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Bylibcom.org news

Re-posting this interview with a sex worker from

<http://libcom.org/news/article.php/interview-sex-text-worker-250106> . It seems an interesting addition to our coverage of various formulations of 'precarity' and labour struggle across the social factory floor. There are also interesting similarities and divergences with Kolinko's call centre enquiry <http://www.metamute.org/en/Call-to-Arms> in the re-iteration of the subjective conditions of technologised communications work

Last week, GMB member Irene Everett won the first ever unfair dismissal case for a sex worker, against Essex-based Datapro Service Limited. She had worked on their live adult chat lines for eight years. The GMB, following its merger with the International Union of Sex Workers in 2002, has been trying to organise in the UK, and this was their first victory.

libcom.org interviews another sex worker about the industry, the work, and the possibilities for struggle.

This month the government also announced moves to legalise brothels of up to three prostitutes working together, whilst stopping short of full decriminalisation of the sex industry and even promising new crackdowns on street prostitutes. This underlines the difficulties for sex workers in organising and the ambivalent nature of state intervention, although it does point to new mainstream interest in the subject.

Research by Sophie Day has shown the diversity of approaches to self-organisation or legal reform amongst prostitutes. Some view their work very much as a small business and wary of legislation - which although it might mean better work conditions may also mean more regulation, less autonomy and more difficulties in remaining self-employed, and some are involved in public campaigns for legal recognition and work rights. However, the sex industry should not be seen as limited to prostitution, as Irene Everett's case shows.

With this in mind, libcom.org spoke to Jack, a socialist who worked for a sex-texting company during 2005.

Which company did you work for? For how long?

The company I worked for went by the ever so pleasant and subtle name of 'box-69'. The company did 'sex texting' - basically people would text sexual messages in to you (which you received on a computer, in a chat room type interface), and you would respond - the messages going directly to their mobiles. Obviously, in all but exceptional circumstances, these messages were of an extreme sexual nature. The company got most of its clientele from a daily advert in the Daily Sport, but traded under various different names - such as 'Local Girls 4 U'. I lacked staying power, and only stuck at it for about 3 months full time before it started giving me serious problems, and I had to give it up.

How and why did you choose the job?

I mainly chose it because I needed the money! I was pretty depressed and had been out of work for a few months, and got told about it by one of my friends. Obviously, at first it sounded hilarious - I got to sit at home, pretending to be a girl, and getting guys off, and for (what looked like) not too bad money. So I searched about for a few companies on the internet, sat a 'test' (basically responding in a 'sexy' manner to a few form questions), and got offered the job. Probably more down to my ability to

type quickly and accurately than any ability to be particularly sexy! I provided a scan of a (female) friend's passport to 'prove' I was over 18 - I thought I would have to pretend to be female, although in retrospect I very much doubt they cared. Once I'd sat the test I waited about a week for them to get back to me, and then I was in!

What was the main content of the work?

The way the job worked was you had a number (usually around 4-6) of clients on the go at once. You could send them up to three texts for each one they sent you. I got paid around 10 pence for each text I sent - the customer got charged £1.50 for each one (the mobile network took around a third of this, the rest went to the employer). How it went depended upon how often the customer had been texting. If you got a 'new' customer it was pretty easy - you created a persona, spent about three texts introducing yourself and trying to make yourself sound sexy, and basically creating your character. Then you'd flirt a bit for a couple more, and soon enough (in almost all cases) be having sex text. A few people just wanted to 'chat' - although this was very much a minority. You had to keep notes on your character, so that you didn't mess up later and make the client realise you weren't real - most clients were under the impression you were another person texting in to try and meet dates, and had no idea you were an employee, although occasionally you would be accused of this, or being a machine, and had to spend (still paid for!) texts convincing them otherwise.

Things were much harder, however, if it wasn't a 'new' texter. Not just were we pretending to be other 'real' girls, but also oftentimes someone would text in again wanting to speak to a girl they had spoken with before. And often, the person who had worked as this girl wasn't working at that time, and so you would have to pretend to be this person - in fact the allocation of clients was almost totally random, so with the majority of clients you were continuing on from someone else's conversation, pretending to be them. This was much harder as you had to spend time checking and updating notes (which was unpaid), and could be very tricky with clients who had long, long histories. At first, it was easy, and a bit of a laugh - as well as funny talking point with my friends, but this didn't last for very long...

How were you paid for the work?

I was paid at a piece rate of around 10p per text. At first, this sounded amazing, especially as I could type them (140 characters average) with a keyboard - I figured I could average 3-4 texts a minute - which works out at over 20 quid an hour. This was paid either by paypal or direct bank transfer, and I never had any problems with lack of payment.

The problems, however, were multifold. Firstly, due to checking and updating notes and also getting information that matched the client (to keep them interested, I had to pretend to be local, so had to do stuff like look up info on local pubs etc. if I was asked where I liked to go), this rather never ever happened, because I wasn't constantly doing the 'paid' bit of the job. I was also further slowed down by (obviously) not being able to constantly type at my full speed for 6 hours in a row (I had to work straight shifts), and also having to constantly think up new ideas - there are only so many words for a cock, and only so many ways you can be taken from behind by the same guy before you start repeating yourself!

And to be honest, for this reason, it just became really, really boring, so I wouldn't want to do it constantly at my full speed, and so my rate quickly began to drop.

There were also all the usual problems with piece rate, such as lack of a secure income and being unpaid for any kind of break in the work I made - so for example I wasn't paid when I needed the toilet on top of this. In the end with all this factored in, I was probably only making £3-4 an hour on average, and maybe £6 an hour if I was busy. On slow days when there weren't many clients, I could

be making less than £2 an hour.

You mentioned things went wrong, what was this other than the money and the boredom?

Well, to be blunt it really started to fuck with me. While at first it was a novelty, and I laughed off the concept that it was ever going to 'get to me', or that I'd ever see it as more than sad old blokes wasting their money, it actually very quickly became really dehumanising.

Some of the clients I got were (perhaps predictably) real sick bastards. Two examples I remember specifically were a guy who had me act out in text form him shitting in my mouth, pissing on in, and then 'forcing it down with (his) long hard cock', and the trucker who wanted to take me in his cabin and fuck me with his gear stick. At first I thought this was a euphemism, until he added he wanted to me suck his penis while I did it. And obviously, given the nature of it, I had to act out enjoying all of this. It's really weird, because it's hard to describe and convey just why it was so wrong - I'm sure to a lot of people it just sounds funny, and on a conscious level to me, it was. But at the same time, it was really fucking me up inside, and really started depressing me.

I suppose it's not really that surprising - I spent 6 hours a day acting out as a vile fantasy who liked nothing better than being degraded and enjoying it - and I had no way of opting out (short of anyone who was racist or wanted something like rape, who could be disconnected) or I'd lose the job which at the time I urgently needed.

There was also a lot of pressure to constantly perform, to keep clients interested and coming back (the system tracked if you lost clients from the service) and to text in more and more - which obviously had its own problems, as I knew people were spending huge amounts of money on this service, thinking it was something it wasn't. In the end, I just couldn't do it anymore after I got a warning email that my performance was slipping and had to vastly improve - I desperately needed the money, but just couldn't hack it any more.

Did you work from home or an office? If from home, what were your communications with other workers and your bosses?

I worked from home - from my bedroom in fact! All communication with both bosses and co-workers was electronic, either over email, MSN messenger (which we were required to log into when working) or the systems internal message boards, which were of course highly monitored. Although they had my mobile number (required as part of sign up), this was never used. A sense of competition was fostered (with prizes for the most successful texters), and while there was some sense of community, I had little contact with my co-workers - this being a mixture of only being able to communicate digitally, the monitoring of messages and (for me) the fact I was pretending to be a girl!

How much control did you have over the work in terms of hours, rate of work etc.?

The rate of work, I had quite a lot of control over, although mostly because I was a fast typer, and was in little danger of going too slow - I know a lot of people did it a lot slower than me and never heard of anyone getting any problems for going too slow - being piece rate it didn't really matter to the company, and they could just get more people online if people weren't servicing the clients fast enough.

Hours however, were another of the problems. I had to do (minimum) 4 hours shifts, starting at 6.30 am - I could work as much more than this as I wanted, but as a condition of me originally getting the work, I had to do a minimum for 6.30-11, 6 days a week. This was to make sure there was always a 'texter' logged in at any time a client could try and use the service. Compared to most jobs, I did have

quite a lot of control over my hours, and most other texters weren't on as restricted hours as I was - but being at that time certainly added to the problem.

What were your interactions with customers like?

It veered between pity, disgust, guilt and humour. Sometimes, it was just funny to think that some sad old perv was paying 1.50 per text (and bear in mind, I could send 3 for each of theirs - and 'text sex' would involve 3 in a row for each of their messages almost every time) while some depressed guy in his early 20's sat in his filthy bedroom earning a living. Sometimes, this moved to pity, partly that they were spending so much money (and for some of them it was a LOT) on this thinking it was a girl that really liked them - which is where the guilt came in. There were often really sad stories like guys working alone who couldn't meet girls or were stuck on an oil rig - with someone like this I'd vary my rate due to guilt and not wanting to feel like I was sucking out all their pay. Almost everyone would try and get your normal number so they weren't paying so much for the service, which led to a tedious cat and mouse game of different reasons I couldn't give it out (the service blocks it, I don't trust you enough yet, I've had bad experiences in the past etc. etc.) or receive their number, while still keeping them interested and involved in the process and still texting in.

But if I'm honest, any feelings of guilt and pity usually just dissolved into me thinking they were pathetic and feeling contempt for them, because when it came down to it, the sort of people who used the service were almost always nasty sexist assholes. The attitudes to women on display were revolting, and they didn't go to any effort to hide their low opinion of females. This actually sometimes made things a bit easy, as I could laugh to myself with glee as I extracted large amounts of money from these scumbags - probably not the most progressive attitude, but I think anyone who experience the sort of nasty shit some of them came out with, they'd feel similar.

Who were your co-workers?

Almost all of them were single mums, needing something they could do at home, while looking after kids. This obviously meant they were in little position to complain about any problems with conditions, as they absolutely had to keep the job. There were a few students, but a lot fewer than I expected - most were doing this as their fulltime job.

Although I only ever spoke to them over MSN or on the messageboards, so perhaps in reality half of them were really pervy old blokes! As much as I'd like to believe this to be the case though, I don't really think so - it was almost all really vulnerable people being really exploited.

You said interactions with co-workers were monitored, were the texts themselves monitored?

Yes, every single one. Not every one was read - they read a random selection to see if your stuff was up to scratch, that you had enough words per text etc. but mostly, they'd look where clients had disconnected from the service. If it was due to you not being good at it, making a mistake (eg. not reading notes carefully enough) or letting slip you weren't a 'real girl', then you'd get in a load of shit, and could lose the job.

Did customers ever make complaints about service?

Not to my knowledge - a few threatened, but it never got back to me or anyone I spoke to. The whole company was so dodgy, I'd think it'd probably have been pretty hard to have done so in any way, and it was totally legal so long as it followed certain guidelines. Adverts had to be worded a certain way, and they had to send a cost warning message for every £20 spent, but that was about it.

What potential was there for getting around the pay system - say sending standard responses out to customers?

Very little. For some basic stuff, you could get away with it - for example I had a few form character introductions over 2 texts I'd copy and paste to new people, but the whole point of the service was to be interactive, and you had to base it on their responses - if you were just copying and pasting, people really quickly got suspicious and started accusing you of being a machine - which obviously got you in a lot of trouble, and I know people got fired for it. I got warned just for using my standard intro. They were also wise to other tricks, such as putting in loads of xxx's at the end of messages to up your character count. I tried a bunch of different things along these lines, but either they didn't really work and weren't efficient, or were quickly sussed.

Were there any possibilities for collective struggle?

I'm sure there could be, but I never encountered any - the setup was perfect for avoiding it. There was no face to face contact with other workers, it was deliberately set up to be competitive, communication was highly monitored, there was a quite high turnover of staff (although many stayed within the industry - I was one of the few people at the company who hadn't done it for other companies) and most of the staff were really vulnerable and felt they couldn't risk their jobs. And just due to the nature of the work, any concept of workers rights was totally unheard of, and any transgression like that would just lead to instant dismissal. I'm sure stuff could happen - but it'd be amazingly difficult, and I think most people would just pack it in rather than try to organise.

Do you know how long your co-workers had worked at the company for?

The company was just under a year old, and quite a few had worked there since the start or near the start - but large number had worked elsewhere in the past, and several had been doing this or something similar like phone sex for years - I remember one woman who had been doing a mix of phone sex and text sex for 10 years.

Had you heard of the Internation Union of Sex Workers while you were at the job? And were you aware of the GMB's merger and attempts to organise sex workers?

I'd heard of both of them, but if I'm honest just didn't feel they were 'for me'. Mostly, this was because I hadn't really researched them, and thought it was just about prostitutes and the like. Part of it was because I was lying about my name, sex etc. to get the job, so would have been incredibly easy to dismiss (especially as I'd provided a copy of someone elses passport!).

Some of it was also just down to the personal trajectory I was on when I did it - either it was the initial period where I just found it amusing and so didn't really see it as something I needed protection in, or after that was really hating it and was depressed by the whole thing, and not wanting to do anymore to do with it than I had to.

I also never intended it to be a long term thing - it was just something I was doing for a while to sort out some money problems - which is probably one of the major hurdles in organising sex workers, as very few people see it as what they're going to do long term, and so are less likely to stick their head above the parapet.

But in retrospect, it was a really stupid decision - Even just on a personal level and how I felt about the job and myself, it would have been a lot nicer if I could have felt I was organising to make conditions better and making an improvement - and I may well have stuck at it longer if I'd done it. Although whether that in itself is a good thing is debateable - especially as I was hardly forced into doing it as a

career due to the circumstances I found myself in.

Do you think the organising work by the GMB has potential?

Definitely, yes. The very specific nature of the work has several effects in this regard. First of all, is the obvious fact that these are people who really need protection. They are doing exceptionally demeaning work, with poor conditions and pay, for some of the worst employers you're ever be likely to meet. Clichés about Victorian Mill owners come to mind. Added to this is that, as mentioned before, it is usually exceptionally vulnerable people working in these sectors - so certainly, there is a real need for organisation.

However, on a more downbeat side, there are many real problems in terms of organisation, ranging from the dubious legal nature of much sex work (making claiming legal protection harder), the stigma attached to it as well as the violence and drug abuse that is often comes with the territory with other kinds of sex work such as prostitution. There's also the big issue that for many workers in the industry their immediate aim is to get out of what they're doing, rather than improving their conditions; this to a much larger degree than almost any other profession. Despite this, the recent organising we've seen has shown that it definitely is possible - and also that it can be worthwhile and successful. My experience was that the people doing it, despite putting on a brave face, knew how they were being treated and how badly they were being ripped off. Hopefully, recent organising moves aren't just an anomaly, and represent a real move towards an attempt for some of the worst off workers in modern society to take some control over their lives.

What possibilities do you see for self-management in sex-texting and chatlines?

This is a hard one. Whilst I was doing this, it was something we actually discussed - there are many places where you can buy into a service where if you provide the advertising and staff you get the full software and service to send out the texts and receive money for it - getting almost a pound per text and being able to work the hours you chose - so it felt a real probability. However, it soon became apparent that there were several real flaws in this. Firstly, you had to have a significant cash outlay to be able to purchase the service, buy texts to send in bulk, buy advertising and so on. There is the need to learn an entirely new skill set, as well as having to spend time sorting out advertising, doing admin tasks, working out rotas and the like. There was also the major problem that the service needed to be staffed full time - it simply wouldn't succeed if people were texting in, and not getting replies. Without having the fear of losing a job, it's quite hard to get someone to want to self-manage themselves to sit next to a computer at 3am on a Saturday night in case someone wants you to get them off via text message! It also raised all of the same problems that arise with any form of workers control under capitalism - that it is just self management of our own exploitation. In capitalism, if you were going to make the service a success, you really had to adopt capitalist models of efficiency - such as cutting costs, increasing advertising, making people work when they didn't have to and having to ensure people kept their messages up to a required standard. And once you have this, the whole idea of self-organisation is just gone, and it'd become nothing better than the Co-op, but with dirty text messages.

And that's where the real crunch comes. Nowhere, but the most obscene parodies of syndicalism would want autonomous collectives of self-organising sex texters in any socialist society - it's as absurd as having a call centre run under workers control. In practise, it'd be little-to-no better than a prostitute who works without a pimp - better than working under the boss, but still far worse than most capitalist jobs. Not just is it socially unproductive and useless work, which (in my opinion, anyway) is inherently demeaning, but also it is entirely symptomatic of alienation under capital. I'd like to hope that in any society based around self-organisation, there wouldn't be the need for people to pay vast

sums so that someone could sit at a computer and send them messages about how much they loved to feel their big cock inside of her. Call me naive, but I just don't see it happening, and I don't see many people wanting to do it - and anyone who did, probably wouldn't be doing it as a job! Real self-organisation in this sense, would be the ability to liberate oneself from having to do this sort of work - and I think this is the case for most of the sex industry.

Still, despite all this, in the society we live in today, if people really were stuck and not able to do anything else, but were in a position to run it under their own control, then it'd almost certainly be an improvement. There'd certainly be many, many problems, but if for no other reason than there wouldn't be some scumbag at the top leeching off a huge slice of the profits. I don't think it's absolutely absurd to think that some people working in the industry might well get pissed off and decide to do it for themselves. I really don't think it's going to be a major part in how struggle within the industry is going to develop, and if I'm honest I think the chances are that more likely than not, it'd probably 'fail' as an enterprise and way of making a living for those involved - or just soon revert to a standard capitalist model, but with those who'd previously worked on it as a new set of managers. If anything, it'll just play a minor, periphery role within the class struggle within the sex industry. So really, while I think it could happen, I don't really think it's the arena where self-organisation and workers control is most suited - we should work towards eliminating the exploitation and root causes of it, rather than trying to manage it ourselves; if people were ever to be in a position to be able to manage it in any significant way, then I think they'd have power to do a lot better than that.

Interview conducted by libcom.org news, January 2006