

Text by Syd Eastwin, read by Jason Lazarus, at The Outlet, March 23, 2018

On behalf of the Sex Worker Solidarity Network and the whole of Tampa's hardworking radical community, I want to thank you for allowing space for us to engage. "Support Not Protection" was born out of conversations between myself as an advocate, and Jason Lazarus as an artist, simply sitting at a coffee shop and bouncing concepts between us.

What the sex Worker Solidarity Network does materially and what this exhibit does conceptually may feel like leaps from each other, but they're intrinsically linked, as it is ultimately applied ideas which give us our greatest opportunities to learn. I wish I could be present for this event, and I'm so honored to learn our work is reaching sympathetic ears.

However, as victims of prohibition the world over are living under persecution, I will be assisting Solidarity movements overseas to support refugees in Europe, who are violently attacked by police, their food and tents stolen, their health left untreated, and intentionally prohibited in their freedom to move when they most need the sanctuary of our abundance.

Similarly, in the US, immigrants and women are prohibited in their personhood and their freedom to do what they please with their bodies, leaving them with arrests which limit their access to employment and housing, as well as in dangerous situations because they are unable to report predators without risking arrest.

The Sex Worker Solidarity Network was founded on the principles of solidarity, intersectionality, and self-determination. We therefore support all struggles against oppression in acknowledgement that while we may struggle differently, our liberation must be collective.

In place of a real chance to interact, I'd be honored to share three stories with which really impacted us when we learned of them:

1.

In New York, massage parlor raids are at an all time high. In one tragic incident, a massage parlor worker, Yang Song, a consensual sex worker, was harassed and intimidated by police for months. Her family describe her as a kind girl, ambitious, and recall her shipping back gifts and baby formula to her family overseas. In what NYPD calls an effort to end human trafficking, Song was held at gunpoint and raped by a police officer to make her inform on her co-workers and friends. She considered becoming an informant just to make the harassment, physical assaults, and raids stop, she was promised informal immunity if she only became an informant, but she didn't want her friends, colleagues, and neighbors to suffer in the way she did at the hands of NYPD. In the final NYPD raid Song faced, Song fell 3 stories from the her workplace to her death. Police claim they weren't in her room at the time and that it was suicide, her family believe it was fatal retaliation by police for not becoming an informant. Regardless of strange circumstances surrounding her untimely death, nobody was held responsible for the rape and mistreatment of this young woman.

2.

Next is the story of Ana. Ana, a resident of Miami, was cruelly trafficked by a wealthy family. Her "employers" if you can call them that, paid her only \$3/hour, denied her healthcare, she was forced to sleep in their spare room, was not allowed contact with friends and family, and was warned that if she complained to anyone about the conditions under which she worked, that she would be deported. After two years of suffering through this abuse of power, Ana took her bags and left. She filed a formal complaint against these wealthy, exploitative, coercive criminals, who held, threatened and exploited her for 2 years. Ana cooperated with law enforcement who acknowledged her victimhood, she worked with police to ensure justice for herself in the face of extreme abuse. Only 2 months later, she was taken into detention by ICE. She saw no justice for the extreme cruelty she faced at the hands of her trafficker.

3.

Here in Tampa, police are regularly raiding and harassing the workers in long standing massage businesses - specifically under the racist assumption that all "Asian" spa workers are either trafficked or providing illicit services. An ordinance redlining many of our cities longstanding spa workers out of the city in the name of ending human trafficking was just passed unanimously. As our city councilman Mike Suarez and city attorney Mike Schmidt admitted to the sex worker Solidarity Network justifying the removal of basic human rights for spa workers and I quote: "Tampa police can't legally have sex with the workers to prove whether or not they're providing illicit services, therefore we must find other ways to catch them." Our question? Why do you seek to arrest these workers in the first place? With no proof of illicit activity, not a single victim of human trafficking produced from these raids, and countless innocent workers redlined out of their own city, we ask, IS THIS REALLY AN ATTACK ON HUMAN TRAFFICKING?

Or is it an attack on marginalized workers? Are we raiding the homes of wealthy business people, the farms of wealthy landowners, the utility rooms of high end hotels? Where labor exploitation is the norm and legitimately accepted in our culture? No.

Are these raids doing anything to assist victims of human trafficking? No.

Not only are Prohibitionists, who fight for laws which further criminalize sex work, talking over victims of human trafficking by claiming to fight for them, they're distracting from the issue entirely so that we still have established victims sitting in detention or stuck with their traffickers, because their trade or their personhood is criminalized. Again, victims are stuck with their traffickers because their trade or their personhood, is criminalized.

When we use words like autonomy and self-determination, we advocate for consensual Workers as well as for victims.

Prohibiting people and workers serves only to bolster our criminal justice system. The state sanctioned slavery of our day. Prohibition of immigrants and closed borders only empower our

law enforcement as well as dangerous smugglers, as migrants are vulnerable to both when exercising their freedom to move in the face of a border. Prohibition of personal behavior simply discards the autonomy of workers who may choose sex work out of crucial need to survive, and undermines our rights as human beings to do what we please with our bodies.

The only solution to this is to end prohibition. It didn't work for alcohol, the war on drugs has failed, and yet, the war on women is still in full force.

Our official proposal to the city of Tampa, to truly address human trafficking and liberate prohibited workers from scrutiny, is for legal immunity for victims. Less than 50% of women in the US report to the police when they've been raped. On college campuses, 47% of rape victims who didn't report state their reasoning: "that they didn't want anyone to know." According to Amnesty International, victims are more likely to come forward when their identities are protected. The criminalization of human trafficking victims has unimaginable consequences. 80% report being unable to gain employment due to their convictions and 60% report being unable to find housing. 70% of victims of sex trafficking are unable to get their criminal records expunged even after establishing their victimhood, leaving them with no other options but to remain with their trafficker or starve. Perhaps equally startling, 44% of the victims surveyed cite never seeing their trafficker arrested, and even those who were arrested are seldom arrested for trafficking. The penalties on victims are already so high, our justice system leaves them even more vulnerable to their traffickers who can exploit them with relative impunity. We know full legal immunity from arrest for prostitution and detention due to immigration status is the only lifeline we can lend to victims on a city level, as a measure which truly empowers them to reach out when they most need it. Furthermore, legal immunity would end indiscriminate and misguided spa raids and police stings which force prohibited workers further underground. It is our duty to respect the needs and autonomy of those most marginalized under all forms of systemic oppression. It is this principle of support not protection, rights not rescue, solidarity not charity, which guide our actions.

In the meantime, as we understand prohibition will not end tomorrow, we have set up our community legal defense which will serve the self-determined needs of victims of prohibition: primarily immigrants and women. Last year in Tampa, 113 people were arrested for prostitution, yet we only apprehended 27 rapists. Roughly half of these rapists will walk free. Black women are arrested at twice the rate of white women for sex work and 29% of sex work homicide victims are trans women of color. Are we "protecting" the right people with these laws?

We reject the notion of protection in favor of solidarity. By giving directly to the needs of prohibited workers, we can create space where our state does not. Sex workers are not asking for rescue, they are demanding our solidarity, and in this difficult time as Tampa is harshly punishing so many for existing, we have a unique opportunity to bring this community out of the margins and demand equal protection under the law.

Thank you again for taking this time with us today, and for your crucial support.

In solidarity, until every border falls,

Sydney Eastman



Image of Syd Eastwin, Activist, 1/6/18