WHY ARE SEX WORKERS AND THEIR ALLIES OCCUPYING WALL STREET?

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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 5th 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:**

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
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.

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.

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.