

Anarchists & Sex Work

Solidarity or Abolition?

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Responses welcome; see Questions & Guidelines in this issue.

Which is most consistent with anarchist ideals? Supporting sex workers as an act of solidarity or calls to stop men from consuming women's bodies?

On December 20, 2013, many anarchists and radical feminists in Canada celebrated an historic ruling of the country's Supreme Court which unanimously struck down three major laws regulating prostitution, effectively paving the way for the decriminalization of sex work. The laws prohibited the operation of a "common bawdy house" (a brothel), communication for the purposes of sex work, and living from the proceeds of prostitution. The government of Canada now has one year to rewrite the laws.

However, this historic day also touched a sensitive nerve within the anarchist movement across the country as there is no consensus among anarchists in Canada on a position regarding sex work. Indeed, some anarchist feminists have deplored the recent supreme court ruling and continue to advocate for the abolition of the sex work industry.

Anarchists who struggle in solidarity with sex workers, and those who are abolitionist are often in conflict with each other as abolitionists argue for completely doing away with sex work, while others see a necessity to stand behind sex workers as part of feminist and anti-capitalist ideas and practice. If we want to be consistent with core anarchist values of freedom, self-determination, and the elimination of capitalism and patriarchy, it is crucial that we stand firmly in support of sex workers' struggles for better working conditions, and by extension, better lives.

I am a Canadian-born, straight, white male anarchist who has never done sex work, nor am I in an economic position that would make sex work one of the few viable options in life to pay my rent or put food on my table. I have, however, several close anarchist comrades and friends who do sex work, or who are sex worker rights advocates, and their work heavily inspires and informs my own positions.

Throughout history, anarchists have taken different positions around sex work. Perhaps it is more useful to focus on what unifies us as anarchists around this debate. Whether we're abolitionist or pro-sex worker rights, we all share a deep commitment to ending capitalism, patriarchy, and all forms of domination or oppression.



Participants at the Red Umbrella Rally, Festival of Sex Work, Melbourne 2013

—photo: the Scarlet Alliance Archives (from titsandsass.com)

Furthermore, we all share an opposition to prisons, liberal notions of criminality and the criminal justice system as a whole. What distinguishes radical or anarchist abolitionists from their liberal feminist counterparts is that they don't advocate the criminalization of sex workers. Rather, as the Montreal-based anarcho-feminist collective Les Sorcieres argues, the sex work industry should be torn down, and clients (or "Johns" as they are commonly known) should be denounced. In their words, "Instead of stigmatizing prostitutes, we should point the finger at clients. We need to discourage men from consuming women's bodies."

This approach, similar to the so-called "Nordic model" whereby it is the clients who are criminalized rather than sex workers themselves, has been denounced as highly problematic by sex workers. For one, it still forces sex workers into situations of criminality by criminalizing one side of the interaction. It still forces sex workers to work underground, driving them into potentially unsafe conditions.

In a similar vein, pro-sex worker anarchists need to be more critical of the criminal justice system, including the recent Canadian Supreme Court decision. While the ruling will have a significant positive impact in many sex workers' lives, we should not be so naive as to think of this as an absolute victory.

A positive ruling here could just mean that the Conservative Party dominated Canadian government re-writes even harsher laws in one year's time.

Indeed, no long-lasting solution can come without systemic change and revolution.

While not wanting to present the debate as a polemical divide between two sides of the anarchist movement, it is useful to map certain positions which inform our political perspectives. In a very general way, anarchists in the pro-sex worker camp tend to argue from positions informed by gender-queer theory, anarcho-syndicalism, and an intersectional anti-oppression framework. On the other hand, anarchist abolitionists tend to argue from a materialist-feminist and sometimes insurrectionist framework.

One of the abolitionists' arguments is that sex work should be abolished simply because all wage slavery should be abolished. Granted, all anarchists agree that we should do away with capitalist wage work. However, anarchist practice also needs to be heavily informed by a sense of solidarity with those who are on the frontlines of liberation struggles. For example, anarchists who struggle in solidarity with undocumented migrants or indigenous people are careful to never erase the voices of those directly impacted by social injustices. Another useful parallel would be to look at labour struggles at Walmart. While we hate Walmart and everything it stands for, we would never tell their workers organizing for better conditions, "Sorry, you're fucked. We won't support you."

Sadly, abolitionist anarchism is drawing a line between workers who are deserving of our support, and those who aren't. We can hate the sex industry, and the fact that money is being exchanged for sexual acts, but that can be consistent with our uncompromising solidarity with sex workers fighting against criminalization, violence, and for safer working conditions.

Abolitionism can fall into the trap of playing a sort of great white saviour, whereby anarchists who are too infrequently non-sex workers themselves attempt to dictate what is best for working women. In imperialistic terms, this would be the equivalent of the "white man's burden" to liberate darker nations from themselves.

The zine, *Whorelicious*, describes the "Imaginary Victimized Sex Worker" as such: "Everyone (in particular people who see themselves as sex work allies) wants to find the Imaginary Victimized Sex Worker. If it isn't me, it must be street workers or the underage or the addicted or the so-called "trafficked." It isn't.

Think of the manufacturing or hospitality industry: some settings are good and respectful, some are shitty and abusive. But the concept of victims in need of rescue is never helpful. There are workers who might want better rights or conditions on their own terms. The idea that sex workers are victims is exactly how some of the worst abuses of sex worker rights, usually perpetrated by the state, are justified and for that reason, talking about safety and danger is really loaded."

Again, this is not to say that we should ignore violence in the sex industry. Quite the opposite. It should be confronted, acknowledging that sex workers are indeed the first to feel it, and to confront it. Another line one often hears from abolitionists is, "I support sex workers; I support them to leave the industry."

An anarchist approach to sex work is one that supports workers who want to get out of the industry, while at the same time supporting people who want to stay and fight for better conditions. The two approaches are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, we need to acknowledge sex work in all its complexities.

We need to create spaces that are anti-patriarchal, sex positive, offer harm reduction techniques (distribution of condoms and safe sex kits, needle exchanges, etc.), while at the same time offering rape crisis support and positive support for people to leave the industry should they desire. Anarchism should be about opening up possibilities for marginalized people in struggle against the state and oppressive forces, not limiting our solidarities with people in struggle for better working conditions.

In criticizing sex work, we need to be very clear about what constitutes consensual sex work, what constitutes violence, and what constitutes trafficking. The situation of women who are forced into the industry and brought across borders against their will cannot be ignored. But advocating for the abolition of the industry will only open up more black markets, creating larger margins for pimps and traffickers to operate in. Decriminalization, while not a completely liberatory step, at least removes some of the demand for trafficking and starts to put the control back in the hands of sex workers.

There are paths where we can link struggles against colonialism, border violence, and patriarchy by affirming the rights and dignity of sex workers. In an interview with Robyn Maynard, scholar/activist Nandita Sharma states that “ultimately, the moral panic against sex work makes migrant women more vulnerable in the sex industry.” If we seek to abolish some of the more unjust aspects of sex work such as trafficking and pimping, the most pragmatic and sensible solution is to listen to women who are on the frontlines, and support their right to self-determination and autonomy.

In that same interview, Sharma continues, “Ultimately, if we want to end the exploitation of women, we need to challenge capitalism, which is the basis for all of our exploitation. Whether we’re working in the sex industry, a restaurant, or in a university, we’re being exploited by those who are benefiting from our labour.”

Lastly, while an anarchist reflection on sex work opens up the possibilities for linking struggles of sex workers with other struggles for liberation, an anarchist abolitionist approach limits our solidarities.

According to Maggie’s, a sex worker organization in Toronto: “Sex work is real work and we demand fair and safe working conditions for all of us including those without status. We stand against the exploitation of all workers and legislation that advances the precarity of labour and creates vulnerability to exploitation. The disregard by the state for the lives of Indigenous people involved in sex work and the over-representation of Indigenous people in the most precarious and vulnerable forms of sex work cannot be separated from the ongoing economic exploitation of Indigenous people, the extraction of resources from Indigenous lands, the ongoing pursuit of profit at the expense of Indigenous communities and environmental protections, and the displacement of Indigenous peoples from land and labour. Our call for labour rights for all sex workers supports the right to self-determination for Indigenous peoples. Sex worker rights are labour rights.”

Anarchists should never be satisfied with legalization nor decriminalization, and as such we should approach the current context in Canada with scepticism. We are not fighting for bigger cages, longer chains, and more state regulation in the sex industry. We are fighting for total liberation, where people determine their own lives and have freedom over their own bodies. This should not be forgotten.

At its core, anarchism stands for freedom, self-determination, as well as personal and collective autonomy. We do not win struggles by deciding what is best for oppressed people. We win struggles when we open our hearts, listen, and honour voices on the frontlines. It is for this reason that anarchists should lend our full solidarity to sex workers in struggle against capitalism and patriarchy.

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