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Interview with an anarchist dominatrix

Organise!

2002

For two years Mistress Venus was a professional dominatrix in central London. She's also an anarchist communist. So, we at Organise! thought we'd take the opportunity to ask her a few questions about this.

Organise!: *There's a popularly-held belief, also prevalent among the left and some anarchists, that anyone (particularly female) who works in the sex industry, is in some way a victim and has been forced into that situation. How realistic is this view?*

Mistress Venus: I think it's very important to make distinctions between workers in different areas of 'the sex industry'. The role played by a girl working the streets is very different from the role (as that's exactly what it is) played by a professional dominatrix. Speaking from personal experience, my decision to work as a dominatrix was purely my own choice and was something I wanted to do. It was an extension of having spent years going to fetish clubs and performing as a fetish model. I knew the scene, the roles played and exactly what was involved. I had no illusions about it and I was in no way coerced into it. I kept my day job (working in a shop), worked when I

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wanted to and unlike many, had no monetary pressures I was forced into supporting.

I must admit that the approach I took was a very practical one: I only ever worked with at least one other dominatrix, who worked as my 'maid'. And sometimes a male colleague stayed within the building and helped set up the 'sessions'. Sessions were pre-arranged, with the 'client' and myself both discussing our own limits and expectations, though obviously not all sex workers are afforded this level of co-ordination and support!

There's a very different attitude from the 'client' towards a dominatrix, compared to that towards a girl on the streets, I think. To my 'clients', I was the embodiment of their desires. They worshipped everything about me, and I had the power to control whether they were allowed to even look at me. And, if they displeased me, they cleaned my bathroom out with a toothbrush!

There was never any sex involved in the 'sessions'. The sexual energy from the client is derived from the playing and reversal of power roles, from a form of humiliation and degradation absent from their 'normal' daily lives. That's not to say, however, that I didn't, at times, feel used, or stop and question just exactly what I was doing. In fact, at times, it served to reinforce ideas I'd previously held about the exploitation of women by men, particularly, in the case of a dominatrix, sometimes very rich and powerful men!

Ultimately, I stopped though. I chose to give it up. I wasn't interested in, or enraptured by, the money it brought in (and these guys would pay up to £120 an hour, £30 extra to be pissed on!). It was something I chose to enter, and chose to leave; a choice many 'sex workers' don't always have!

O: You say your 'clients' worshipped you when you were in your dominatrix role, and you also talk about having power and control over them. How does that role fit in with you being an anarchist?

We need to abolish all forms of control that are so common within the sex industry, and abolish the different levels of power; we need to work as one so that we are all informed, safe, supported and united, as opposed to working alone through force or need, in sometimes dangerous conditions. Sex work, in one form or another, will always be around, it always has been, and it's certainly not in any danger of disappearing — whether we live in a capitalist society or even in a moneyless anarchist society.

Sex work takes a myriad of different forms and is entered, used and left for a myriad of different reasons. It's just that in one of these societies workers within it will continue to be exploited, misrepresented and scorned by that very society itself, and in the other one we will have the power, ability and motivation to both be ourselves and govern ourselves!

MV: During a domination session both parties are consenting adults who choose to perform their particular role — whether it be the role of the master, the all-powerful oppressor, or that of the weak, oppressed slave — and choose their own limits. The session is an escape from reality; a performance where the clients enter the realm of their imagination, and briefly live out fetishes that are scorned in this society.

The roles we play mirror the powerbased capitalistic society we live in today, a society of greed, oppression and subversion, a society of force, silence and pain. This is in no way representative of the lifestyle I choose to live in as an anarchist, a society based on equality, respect and selfgovernment.

Domination is a game, the adult's version of what children call 'playing'. It's not real and, for me personally, it does not reflect elements of my personality. I enjoy the sessions as a performer, as an experimenter and as an exhibitionist... It's the attention I crave. The thrill of power and control is a novelty in a game, not something that I desire to be present in my 'real life'. I think it is very important, in a society based on freedom, that people should be able to express themselves and their fetishes and fantasies freely and in a safe environment (providing all parties are consenting), whether those fetishes involve being whipped as a naughty school-kid or dressing up as a nurse!

O: Earlier, you mentioned that your work sometimes reinforced issues around the exploitation of women by men. Did you feel you were more exploited than you might have been in other kinds of work?

MV: During a domination session, the traditional, stereotypical gender roles are usually reversed. During the sessions the female dominatrix becomes the power holder, taking control over the male. This is a mirroring of the patriarchal society we inhabit today; where males traditionally have the 'best' jobs, the higher wages, the positions of power in society and the home; and where the male is seen as the authoritative figure in control. Throughout the world, history is told through

the eyes of the male, and women are repressed through, for example, religion, violence, exploitation and inequality. The role of the dominatrix temporarily reclaims some of this power and hands it back to the woman; one might almost say it is the man who becomes the exploited. However, I do consider the 'sex industry' as being one of the very vehicles used by men and society to exploit women, an arena where women use their bodies as an object for sale. And being a dominatrix is still making a living using the 'being' and body as an object, regardless of who wields the so-called 'power' for the duration of the session (or who holds the whip!).

Often, yes, I was left feeling as though I had been exploited, possibly more so than if I had a more 'conventionally acceptable' or 'normal' job. Regardless of the fact that I enjoyed the role play and enjoyed the escapism, the costume and grandeur of the part, I still felt as though my body had been used by another person as something they had control over, simply by the fact that they were paying for the session, paying for me to dress up in a certain way and behave in a certain way at a certain time (even though we could say the same about a number of roles we play in our life!).

I believe the body is the last aspect of our lives we have any control over. This explains the large and growing amount of interest in fetishes such as body adornment and modification (tattoos, piercings, scarification etc). And when it dawns on me that I am making a living by someone ultimately controlling what I am doing with my body, the element of how much choice I have over my body and life has to be questioned. There is a feeling of having been exploited, felt by nearly everyone who has to work hard in this society, which is based on inequality and division. I've felt it whether I was working in a shop or in an office, or as a cleaner, which were my previous professions, but the feeling of having your own body exploited is a much more raw one, a much more personal one, that does leave you feeling 'naked'.

There is a big difference when money becomes involved. I spent years going to fetish clubs, where all the 'games' and activities are done by choice with willing participants, everyone enjoying the role they played. But when the exchange of money becomes involved, the element of choice is gone and the realms of 'body fascism' open up. If people are going to pay for services, they expect you to look a certain way!

Hence the feelings of exploitation creep into the normally pleasurable areas of your life.

O: We've seen the positive initiative of the setting up of the International Union of Sex Workers in this country. But, more recently, however, at least in London, they've affiliated to the GMB. Now, obviously, the AF would see this move towards mainstream trade unionism as retrogressive. But as someone who's worked in a job generally identified as being part of the sex industry, what do you think is the potential for better selforganisation among sex workers?

MV: I think there's huge scope for potential, just as there is between workers within any industry. What it needs, however, is for various obstacles to be overcome both by ourselves and by society, and for barriers to be broken down, for example the barriers created by the 'separatist' attitudes so prevalent between workers, both within the same branch of work or within different branches. Once this is achieved, and we all begin to realise that our strength and support will stem from our working together, then we will be stepping closer to self-government and organisation, as opposed to resorting to being represented by a body so influenced by, and affiliated to, the Labour Party! By improving communication between the various workers and branches, and achieving the de-stigmatisation of the industry by society, we can begin to co-operate with one another to create a united body offering, for example, advice and information, and giving emotional and practical support for people, both already within the industry, and entering it.