

## WHY ARE SEX WORKERS AND THEIR ALLIES OCCUPYING WALL STREET?

Melissa Sontag Broudo and Penelope Saunders

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In the last four weeks, many have been wondering what has driven people to Occupy Wall Street (OWS) and bring attention to the economic situation that has developed in our country. Critics have argued that so many issues are being discussed and that so many disparate groups have joined forces, that the occupation has no cohesive message, purpose, or goals. As our group of sex workers and allies stood in solidarity with our fellow revolutionaries Wednesday, October 5<sup>th</sup> at the rally at Foley Square in New York, it was apparent that we were included in that critique or question. What were we doing there? What was our purpose? What was our message? And how do sex workers' rights connect to the larger OWS movement?

Those of us who were there, or who are active in the sex workers' rights movement generally, have no doubt about how we fit within OWS and how OWS fits within our movement. United, in solidarity, with everyone coming together in Zuccotti Park and in all the plazas nationwide, we can bring about greater change. After the rally, we decided to highlight the points that bring together our intersecting movements and realities. **We, as sex workers and allies, have joined OWS because:**

As a sex worker, I joined Occupy Wall Street because the issues that impact both myself and my community are issues that are affecting other workers: lack of affordable housing, healthcare, education, and childcare. I come to stand in solidarity with communities of color, immigrants, Indigenous folks, and LGBTQ folks who have remain disproportionately impacted by a system that has failed to provide justice, decriminalization, destigmatization, and the practice of fundamental rights.

*Hannah, a sex worker for over a decade*

**1) Sex workers, people in the sex trade and people affected by anti-prostitution policies (such as trans communities, youth) are deeply oppressed by the economic inequities that exist within our society.** As the OWS slogan goes, we are the 99%, with 1% of the country's wealthiest owning 40% percent of the country's wealth [see these and other facts about economic disparities here: <http://thinkprogress.org/economy/2011/10/03/334156/top-five-wealthiest-one-percent/>]. These disparities are highlighted and magnified across racial, gender, ethnic, geographic, and other lines. Many sex workers and people in the sex trade are from economically marginalized and oppressed groups and seek to address their economic needs through a wide range of sexual commerce. The criminalization and stigmatization of many forms of this work only compounds the economic and social disempowerment that many

already have faced and is a deep form of injustice (that is punishing people for their desire to provide for themselves, their communities and families).

**2) Sex work is work, and thus we as the sex workers' rights movement are joining forces in solidarity with other labor rights' movements.** The idea that sex work is work has been a critical rallying cry for sex workers all over the

We're participating at OWS because sex work is real work, and all workers deserve living wages, affordable housing, and healthy communities. Sex workers are a part of OWS's cross-movement dialogues at working groups, marches and teach-ins, in order to build mutual understanding and work for broad-based social change.

*M, an organizer and former sex worker*

country and world. The United States lags in recognizing sex workers as a labor force and creating an environment in which sex workers may fight for and establish their rights [in India and Brazil, for example, there are strong and powerful voices for the sex worker labor movement: e.g. Durbar Mahila Samanoy Samity in India <http://durbar.org/> and Davida in Brazil <http://www.davida.org.br/>]. Participating in OWS allows us to be seen – and heard – as a workers’ rights movement and to gain ideas and momentum by linking visions and strength with fellow workers.

**3) The NYPD must be held accountable for the abusive practices they utilize against those they perceive to be politically powerless, including sex workers, street vendors, people who are living at or below the poverty level, people of color, transgender people, and others.** Sex workers and their allies have long known what some are just finding out at OWS: the NYPD often utilizes harsh, ineffective, inhuman, and downright degrading tactics to subdue and control those without power. Sex workers have been and continue to be targets of police abuse. Police demand sexual favors, perpetrate physical violence and refuse to take rape and assaults against the sex work community seriously. The ability of our community to come out and join forces with others to fight against this is critical and will hopefully create positive and empowering change.

I hope that my presence at OWS and the sign that I carry revealing myself as a sex worker and a person affected by the crimes committed on Wall Street, open up people's minds to the possibility of including sex workers in the process of the people's liberation.

*Andy, a male prostitute and organizer for sex worker rights*

**4) Because sex workers have critical roles to play in making this movement more accountable in regards to racism, sexism, transphobia, homophobia, xenophobia, and the stigmatization of various activities.** M, an organizer and former sex worker, notes that, “many sex workers exist at the intersections of marginalized identities and are contributing to the dialogues among protestors as our movement takes this opportunity to confront oppressions within our ranks.” We hope to be able to provide this awareness about how various identities interrelate and intersect with multiple systems of oppression relating to race, gender, heteronormativity, the prison industrial complex, and other issues to other activists and to the general public by our presence and voice.

Occupations are at the heart of sex workers' rights movements. Think back to the Lyon occupation in France in the 1970's [see: <http://blog.audaciaray.com/post/6108916431/prostitution-is-legal-in-france-but-soliciting>]. Taking Times Square last Saturday was a full circle moment, given the history of sex work in Times Square, and the joined forces of corporate and political interests that have displaced sex workers from not just Times Square but any public space. For sex workers, occupying public space is about economics as much as it is free speech.

*Melissa Gira Grant, writer and former sex worker*

Just like others who are coming to OWS, we each have our own stories and reasons for joining in solidarity. We hope to bring a distinct perspective to the OWS movement – and to solidify the sex workers’ rights movement as a critical labor force standing in solidarity with the 99 percent.

*Penelope Saunders and Melissa Sontag Broudo are both representatives of SWOP-NYC [www.swopnyc.org] and the Best Practices Policy Project [www.bestpracticespolicy.org]. We are also involved in many other organizations working for the rights of sex workers. We would also like to thank SWOP-NYC and SWANK members for sharing their thoughts about OWS with us.*