
AN UNLIKELY UNION

**Julie Bindel investigates a world of
workers, pimps and punters**

In 2002, the GMB, one of Britain's largest Trades Unions, made history. Known for its representation of men in traditionally masculine jobs – after all it was originally set up for boiler makers – there was surprise and some consternation when a new branch proposing to represent strippers, lap dancers, porn actors and prostitutes joined the fold. The Adult Entertainment branch would, its founders argued, enable people working in the sex industry to enjoy the same rights as those in any other trade or profession.

The seed that grew to become the Adult Entertainment branch began not in a brothel or strip club but in a university. In 2000, a campaign group called the International Union of Sex Workers (IUSW) was founded by a couple of radical anthropologists who believed that the rights of people involved in prostitution could only be won through collective organising. Having established the IUSW the founders then realised that only by being a part of an official Trades Union could its members properly reap the benefits.

According to Chris Knight, one of the IUSW founders, prior to passing its governance to the GMB in 2002, the IUSW was, “fledgling and rather informal”. In the first issue of the IUSW journal, *Respect*, published in 2000, the founders declared: “When the oldest profession comes out, pimps and capitalists beware! ... Whatever your sex or sexual situation, if you feel you need a union, you are welcome to join!”

But the IUSW, often mistaken for the GMB Adult Entertainment Branch, is far from the left wing, pro-worker organisation its founders intended it to be. Some former members have told me that it is more of a mouthpiece for pimps and punters, and rather than warning them to “beware” as did its founders, the IUSW today welcomes sex industry bosses as members with open arms. The endorsement of the GMB, albeit for the official union branch representing those in the sex industry has led to the IUSW appearing to represent the ‘workers’ within the sex industry.

Such organisations are politically motivated lobby groups campaigning for total decriminalisation of the sex trade, hence the fact that pimps and punters are encouraged to join. In the Netherlands, where brothel prostitution has been legal since 2000, the Red Thread prostitutes’ rights group founded a union in 2002 that at its height only had 100 members, mainly managers and erotic dancers. It lost its government funding in 2004. No one within either the GMB or IUSW have been either able or prepared to give me exact figures as to how many members there are in the actual union branch, but it is thought to be between 20 and 100 out of an estimated 80,000 sex workers in the UK.

But prostitution is not a legitimate industry, and living off its proceeds and other aspects of the trade remains illegal. Abuse, coercion, deceit, and often appalling working conditions

are all features of the sex market. Rape, sexual harassment and murder are common occupational hazards. But whilst the well-meaning founders of the IUSW believed that these problems could be addressed by unionisation, others are clear that it is shortsighted and even dangerous to normalise an exploitative trade as opposed to helping those involved in it escape.

I have met several members of the IUSW over the years at seminars, conferences and public meetings in the UK and elsewhere in Europe. Members, usually represented by Catherine Stephens, are aware that I campaign against pimping and support the criminalisation of paying



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for sex. I am also critical of the terminology adopted by the pro-prostitution lobby. According to Stephens, who became involved in 2004, the main founder of the IUSW, Ana Lopes, was a ‘migrant sex worker’, but that is somewhat of a distorted definition. Lopes came to the UK from Portugal to study for a PhD. She, like a small but growing number of academics studying ‘sex work’ began to personally experiment with prostitution, thinking it akin to ‘field research’. Eventually the academics moved aside and those more directly involved in the sex industry took over. But they too were far from representative of the majority of prostitutes in the UK.

I first came across Stephens seven years ago

when she told me that in her eight years as a ‘sex worker’ she had never even experienced bad manners from a ‘client’ let alone abuse, and that she “loves” her work.

Stephens does not appear a typical dominatrix. Middle-aged, with her hair tied back from her face devoid of make up, and usually wearing loose, casual clothing Stephens spends a lot of time speaking at public and invitation-only meetings about prostitution, and appears regularly on TV and radio, calling for the decriminalisation of all laws pertaining to prostitution. When contacted for a quote for this article, as branch secretary of the GMB branch, she wrote that. “The GMB branch for people in the sex industry, like all GMB branches, is run by its members and is open to all people in the sex industry.”

“Catherine is totally dominant and wants things all her own way,” says Thierry Schaffauser, a former member expelled from the IUSW in 2012 mainly, he tells me, because he has always been vocal about his dislike of managers being so prominent in the union. “She gets to make all the decisions without even discussing it in the group first.”

At Parliament Square I meet the man who, alongside Lopes, set up the IUSW back in 2000. I find Chris Knight, a tall man in his late 60s wearing a multi-coloured hat and denims, next to a banner reading ‘Capitalism isn’t working’. Knight was involved in setting up Democracy Village – a group of protesters against the war and capitalism who used to camp out on the Square alongside anarchists and homeless drinkers.

Knight was a professor of anthropology at the University of East London (UEL) until he was sacked in 2009 for his activities on a G20 demonstration.

“The whole point of setting the union up was to end prostitution,” says Knight. “But there are different ways of going about that. Marx said all workers are prostitutes. If we want to end prostitution we have to end capitalism.”

Lopes appeared to have been more interested in joining the sex industry than dismantling it. Soon after she began working with Knight, Lopes signed up for shifts on a phone sex line.

I catch up with Camilla Power, co-founder of the IUSW who worked with Chris Knight at UEL and supervised Lopes’ PhD. Did she sanction Lopes getting directly involved in the sex industry, specifically phone chat lines, as part of her studies?

“It is what anthropologists call ‘participant observation,’” says Power. “You can’t work with the community and stand outside of it and treat the people as objects. With sex work it is even more the case because of the gulf between them and the educated academic.”

I ask if Lopes was granted permission from the University ethics committee to continue with phone sex work as part of her studies. According to Power, “Basic anthropology ethical guidelines”

at the time. I was told by an EUL spokesperson that the relevant documents could not be found to verify that.

During her involvement with the IUSW, Lopes travelled the UK giving talks to other unions and women's groups, touting for support. In 2001 she was awarded a golden trophy in the shape of a flying penis on winning Campaigner for Sexual Freedom award at the Erotic Awards. The awards are organised by the Sexual Freedom Coalition who, along with help from Catherine Stephens, set up the TLC (Tender Loving Care) website to campaign for the introduction of provision for 'visiting sex workers' in hospice wards and for at least one wheelchair accessible brothel per city in the UK.

The IUSW and the GMB branch are, despite being officially separate entities, almost indistinguishable. In 2003 Lopes was a speaker at a GMB-hosted conference in Birmingham for sex industry workers during which a GMB leaflet was handed out offering table-dancing and stripping lessons subsidised by union members and government funds.

I ask an IUSW spokesperson why the word 'union' is in its title when it is nothing of the kind. "When the International Union of Sex Workers was established the issue almost everyone involved identified as most critical related to the conditions of their work, rather than the work itself. Since the name for a group of workers organising to improve their conditions of work is a union that is the title the new organisation took."

Douglas Fox used to be a well-known face of the IUSW. Fox and his partner John Dockerty run one of the biggest escort agencies in the north east of England. Fox is keen to make it clear that the agency is solely in Dockerty's name. "I am not and never have been a manager or owner of any escort agency. My civil partner is the sole proprietor."

Fox agrees to meet me despite the fact that Stephens tried hard to dissuade him from doing so.

In 1999 the couple set up Christony Companions in their hometown of Newcastle. Fox was working as a fashion designer and Dockerty a civilian finance officer for the police. They began the agency, says Fox, when an escort friend asked Dockerty to make appointments for her, and, realising how much money could be made, decided to set up their own business.

In 2000, both men were arrested following an undercover investigation by a local newspaper. A reporter posing as a would-be escort and fitted up with a concealed camera later provided enough evidence for the men to be charged with living off the earnings of prostitution. During the meeting with the reporter, Dockerty asked about her menstrual cycle so he could make a note of it in his diary. The men were later acquitted on a legal technicality – the escorts on Christony's books refused to appear as witnesses because they had been refused anonymity by the judge.

Five years later, filmmaker John Alwen read a small item in a tabloid newspaper about an escort agency owner advertising for women in his local Job Centre and decided to follow it up. Fox and Dockerty agreed to Alwen filming them over a period of months to make a fly-on-the-wall documentary about Christony. Whilst the film crew shadowed Dockerty and Fox an undercover reporter from a local newspaper set up yet another sting.



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Dockerty, hoping to boost business, had advertised on the Christony website to give punters the chance to "win" one of his escorts for up to four hours at a time. Entrants were asked to guess the relevance behind a clue he placed on the site each month. The *Scottish Sunday Mail* ran the story over two pages with the headline. "Internet Pimp: Businessman offers his girls as sex prizes in Internet competition".

Alwen's documentary *The Escort Agency* was screened in 2006. One of the first scenes is of Dockerty booking an appointment with a regular.

The punter, who asked to see the youngest escort on Christony's books, is a head teacher who requires her to dress as a schoolgirl. Whilst Dockerty claimed that the punter, "...is not my most favourite appointment" he happily made arrangements for 19-year-old Tori to meet the man the following evening.

Despite the overwhelming evidence from the documentary, the press and the police file on Christony, Fox denies that the business has anything to do with prostitution. Fox also tells me during our meeting that he is only involved, "...as any husband or wife would be in their partners business. If he asks advice I might have an opinion. But the everyday management of the business has nothing to do with me." In the documentary we see Fox counting out Christony's £150 cut of the £600 earned during an overnight appointment by an escort.

Dockerty and Fox use the GMB as a kite mark to boost business. The slogan on the Christony website reads, 'An Ethical Newcastle Escort Agency & a Member & Supporter of the IUSW.' "I have never known a commercial business using a union in order to boost sales," says one former member of the IUSW who asked not be named. "It is supposed to be about protecting workers, not profits for pimps."

Thierry Schaffauser is the former president of the GMB/IUSW, and the Erotic Award 2010 male escort of the year. Young and handsome, Schaffauser worked for a time as a street prostitute in Paris before moving to the UK where he advertises for clients in the gay press. There is no love lost between Schaffauser and Fox. Their arguments about the purpose of unions and the state of the sex industry have been carried out publicly on the Internet, with Fox accusing Schaffauser of misrepresenting prostitution by highlighting the abuse within the industry.

I asked Schaffauser if we could meet to discuss his differences with Fox and at first he agreed but later withdrew after pressure from Stephens. Telling me he was worried about losing his position on the IUSW, Schaffauser nonetheless said that, "The IUSW will have at some point to criticise and try to change the way the industry operates because there is a lot of exploitation within it."

Another former member of the IUSW is an escort known as Sleazy Michael. Michael, who was married with two children before coming out as gay in 2004, tells me he too left the IUSW as a result of "internal politics", namely the disagreement caused by managers being prominent in the organisation.

Opening the door to me in an all-over tan and a thong Michael leads me to his bedroom where, in pride of place, is the infamous flying penis he was awarded in 2007 when he was named 'Escort of the Year'.

"I used to go to a gay sauna for sex and some guy said I could make money from it. So I paid an escort for sex and learned from him and set up



Thierry Schaffauser at a sex workers' rights demonstration



Douglas Fox



The late Sebastian Horsley



Sleazy Michael – sex worker and former IUSW member



Red umbrellas (right) symbolise the international sex workers' rights movement

Photograph: Charles Hutchins (Flickr)

a website,” he tells me, giving me a guided tour of his pornography and sex toys. “This weekend I have had a client who is deaf and dumb and then ten minutes later a married closet. Then I had one who brought a bag full of leather gear and nipple clamps. That’s why I love my job. I meet such fascinating people.”

Michael became involved in the IUSW after meeting one of its activists during the campaign to repel the proposed legislation against punters in 2009. He joined in order to support what he believed to be a Trades Union, having been active in one during his previous career.

“[Some] years ago the IUSW almost folded because there was a big argument about Douglas [Fox] being involved. I supported him though



because he got some of his girls to join, but lots of people left over him running an escort agency.”

The IUSW enjoys significant support from academics. Belinda Brooks Gordon is Reader in Psychology and Social Policy, Birkbeck, University of London. She is a Liberal Democrat councillor and an avid campaigner for the decriminalisation of prostitution laws. Brooks Gordon has argued for the rights of disabled people to have access to prostituted women on the NHS. During the IUSW-led campaign against government plans to introduce partial criminalisation of paying for sex, Brooks Gordon, with the help of Fox and other IUSW activists, circulated a request for help amongst punters and prostitutes via their websites. In her lengthy email Brooks Gordon advised on how to prevent the law from being passed before moving on to insulting the dress sense of Fiona (Mactaggart, Labour MP who was instrumental in bringing in the law).

The IUSW has also gained support from academics in the US. One such scholar is Elizabeth Wood, who teaches sociology at the State University of New York. Wood promotes legalisation of the sex industry, and has argued that sex with animals can be consensual “when the animal is not prompted, rewarded or punished to try to alter its behavior but is simply given an opportunity and takes it,” and says that, “people who enjoy this should not be stigmatised.”

The link between the sex workers rights and academia was compounded in 2009 with the week-long Sex Worker Open University at which members of the IUSW, academics and prostitutes ran sessions on how to strip; gave tips to those wishing to enter prostitution; self defence; and lessons on how to lobby for an end to laws against profiting from prostitution as a third party. One supporter was the late Sebastian Horsley who was filmed at the opening event of the SWOU, pouring scorn on former Home Secretary Jacqui Smith, the instigator of the proposed legislation. Calling her, “fat and unfuckable”, Horsley claimed to have slept with ‘over a thousand prostitutes’.

I attempt, on several occasions, to speak to the GMB to put the allegations from Schaffauser and others to them but, despite several attempts, no one calls me back. When I had previously written about a related issue in 2010 I was met with a wall of resistance. When I asked about the apparent confusion between the IUSW and the GMB branch, I was told to, “look at the rule book”.

Cath Elliott, former Vice Chair of Unison’s National Women’s Committee who has written extensively against the GMB decision to unionise prostitution says that she cannot comprehend how the IUSW can claim to be a trade union when its membership is open to pimps, punters and pornographers.

“If it’s true that escort agency managers are also actively involved in the IUSW, then the GMB really needs to revisit its membership criteria,” says Elliott. “It can’t possibly claim to represent the workers when it’s the bosses that are running the show; that’s just not how trade unions operate.”

The fact that agency owners and industry bosses are able to have any say over GMB policy makes a mockery of the basic principles of a workers’ union. More than one former or current member told me that the public involvement of Douglas Fox caused bad feeling amongst the few members who consider themselves workers, and resent industry bosses taking the lead.

Knight is surprised that Fox has been involved in the IUSW as a spokesperson and tells me that Lopes left the IUSW some years ago, “as she felt it had become less revolutionary. She doesn’t feel comfortable about it now”.

I ask Fox if he is still supportive of the IUSW and GMB branch, and he tells me that his personal loyalty is to the IUSW because it is the, “only UK” sex worker group that is inclusive and supportive

of all sex workers in the UK regardless of politics, race, gender or role as sex workers within a diverse and often complex industry.”

But in 2010, in an email announcing his resignation sent around IUSW members Fox wrote, “I hope that the IUSW will continue to reflect the diversity within our industry and provide representation for all sex workers whatever their role in sex work and not become a voice for a minority opinion. I will also be cancelling my GMB subscription tomorrow. It has always sat uneasy with me that I was involved in an organisation that financially supported a political party [Labour] that I was very uncomfortable with not least because of its attitudes toward sex workers.”

Thierry Schaffauser, when he finally agreed to a full interview with me about the inner workings of the IUSW under Fox and Stephen’s control is also no longer involved in either the GMB branch or IUSW and tells me he is keen to garner support

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for a “proper workers union” that can support people involved directly in prostitution rather than the managers and other profiteers.

“I think GMB is also a patriarchal union which explains why they don’t care about a branch which is made of women and young queers,” says Shaffauser. “They never took us seriously at all.”

“We had a lot of members, but all the strippers left to join Equity, many left to create the Sex Worker Open University, and many others left the GMB when the first conflict appeared about the managers.”

This strange organisation is shrouded in secrecy that the ruling cabal members, such as Stephens, justify as ‘confidentiality’ due to the sensitive nature of the members’ activities. But I failed to find even one member who could tell me anything convincing about benefits to ordinary workers of being a member of the IUSW. Despite presenting itself as an organisation promoting workers’ rights, in effect it appears to be more concerned with lobbying for an end to laws that criminalise the exploiters in the sex trade, and ultimately to sugar-coat the realities of this abusive and dangerous industry.