managerial discipline. The perspective is also of sex workers selling sexual services and not their bodies and persons *per se*. In this, distinctions are not made between acts involving the selling of sex and acts of selling sexual stimulation, between those acts which involve entering a body, acting on another body or entering personal body spaces (such as intimate closeness) and those which involve the production of imagery. Sex work is then viewed as comprising work that *can be* socially useful and *can* provide job satisfaction, personal fulfilment, empowerment and self-actualisation, where becoming a sex worker *can be* a genuine life choice. The conditions of this potentiality are argued to be existent in the present and to be potentially further enhanced in the future under different, deliberately induced social conditions. However, it is recognised that alongside these potential benefits, there are many downsides in terms of violence, stigmatisation, poor pay and conditions of employment, and job insecurity, and that these can be ameliorated through regulation and interest representation. Of critical importance for interest representation is that the sex workers, aided by supporters such as liberal and libertarian feminists, developed the discourse themselves. Moreover, without it, or at least certain parts of it, it is inconceivable that sex worker unionisation is conceptually or practically possible. Under it, sex workers are not viewed as victims or as helpless. Rather, they are

conferred with agency, rights and legitimacy.

### **Antecedents to labour unionisation**

The first steps towards sex worker unionisation took place following two turning points in the 1970s and 1980s, namely, the emergence of the 'sex work' discourse and the self-organisation of prostitutes into prostitutes' rights groups. These antecedents facilitated sex workers defining themselves, and being defined, as wider than just comprising prostitutes and provided inspiration for the creation of the self-representation of sex workers' interests. However, unlike the prostitutes' rights groups, the current sex worker organisations decided to constitute themselves as labour unions rather than as pressure groups (see Jenness 1990, 1993, Mathieu 2003, Poel 1995, Weitzer 1991, 2000b on the prostitutes' rights groups). Thus, for example, under sex worker unionisation, the practices of creating membership-based organisations, which levy subscriptions and use democratic structures and participative processes to form policies, elect office bearers and pursue objectives through collective mobilisation has been prioritised far more so. This move follows from sex workers' assessments that the prostitutes' rights groups experienced severe weaknesses as a result of focussing firstly, on primarily civil and human rights in law (and not on economic rights, labour rights and workers' rights), and secondly by operating as pressure groups without extensive membership bases and significant member participation and involvement. Consequently, sex worker union organisations focus far more on work issues within the workplace, albeit within the context of regimes of regulation which necessitate mobilisation to seek reform of.

### **Surveying contemporary developments**

The following survey of contemporary developments in sex worker and sex worker union organisation over the last few years is briefly contextualised by reviewing extant developments over the decade prior to this (see Gall 2006 for more detail on sex worker union organisation in the period 1980-2000). Consequently, it is possible to discern whether sex worker union organisation on a country-by-country is on an upward, downward or level trajectory.

#### *Australia*

Two prostitutes' rights groups (Workers in the Sex Industry, and the Prostitutes' Collective of Victoria) joined the Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers' Union (LHMWU) in 1995 to recruit prostitutes to the union. However, the initial momentum was lost as a result of meeting intra- and extra-union hostility so that low-key recruitment was carried out through sex work support projects rather than directly and then stopped. The prime hostility has taken the form of an unwillingness by different bodies within the LHMWU to provide further resources following a short period of support based upon an exacting 'make or break' rationale on gaining prostitute members. This led to the effective winding up of this unionisation project. A slightly more generous interpretation of this situation is given by Perkins and Lovejoy (2007:158) who describe the dispute between the union and the prostitute union activists as resulting from a 'misunderstanding over the number of [recruited] members required by the union'. Nonetheless, but without any supporting evidence, Perkins and Lovejoy (2007:158) went on to state that interest in sex worker unionisation is maintained and may bear fruit in the near future. And, in 2009 an attempt to restart prostitution unionisation was made.

In 2002, the Striptease Artists of Australia (SAA) was formed as a union to represent lapdancers and strippers. It gained an industry-wide bargaining award through the Australian Industrial Relations Commission (AIRC) in 2006. Some dancers doubted whether the formalisation of employment status would benefit dancers (see, for example, *Third Degree* 14 April 2006) because the dancers would be subject to general taxation while club owners would seek to avoid the additional costs by re-classifying dancers as sub-contractors and because of opposition organised through the employers' body, the Eros Foundation. Changes in general employment legislation under the then Conservative government – through Australian Workplace Agreements under the *Workplace Relations Act 1996* and changes to the AIRC under the *Workplace Relations Amendment Act 2005* (WorkChoices) undermined, and were used by employers/operators, to undermine the award. Although the Scarlet Alliance - the Australian Sex Workers' Association - comprises sex worker rights organisations, projects, networks and groups, has operated since 1989, is affiliated to the Australian Council of

Trade Unions and bars sex industry business owners and operators from membership, it is frequently but wrongly identified as a labour union (see, for example, *ABC News Online* 25 Jan 2007). This erroneous identification is made because the Scarlet Alliance commonly speaks of sex workers' rights in terms of labour rights. The Scarlet Alliance shows no signs of developing into a labour union, either on its own or in conjunction with others. Thus, the sex worker *union* project has imploded with activists returning to advocacy and rights work in a host of state- and city-based organisations.

#### *Britain*

Seven lap-dancing clubs are unionised for which the GMB has two union recognition agreements (Club Crème, Bristol, and Majingos, London). There is also a unionised brothel in Stoke-on-Trent. The GMB, after the London-based International Union of Sex Workers (IUSW) joined with it in 2002, is primarily targeting lapdancing because of the clubs' desire to have code of conducts agreed with their dancers, through an independent body (i.e., a union) because this helps gain the necessary local authority entertainment licenses. Membership totals around 2,000 sex workers. Like the initiatives to recruit, organise and establish union recognition in the two aforementioned lap-dancing clubs, the initiative to recruit escorts in north-east England resulted from the positive noises made by an employer (*Sunday Sun* 24 June 2007). However, most of the current work of the GMB here has concerned continuing to make the case for unionisation through general argumentation and propaganda, rather than the demonstration effect of workplace action itself, and organising lobbies and submission to local and national public consultations on the regulation of lapdancing and prostitution.

#### *United States*

After a long struggle at the Lusty Lady peepshow in San Francisco, the dancers there unionised and gained union recognition in 1996 through the Exotic Dancers' Alliance (EDA). Following closure by the employer, the dancers and other staff bought the club, turning it into a workers' cooperative in 2003 called the Looking Glass Collective (Gall 2006:72-78). Between 1993 and 1996, Pacer's in San Diego was both unionised and had union recognition but staff turnover allowed the employer to win a derecognition election. Elsewhere, dancers unionised but failed to gain union recognition in Seattle, Anchorage, Philadelphia and Las Vegas in the 1990s. Such unionisation has been orchestrated with the help of the Service Employees' International Union (SEIU) and Hotel Employees' and Restaurant Employees' (HERE) unions. Elsewhere, porn actors and actresses in the Californian San Fernando Valley, the largest single location of pornography production in the world, again tried to unionise in 2004 following several earlier unsuccessful attempts in 1993 and 1998. However, little headway was made.

Shortly afterwards becoming a cooperative, the Lusty Lady came under pressure to make financial cost savings. The consequences upon member participation resulting from staff turnover leading to a loss of social capital, and the extra effort and transaction costs involved in running a cooperative, quickly became apparent. These difficulties were compounded and extended by a bitter internal feud. In 2006, a number of male support (i.e. non-dancer) workers tried to derecognise the SEIU Local 790 union against a backdrop of internal strife, ranging from inflammatory e-mails and verbal communications, suspensions, firings and competing allegations from dancers and support staff of sexual harassment and unfair labour practices (*San Francisco Bay Guardian* 26 September 2006, *San Francisco Chronicle* 2 October 2006, *Salon.com* 3 October 2006). This began when some of the male workers, who are front desk and cleaning staff (and coop members), began arguing that the coop was losing money (which impacted on wage levels and job security) because the dancers were too fat, big and un-sexy, and that the union contract was invalid because the co-op makes no distinction between management and labour. This outraged the dancers, who regarded the view of these male workers as discriminatory and rolling back the gains of a hard fought battle to unionise the Lusty Lady. In the process, a considerable divide opened up between the cooperative board of management, generally supporting the business case argument of the male workers, and the SEIU Local 790 union which supported the dancers. However, subsequently these tensions eased, aided by the cooperative's financial position improving.

Outside the arena of the Lusty Lady, no body or activities in California have emerged have been capable of either filling the gap left by the folding of the Exotic Dancers' Alliance in 2004 or extending

its nascent activities. Of the activity which has taken place, this has comprised public lobbying and giving testimony to the San Francisco Entertainment Commission in 2006 on a proposed amendment to the Police Code for the regulation of live adult entertainment businesses and submitting evidence to the Commission on the Status of Women (*PR Newswire* US 17 August 2006) as a result of the activity of three sex worker activists. In more union, rather than pressure group, orientated terms, the SEIU has been trying to use Californian labour law, through the California Labor Commission, to reclassify all dancers as employed workers in order to avail them of workers' legal rights. Concomitant, a former prostitute established the Erotic Services Providers Union (ESPU) in 2004 as an organizing committee with the San Francisco Labor Council in order to work on labour and employment issues. This new organisation superseded that of the San Francisco-based Sex Workers Organized for Labor, Human, and Civil Rights (SWOLHCR) led by a former dancer. Like SWOLHCR, the ESPU has operated essentially as an advocate-cum-pressure group for its membership remains very low. However, it was the mover of collecting sufficient signatures to allow its proposal to get on a public ballot to facilitate a bill on decriminalising prostitution in San Francisco. Although the proposal was lost in the ballot, it provided a boost to sex worker activism if not sex workers unionisation and was more successful than similar ballot attempts in Las Vegas in 2002 and Berkeley in 2004.

Following the organising attempt at the Oakland Inn outside Philadelphia to establish a Professional Dancers' Union and gain union recognition in 1997 (Gall 2006:82-83), a group of ten sex worker activists 2002 formed the Sex Workers Action Team (SWAT) group in the Philadelphia (*Philadelphia Weekly* 6 March 2002). Initially, the group sought to establish a grassroots support group with a view to forming a labour union. Meanwhile, the Las Vegas Dancers' Association has imploded, with the main activist continuing to be active in the arena of sex workers' rights but as a lone individual after being blacklisted and financial ruin (Majic 2005). In the city, the Sin City Adult Professionals Alliance (SCAPA) has acted a resource and advocate group for sex workers. Elsewhere, the Desiree Alliance, a coalition of sex workers and health and educational professionals formed in 2005, advocates for sex workers' human, labor and civil rights.

### **Explaining for ward momentum halted and return to advocacy**

Despite varying employment laws and body politics in the different nation-states, the economic, political and social conditions for creating and sustaining sex worker labour unionism remain uniformly difficult. Sex workers and sex work remain routinely stigmatised, unlawful and marginalised, giving rise to a campaigning reform agenda as the *raison d'être* of both sex worker pressure groups and labour unions. Here, political-cum-public policy and legal reform are required to create legitimate and lawful work, providing a major reason why labour unions have acted in a similar manner to the advocacy groups. Yet, present conditions are not particularly any more difficult than they have been in the last decade or so when the first sex worker unions were established. The one rider to this has been that legalisation of prostitution in Australia has not been the boon to sex worker labour unionism that was anticipated by the sex worker union activists. The reason for this concerns that most prostitutes have not registered as required under these new legal regimes for fear of losing anonymity and having to pay taxes. Consequently, sex worker labour unions were unable to attempt to represent and bargain for the mass of prostitutes outside of the law. With that exception noted and recognition that neither law nor public policy *per se* determine the ability of workers to bargain and pursue collective interest representation in the workplace, this suggests that the focus of attention for explaining the stasis should be largely concerned with examining internal issues to sex work and sex workers – and in this regard, this is consistent with the focus of the explanation for the initial growth of sex worker unionisation (see Gall 2006). Thereafter, the issues of labour markets and wider labour union milieus are considered.

#### *'Sex work' discourse*

The still limited presence of the 'sex work' discourse amongst sex workers (Altman 2001:102, Bernstein 1999:111, Zatz 1997:283), as well as within wider society, is critical in explaining the limited development of sex worker union organisation. This may seem almost too obvious but it is, nonetheless, crucial to understanding the foundation of other barriers to sex worker unionisation. Knowledge of, if not concurrence with, the 'sex work' discourse is *likely* to be a necessary prerequisite

for the *possibility* of unionisation. Awareness and agreement may provide the ideological and attitudinal resources to help generate a willingness to set up, join or be active within a union. At the most, the sex work discourse helps lessen the individually internalised ways in which sex workers experience stigmatisation and helps increase their degree of self-confidence through legitimation. Without it, low measures of self-esteem and self-belief are likely to exist for many sex workers will view the sex work they do as degrading, deviant and immoral. Moreover, the sex work discourse provides for a certain degree of pride in being a sex worker that positively identifies with her or his occupation, trade or profession. However, fieldwork interviews revealed activists thought that most sex workers believed that sex work was deemed to be work. However, continuing doubts and defensive about the legitimacy of this work and a lack of awareness of the full implications of designation as work meant that the potential full and positive force had not registered. So rather than the salient issue being the consequences of the limited presence of the discourse (in terms of presence or absence), there is a need to recognise the processes by which the full force of the discourse has not been felt.

Nonetheless, there are a number of consequences to this multi-dimensional phenomenon. In addition to limiting the size of sex worker union activist milieus (see below), one concerns the importance of divisions within and across sex workers in terms of social and market hierarchy (Bernstein 1999), in prostitution, and exotic dancing in particular. *In toto*, these internal divisions make the possibility of creating a wider community of sex workers difficult (see Gall 2006:205-207). Second, awareness, sympathy and some agreement with the discourse are also necessary amongst other groups and milieus in society, be they unions, policy makers, opinion formers, or 'public opinion', because ignorance of, disagreement with, or hostility to the 'sex work' discourse constitutes another barrier to unionisation. Moreover, opposition to the discourse and unionisation has been accentuated where some of the harshest critics of both have come from feminist milieus.

#### *Paucity of sex worker union activist milieus*

Given that sex worker unionism is primarily either embryonic or nascent, a key consideration at this point in its development *vis-à-vis* survival and growth is the number of activists it has to call on to carry out its work and tasks. Despite some of the sex worker union organisations having been in existence for a number of years, they have not been able to move beyond being reliant upon – indeed, often comprising – a tiny number of activists. For example, it is not uncommon for a regional or city organisation to have only five activists, and national organisations not many more. The key point here is that the consequence of this is not just the continued reliance of sex worker union organization on a small handful of hyper-activists to sustain activity and representation but also the burnout and fatigue of these, their inability to replenish their own stock, and the resultant demoralising impact of this upon them. Overall, this paucity curtails organising capacity and predisposes union organisation to fragility.

#### *Making the transition: creation to sustenance and campaigning to representation*

Although difficult to establish labour unions in a period of reduced citizen participation in the organs of civil society and general retreat for labour unionism, and much more so for sex worker labour unions given the hostile and dismissive social atmosphere to such a project, many sex worker union organisations have also found making the transition from creation to existence and sustenance extremely problematic. After the initial phase of organising to create and launch a union, activists have often become tired and jaded, leading to smaller milieus of continuing activists. The process commonly begins with high levels of energy, vigour and excitement – itself bringing about the prospect of burnout – being invested as a result of being involved in creating a new organisation which had a specific objective and definite endpoint (i.e. of getting up and running). Euphoria greets creation. But once this point had passed, the organisations have had a greater number of multifarious objectives which, in themselves, have no end points or finality as such. Moreover, sustaining organisation becomes a quasi-separate, often burdensome, activity from operationalising the organisation's objectives, even though it is a prerequisite of facilitating the operationalisation of those objectives. The desire-cum-pressure to maintain the organisation as the basis for the potential to achieve its objectives also leads the small number of activists to substitute themselves for a wider number of activists, leading the former to become hyper-activists operating in a centralised tendency. In the process, routinisation and normalcy supersede innovation and initial enthusiasm, and

momentum is lost. This overall process had led in Australia, Britain and the US to the creation and sustaining of severe internal tensions as frustrations consequent upon the mismatch of resources and goals are played out through individuals and surface issues. Tensions are also involved in making the transition from just being a campaigning organisation to one which carries out representative functions. These two functions have different rhythms and dynamics, with the former emphasising membership participation and the latter de-emphasising membership as a result of lay officer specialisation to carry out the representation. Indeed, the paucity of activists strengthens the push to service existing membership, rather than organise to expand membership, and further concentrates activity amongst the lay officer cadre.

#### *Labour market forces and structures*

The faster expanding supply within sex work labour markets relative to the, albeit growing, demand for sex work services (see, for example, Agustin 2007) is the most salient wider contextual phenomena here.<sup>1</sup> Within this, sex work has become deskilled in as much as it is no longer seen as still being the preserve of a small, deviant and socially skilled minority. The most obvious case has been the transformation of striptease through the decline of burlesque and the rise of lap- and pole-dancing. So the size of the labour markets in exotic dancing and prostitution have both experienced growth – the former as a result of changing social attitudes where less stigma is attached to lapdancing, and the latter as a result of migration from the new EU accession states and countries of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc swelled the ranks of prostitutes. As a result of the relatively greater language and interpersonal skills and exposure to open society needed for exotic dancing, this labour market has not been the subject of so much growth from migrant labour as that for prostitution has.

Additionally, within prostitution, there is a particular aspect to the expansion of the labour market, concerning the emergence of forced and bonded labour as a result of largely trafficked migrants who are compelled by economic strictures (debt), violence and abuse (and threats thereof) and social and physical isolation to work not only long hours but in servile conditions. However, it is difficult to discern the extent of bonded and forced labour for bonded labour is not necessarily a permanent state of affairs and not all trafficked migrants work in the sex industries, nor are all trafficked sex workers forced labourers. In pornography (both static and moving images), there is an additional force at work. The desire to be 'get started', develop a portfolio and become a 'star' on the part of an abundant supply of models and actors/actresses in order to 'get rich quick' has, no matter how unrealistic, tended to depress the price of labour. This is the case even though the increased demand for pornography has been facilitated by change in social attitudes and new technologies. Moreover, the labour market for men in pornography has expanded with the arrival of Viagra so that many more men can now perform for the required lengths of time and in the manner desired.

Cumulatively then, and despite caveats and nuances, the state of these sex work labour markets would thus conventionally be termed 'slack'. By contrast, little evidence exists of 'tight' sex work labour markets so sex workers have seldom been able to attempt to benefit in the way other workers have been able to by taking advantage of the greater demand for, than supply of, labour. The problem for sex worker labour unionism here is that it, like labour unionism *per se*, is based on reducing the level of competition between workers within a trade or sector while at the same time trying to increase the price of labour by acting in a monopsonistic manner. Attempts to create and

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<sup>1</sup> However, the impact of economic globalisation with regard to the sex industry has not in the main involved the processes of capital divestment and (overseas) investment through outsourcing and relocation because there is a fixed spatial nature to exotic dancing and prostitution, namely, that with many services, direct physical immersion in the marketplace is necessary. Pornography and sex chatlines are physically and technologically amenable to these investment and divestment processes but national cultural consumer tastes militate against their use to a large degree. Consequently, the threat or possibility of such divestment and relocation for sex worker labour unionism is not one that as acutely felt as it is for other labour unions involved in manufacturing or finance sectors of economic activity.

grow sex worker unionism have been overwhelmed by these labour market changes – overwhelmed by the increase in the size of the potential membership and the amount of activists and work needed to convert this potentiality into actuality, and overwhelmed by the increase in the size of the labour force leading to a reduction in extant bargaining power and influence. This outcome of this labour market process is accentuated by the vast majority of sex workers being deemed in law and in practice to be 'independent contractor', that is, self-employed, so that their degree of job insecurity is further heightened.

#### *Labour union milieus*

Perhaps to a surprising degree, sex worker unionisation projects in the six countries have attained some degree of support from existing, mainstream labour movements. And following from this, the stasis and inertia experienced by sex worker labour unionism have not resulted in the main from the withdrawal of existing, mainstream labour union support, except in Australia *vis-à-vis* the IHMWU. In Britain, the level of GMB support has been maintained at a consistent level. A similar situation pertains in the United States with the SEIU, although not all its Locals have been as accommodating. However, given the fragile nature of sex worker labour unionism, the level of resources given over has been commensurate with the maintenance of existing sex worker labour unionism, not its expansion into new or adjacent areas which is a key means of buttressing existing organisation. So, those unions that support sex worker unionisation have usually waited for sex workers to approach them before embarking on any union organising activity with these sex workers, rather than initiating the union organising themselves.

#### **Conclusion**

Sex worker labour unionism continues to remain in fragile forms, emerging in spite of huge internal (to sex work) and external (to sex work) obstacles because of mobilisations by limited milieus of sex worker labour union activists. This strength has a dialectical nature for it also represents a weakness, whereby the limited number of activists has been unable to achieve basic cadre accumulation in order to supplement their own ranks. Referring back to the identified weaknesses of the prostitutes' rights movement, and the turn by sex worker union organisations to avoid these problems, the inescapable conclusion is that sex worker union organisations have found it very difficult to attain widespread, active membership participation through an array of means. Neither have sex worker union organisations been able to construct wider effective alliances with feminists and labour unionists that would allow this aforementioned weakness to be offset or ameliorated. Although the prostitutes' rights groups did not necessarily seek to achieve these goals of participation – partly because of the difficulty of achieving them – the inability of sex worker unionisation projects to achieve them through conscious and deliberate effort is all the more notable. Whether the balance between atomisation and decollectivisation, on the one hand, and collectivisation and mobilisation, on the other hand, will continue to be tilted in this current direction will depend upon the interaction of these forces of agency and environment. For the moment, sex worker labour unionism remains between something begun and something not yet progressed. And it is in this moment in time that sex worker union collective organisation remains somewhere between advocacy group and labour union. It has the aspiration but has not achieved the reality. Concomitant, it has not been snuffed out so it continues in its less preferred form of advocacy group.

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