

# The obstacles facing sex worker unionisation suggest occupational, rather than workplace unionism, could be a way forward

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*In Britain, sex workers – unlike other workers – find they have a combined, triple hurdle to overcome in order to secure representation of their collective labour interests through unionisation. Based on research from his [new book](#), **Gregor Gall** outlines how, due to the nature of the industry, the notion of occupational unionism may have some particular purchase as opposed to workplace unionism.*



The first hurdle facing sex workers is the extent to which the state regulates the work they do and the conditions under which it is done. Working together in brothels remains unlawful while lapdancing clubs are increasingly regulated, being subject to stricter licensing controls. The second is that sex workers are almost without exception self-employed or 'independent contractors'. And, the third is that customer or clients have a large role in mediating the relationship between labour and capital in the sex industry. Here, they exercise choice and often negotiate directly with sex workers over price and service.

The first and third mean that the traditional bi-lateral relationship between capital and labour upon which labour unionism rests is queered somewhat while the second means creating the leverage over capital is made much more difficult. So in the workplaces within the sex industry that most closely align to conventional workplaces in the wider economy (by virtue of their collective nature where workers congregate and interact with management), namely, brothels and lapdancing clubs, sex workers have big challenges to overcome. In addition to these specific challenges, there are others which workers in general face such as staff turnover, part-time working and low attachment to work.

Two unions, the Equity union for actors and models and the GMB general union, have organised amongst the exotic dancers in lapdancing clubs since the late 1990s and early 2000s respectively. Collectively, the two unions attained half a dozen union recognition agreements with clubs (out of some 300 clubs) where collective bargaining took place over terms and conditions of work. However, these agreements became moribund as dancers moved to different clubs, some left dancing altogether and dancers from Eastern Europe (where unions have a poor reputation) became more commonplace. In other words, a bridgehead was not formed from which to expand out into the majority of clubs.

Added to this was that unlike in the United States, dancers in Britain have not been able to show in law that they are *de facto* employees, whose work is managed and controlled by clubs. The case of [Nadine Quashie v Stringfellows in 2012](#) dealt a blow to replicating the situation of the United States where a growing number of clubs have been forced to reclassify dancers as employees.

Of course, lack of employed status, state regulation and the like help provide the foundations for senses of injustice amongst sex workers. But whether they can be turned into grievances which can be acted upon collectively is another matter. Otherwise, individually, sex workers will develop their own coping or exit strategies.

It is here that the notion of occupational unionism may have some particular purchase. Unions which organise at the level of the occupation, rather than the workplace, seek to establish a floor of terms and conditions with capital (owners, operators) across and throughout workplaces because the work their members do is not confined to one single, fixed worksite and is often of a short duration. Sex workers in brothels and lapdancing clubs approximate

more closely to this situation than any other.

Of course, occupational labour unionism has to be based on their being an occupation and one which has elements of a profession to it (such as some degree of regulation to entry to the occupation and of behaviour within the occupation). Seeking to establish occupational rights and status is no easy feat and may take a long time to do. But given that the industry structure and conditions of both brothels and lapdancing are unlikely to be subject to significant changes, the suggestion has much merit to it.

*Note: this article is based on the findings of a [new book](#), *Sex Worker Unionisation: Global Developments, Challenges and Possibilities* (2016).*

### **About the Author**

**Gregor Gall** is Professor of Industrial Relations at the University of Bradford. Along with his new book, he has also edited, with Tony Dundon, a [volume](#) on *Global Anti-Unionism*, and with Adrian Wilkinson and Rick Hurd, *The International Handbook of Labour Unions: Responses to Neo-liberalism*, available [here](#).



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