

Workers!

A Conversation

Petra Bauer, Gem, SCOT-PEP, Molly Smith, Frances Stacey

Participants: Petra Bauer (artist and film-maker), Gem (sex worker and SCOT-PEP member), Molly Smith (sex worker, writer and activist) and Frances Stacey (producer, Collective).

Workers! is a film co-authored by artist and filmmaker Petra Bauer and sex worker-led organisation SCOT-PEP that centres on the experiences of a collective of sex workers in Scotland, their fight for labour rights and their relationship to (women's) work. It was filmed at the Scottish Trade Union Congress (STUC) in Glasgow, a building rooted in workers' struggles for rights and political representation. Sex workers have historically been denied access to this space and the recognition of sex work as work in the formal union movement is fragmented and contested. At the time of writing, only a handful of affiliates of the STUC are openly supportive of the decriminalisation of sex work, a crucial step that would remove sex work from a criminal framework. These unions include the train drivers' union, the communications workers' union, and importantly a GMB branch formed in 2019 for sex workers by the sex worker rights community in Scotland. The film bears witness to an occupation of the STUC, where conversations unfold that focus on the voices of sex workers demanding to be seen as experts on their own work and lives. This is a call for labour rights situated in the context of the broader labour and feminist movement.

The film is the result of a long-term collaboration titled *Nothing About Us Without Us*, initiated and supported by visual art organisation Collective and produced with HER Film. Petra was invited in 2015 to undertake a research-based project as part of Collective's *Constellations Programme*, a series of projects commissioned during the development of the City Observatory on Calton Hill in Edinburgh.¹ Collective's aim was to develop generative projects with artists, local constituents and community groups, to be embedded in existing and ongoing social, political struggles in the city. At the onset of the research project Petra and Frances began by informally mapping the political activity of women in Edinburgh, meeting with a host of collectives, formal charities and self-organised groups, from Shakti Women's Aid to the pacifists Women in Black.² Gem and Molly Smith from SCOT-PEP met at the time with Petra, Frances and Collective's Director Kate Gray, and had an initial conversation that would lead to an extended dialogue and later the development of the film. What was clear in this early meeting is that sex workers are organising globally and "thanks to transnational migration, the Internet, and their impact on transnational social movements, sex workers are speaking louder, more often, and more clearly than ever before. Yet, it is still difficult to listen to them."³ As attested to by SCOT-PEP, sex workers are frequently not heard by policymakers and drowned out by polarising divisions prevalent in feminism, past and present.

Nothing About Us Without Us was structured around a series of workshops held regularly over three years. We initially sought to create an open, social space—getting to know each other, eating and watching films together, sharing texts and ideas. We discussed and mapped the complex discourses around sex-work politics, our varied experiences of work and sex work, and the challenges faced by SCOT-PEP, who are actively trying to change

far in terms of collaboration and authorship, especially since I am personally inspired by feminist film practitioners like Trinh T. Minh-ha, who emphasise the importance of making films *with* their subjects, not *about* them.

G: Hmm, I feel like there is probably a bunch of art-world-specific jargon for talking about that stuff that I don't know, so...

FS: That's fine, we can remove the jargon.

PB: Yeah, we should throw this language out.

MS: I think that making the film has felt very collaborative, and much more so than I could really conceive of when we started. In the beginning, I didn't really have any sense of how we would make a non-fiction film about sex work that wasn't a point-and-shoot interview style documentary. There may be other people in SCOT-PEP who were more visually sophisticated than me, but I just couldn't imagine how we would work together. So, not only did we work together, but my brain physically expanded, in terms of how one would put together something that was about aesthetics and about collaboration. This really fell into place when we began to watch other films and extracts of various films, such as *La Commune* by Peter Watkins, where they re-enact events from the Paris commune of 1871.

On the one hand, feeling my brain going like "wow, OK, wow" with the possibilities, while on the other still not quite understanding how we would make a film like that without being derivative. Sharing these films was like building blocks that then structure a process. I couldn't see at the beginning what direction it would go in, so it was a really in-depth education in how film-making happens.

FS: Those early moments in our collaboration were really important—even as someone with experience of film-making and production—because we set out without a preconceived idea of what and how a film would be made together. In holding a space together to talk about other films and each other's interests we created a reflective space, akin to SCOT-PEP's campaign groups, but more social. All those moments of finding a common ground felt really necessary for working towards the next stage, when we began to think more specifically about a film centred on sex worker rights and work.

G: I honestly don't know how to answer this question, I never felt like there was collaboration going on.

PB: No collaboration?

G: No, as collaboration implies that there is "me" and there is "them", and I need to find ways to work with them effectively. Working on the film, I have never felt like there were two sides, it was always "us". So, I find it very difficult to say, "Oh yes, the collaboration was really productive." As in yes, it was productive, but "collaboration" as I see it doesn't describe my experience.

PB: Just so I understand you correctly, how do you then see it? Would you say we worked collectively, or would you say that I did it? Do you see what I mean? If you say that it is not collaborative, how would you then describe it?

G: I mean together. Like Molly, I also had zero experience of making films, and I wasn't even trying to figure out

how it was all going to come together. You said, “You come and bring the content, and I’ll make it visual”, and I think I’ve done my part—and you know, I’ve got plenty of content to bring. But the next thing I know, we had ideas for what the visual part could be, and these ideas became part of the film. In this way, we worked together. But most importantly, it was never a compromise between the interests of two sides. It was always “us”, not “me” and “them” but one party, working with the same priorities.

PB: I was in the same position when it comes to sex worker politics. Or rather I brought my film-making experience into this and had to learn the rest. The initial workshops we had in March 2016 were crucial for me and Fran, when we shared films with you, and you shared sex worker politics with us. This mutual exchange of knowledge or mutual listening is what I really enjoyed throughout this process.

This led me to understanding what areas of sex worker politics were important to address in the film and you became clearer about how we could address it though the medium of film. However, I have never been interested in pursuing a certain kind of argument, rather what has been important to me is to see what issues are important for SCOT-PEP and how we can address that in film.

And I have to say I am really proud of the fact that we managed to create a platform where we were able to discuss and have opinions beyond the knowledges we initially brought to the project, and to explore something together.

MS: To me, it always felt very horizontal: not like we were teaching you, or you were teaching us, but like everything was being shared horizontally.

FS: I’ve been reflecting on the ways our roles shifted throughout the process: initially we worked in a shared physical space, but as the film developed, for instance during post-production, we passed the baton on to others. So, our process was not static or equal always, but we continued to find space to reflect on the decisions together.

MS: Which is good I think; it feels like that gives us a chance to rejuvenate. We would pass back the film to you Petra for six weeks and you came back to us with a draft. Because the process of making a film was definitely physically pretty arduous...

FS: ... demanding on all our energies.

MS: Yeah, so the way in which it was passed back and forth between us was useful and rejuvenating.

G: And actually, now thinking back over the three years, I have to say I appreciate the way you two, Fran and Petra, created the structure for the project. We don’t know how to make films, but the way you framed it from the beginning, it all seemed to fall together quite seamlessly, and I can imagine a much bumpier road in that respect; with people who have less experience or less appreciation of our personal circumstances, and in how flexible and sometimes inflexible sex workers can be, in terms of time and visibility that we can afford.

FS: It makes me think how useful the early exercise was in which we recorded what our days look like each hour, reading that back together. This gave us all an understanding that we are awake at different times and live differently, which was important for how we set the framework for filming, knowing what conditions were needed to support each other.

And, of course, along the way we became friends, not without disagreements, and this enriched and complicated our work together. Politically, socially and individually we became entangled in learning about each other's lives, struggles and ideas; to the extent that our commitments now extend beyond the timeframe of a "project" or "film production".



Workers!, Petra Bauer & SCOT-PEP, still, 2018. Photo: Caroline Bridges

Political Speech and Anonymity

FS: It was raised in one of our early meetings that there wasn't much space within existing debates and forums that SCOT-PEP take part in, for modes of speech that aren't extremely direct, that aren't about arguing a very specific position. It felt exciting to open up the possibility in the film to also talk about sex worker organising through each other's experiences, with a different texture to how you talk and relate.

MS: ... with complexity. I think the film does a really good job of making space for including the stuff that isn't verbalised often in sex worker rights politics, because you develop a script or a series of lines that you call on for specific arguments in specific contexts. I certainly think that I have much more complex conversations about sex and work, sex work and trauma, intimacy and money, and all these kinds of things in private with friends, many of whom are sex workers. We've kind of texturised the conversation in the film, as much as we can, and this gesture towards complexities in a sense that they are being discussed elsewhere often in private. It goes beyond just the standard sex worker rights script, for sure.

PB: I completely agree. I've been really interested in how we can make a film where there's no pragmatic and programmatic talk, but rather where a conversation can take place. Where viewers are invited in as guests into a group and a movement they do not normally have access to for a short period of time. They are allowed to listen but not overhear—I mean overhear in the voyeuristic sense—where we as makers and sex workers are in control of the listening.

FS: Equally, we were conscious that some people when viewing the film in an exhibition or a screening might come to this with very little knowledge of sex worker rights or even sex work. How to address this audience while also addressing those that are already embedded in the struggle is an ongoing question.

PB: That's the balance isn't it? We will see in time how this works, but I like that if you see the film without having any knowledge of sex work beforehand you are likely to have an experience of feminised work inserted into a male-dominated labour history. And if you are already familiar with sex worker's politics you will see something else, most likely the importance of political organising.

My ambition for the project is that the film is itself a political act through the fact that we are visually occupying the space of the STUC. I would love it if the film would operate on an aesthetic and a political level, and it became a political event in itself when the film is shown publicly.

FS: And when you say that's your aim, what do you mean by the political event? What would you hope it to be or what would it look like?

PB: That is a good question: maybe it's kind of an abstract romantic idea of a political event of mine, but I do hope that it will trigger a conversation that goes beyond both the sex worker movement and the art world. Something that can actually trigger serious conversation about work, about sex work, about history writing. That it is not just another voice on sex worker politics and it's not just another artwork, but it actually has a potential of pushing something.

FS: I suppose in a way you are saying the film itself isn't an end point, it's not a closed representation, but has the potential to open up other discussions or other debates.

PB: Yes, that would be amazing, but we will see this with time. These things are highly unpredictable. Sometimes things have an effect, sometimes not.

FS: I certainly feel on a small scale that this is happening already, in the way that academics are asking questions and problematising what we've been doing, prodding at the film. For instance, asking us if the fight for sex workers' rights is in itself anachronistic when the rights of workers are disintegrating for many people globally.

MS: We haven't really talked about anti-work politics. On the one hand there is obviously a struggle for sex work to be recognised as work, but then what work actually *is* needs to be dismantled anyway. Not that it's necessarily the responsibility of sex workers busy with our own struggle already to do this, but it's something that should be addressed by everyone who works.

PB: But the problem is... How can you address anti-work if you're not acknowledged as workers? It's this double bind almost. I always remember postcolonial feminists in the 1970s, I think Trinh T. Minh-ha was one of them, replying to famous male theorists—like Barthes and Foucault—who said “there are no authors or any subjects anymore”. And women were like “OK, and you say that now? Finally, when we as women have a chance to come to the negotiation table, now you are saying there is no table anymore!”, which again is removing the possibility to be empowered or to be part of a struggle.

FS: For sex workers there isn't another horizon or a more abstract, anti-work struggle. However, it is not contradictory to want rights, when you are not recognised as a worker, while also wanting to dismantle work itself. It returns to short- and long-term goals.

MS: Right, totally.

PB: I think that one thing that I really learned from you is not to single out sex work from other forms of precarious work. This is very effective: if you agree with it or at least take the proposal seriously, you have to have a completely different take on sex work.

MS: Exactly, it is about connecting this to people's material needs. When people have more of what they need, then they are less vulnerable to exploitation regardless of what they are doing, whether that is sex work, busking, informal cash-in-hand work or staying in a relationship that they might otherwise not stay in (all things people do to get what they need). When you start to see sex work in that light then it no longer appears abject or abhorrent, instead it becomes one of many rational modes of survival in a really shit world. The answer becomes clearly about resources, not about empowering the police and the immigration police.

PB: Yeah, so it is about resources, structures and politics.

MS: Right, but currently it's like people think that you can redistribute resources with more policing. When actually of course policing takes resources away from the community—people have to expend resources like time and energy thinking about how to avoid the police, and when people are caught then they're fined or deported or their housing or access to childcare or education is put in jeopardy. Policing is the theft of resources; it worsens already existing inequalities and injustices.

PB: And also, it's really easy to target sex work but not take responsibility for the structures that have created this situation. So instead you target the sex industry, or you target the people that the state deems traffickers.

MS: Rather than thinking about capitalism or thinking about borders.

PB: And I think this is also what we try to do with the film; to connect it to other forms of struggle and forms of work.

FS: You have these moments of feeding, cleaning, replenishing, the maintenance or supportive work.

MS: Social reproduction.

FS: Yeah, social reproduction, what is needed to organise collectively. This is woven through the film visually.

PB: Gem, are you thinking of something? I just heard your brain working.

G: I don't think I have a lot to add to the whole political conversation. It's not something I was thinking about when we were making the film. You know I'm not really political by nature, although yes, Petra, you keep arguing about it..

FS: But you are, you are!

PB: I know. I was just about to say that! You always say that you're not political and I'm always saying you're hyper-political.

[Laughter]

G: I don't think in political terms, I think in personal terms. And for me the film wasn't political, it was personal. I think there will be many people like that, like me, out there, who are not politically aware, who don't think and speak with theory.

For me, when I was watching the film the first time, I thought even if it doesn't work on a political level, it will work on a personal level. The conversations, where we talk about our children, for instance, will hopefully build some sort of camaraderie with the characters at first. When you later realise they are sex workers, I hope that the feeling of solidarity that you developed at the start of the film will stay, and maybe make sex workers more real as people and not just a political talking point; or a talking point about social fucking reproduction.

PB: I think you have a point, Gem, I completely agree with you.

MS: It's a conversation about workers as people, not abstractions.

PB: I think that's excellent. But it's so funny when you said that you don't care about social reproduction, and then you make this beautiful analysis of social reproduction.

FS: You're right that this terminology is maybe not always useful.

MS: It is useful to name the work of everyday life, the work that's traditionally women's work—looking after babies and children, feeding and comforting the worker—feeds back into capitalism. If we don't name it then it vanishes. Capitalism relies on us not naming it in part.

G: But also, I think the film, our film makes words visible. I think a lot in the film has to do with visibility. You know Petra, when we started, visibility was the first thing that you mentioned, asking "how do you speak politically without being public? How do you create new images of sex worker organising without revealing the identity of those involved?" This mix of visibility and invisibility, now towards the end we're coming to this question again: how to make something visible, and very personal, while still remaining invisible and elusive.

FS: Yes, this is crucial. I think early on Petra and I learnt from you that any attempt to speak publicly and politically involves risks to livelihoods, relationships and families; risks that are felt most acutely by migrants and undocumented workers. When your work borders on the illegal, is denied by the state, is subject to carceral responses by the police, stigmatised in civil society and stereotyped in the popular press, to speak out as a sex worker you must constantly negotiate between anonymity and visibility. In making the film, a medium heavily focused on the visual, this became an interesting point of departure as a group. Now the film is public and we speak in different forums about the work, we have to keep asking: how do you visualise political demands while ensuring the safety and anonymity of the group?



Workers!, Petra Bauer & SCOT-PEP, still, 2018. Photo: Caroline Bridges

Representations of Work

FS: As we have mentioned briefly, watching films together that represent sex work, other forms of feminised labour and political organising formed a really important activity in the early stages of our collaboration (if we can call it that). Two films became particularly important to how the project has been conceived and made: *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce 1080 Bruxelles* and *Les Prostituées de Lyon Parlent*. Can we talk about how these historic films have been used as a starting point for *Workers!*?

PB: Chantal Akerman's film-making has always been an important reference for me. I am particularly inspired by how she addresses questions related to identity, women and labour through a very conscious combination of content and aesthetics. A few years ago, I started to revisit her now iconic film *Jeanne Dielman* from 1975, which depicts the daily routine of a housewife over three days.

FS: When you introduced this to us you were interested in Jeanne embodying at least three different roles: housewife, mother and sex worker.

PB: Yes.

G: We actually watched parts of the film during our first film shoot. Waiting for our scenes to begin, we watched the slow rhythms of different forms of labour: Jeanne peels potatoes, makes the bed, wakes up her son, and buttons her shirt after meeting a client.

PB: The film has been very important for a feminist discussion on women's conditions and the potential of feminist aesthetics. Since then almost 50 years have passed, and for me it became important to ask who and what could be a contemporary Jeanne? Or what happened to the figure of Jeanne? While developing this project with SCOT-PEP, I decided to embark on this crazy journey to remake *Jeanne Dielman*, but in three parts, each dealing with one of the themes addressed in the film: sex work, motherhood and domestic work.

I see *Workers!* literally beginning where *Jeanne Dielman* ends; that is, in the last scene where Jeanne sits in the

dark in her living room staring into the void. She has just killed one of her clients, the dead body is still in the bedroom, and her son has not yet come home. The film ends there, in this unresolved political situation and narrative. To me, with this scene Chantal Akerman asks us—in her future—to continue looking into women's conditions and resistance. I heard her and took her proposal seriously. So, I guess this is my starting point and what I brought with me into our work and film project.

FS: *Les Prostituées de Lyon Parlent* was also introduced to us during the process of making *Workers!* by another member of the sex worker community. The occupation of Saint-Nizier church in Lyon by up to 200 prostitutes, denouncing police harassment and perilous labour conditions, documented in this film remained a key point of reference for our project.

G: This film made me cry. On a personal level, I found it only too easy to relate to the women in the church. They feel the way I feel. They struggle daily with the things I have to struggle with. They are desperate, they are scared. I understand all this very well. And then in the broader context, this film made it obvious that nothing has changed in the 40 years since those sex workers went on strike. Here we are, 40 years later, different people, in a different country, with different means of communicating our demands, but still demanding the same things, still not being listened to. It almost makes you want to give up, because what's the point? And for me, the point was that what if, 40 years later, some sex workers somewhere will be watching our film? We can hope that the political context will be different for them, and our film will make them happy—for all the shit they don't have to deal with, for all the safety they have at work, for all the access to justice that is available to them. They will be able to look back at us and see how far they have come and be proud. I would very much want this for them. But if, another 40 years later, the situation for these future sex workers hasn't changed, at least they will see that they are not alone, that they are right in their demands, that they are doing the right thing by standing up for themselves. Everyone needs strength, and as we took inspiration from the Lyon film, maybe ours can inspire other sex workers to go on.

FS: The dual nature of this film is also really thought-provoking. The medium of video was used by Carole Roussopoulos and collective Vidéo Out to create a collective portrait of the women from inside the church and also to broadcast the demands of their occupation directly onto the street outside the church, enabling sex workers to speak in public space without fear of arrest.

MS: Yes, and the occupation led to an eight-day nationwide strike.

PB: ... and we started to discuss what an occupation today would look like, what we could occupy, and what it would imply. How we could be inspired by their strategy; how the occupation of a church gave them cover as people could not enter, but at the same time their demands were heard. That was so clever.

FS: It's interesting both films were made in 1975. We have returned to this year specifically throughout the making of *Workers!* as a way to think about present-day conditions. Not only is this the year *Jeanne Dielman* and *Les Prostituées de Lyon Parlent* were made, but also Silvia Federici wrote "Sexuality as Work" (presented at the second International Wages for Housework in Toronto), and Wages Due Lesbians wrote "Fucking as Work". We shouldn't overlook the specificity of this return, as it is not a return to the 1970s generally, which has the potential to be nostalgic for an abstract political moment.

MS: The English Collective of Prostitutes was formed a few years after this, in 1977.

FS: Then SCOT-PEP was formed in 1986 and for over twenty years its roots in campaigning for sex workers rights have moved between different scales of activity and timeframes; between campaigning with a relatively small group involved month-to-month, to working globally to institute change that takes many, many years.

MS: Yeah, I definitely feel we are very connected to a global movement.

PB: When I got to know SCOT-PEP I also realised that local and as well as global politics are taking place at the same time. I was very impressed by this, and this was something we referred to in the development of the film; that the film must give a sense of a larger movement and be used as a mobilising tool, to be, not universal, but at least address change on a larger scale. But at the same time, it also had to be particular to a Scottish context and the legal system here.

MS: Totally. There is a geographical element but also a time element. You need to think about social change almost in terms of geological time: it is incredibly slow. And even though the day-to-day stuff feels really important and is, in its own way, it's also really important to be able to zoom out and look at the larger picture. This can feel as if we are all just pushing against this enormous boulder and probably will be for the next twenty years; maybe in twenty years' time we'll see a difference and that can be sort of reassuring as well as depressing.

FS: In that sense, the film being developed over three years felt simultaneously a long and a short time for SCOT-PEP. Long in the sense that the organisation is relatively precarious, in who is able to be involved, how it is funded and everyone's energy to work together; and very short in terms of the work needed to change the material conditions for sex workers. I have always been struck by your commitment and endurance: despite the feeling of a huge boulder of resistance against change, you keep going.

PB: In this way, it was also a good decision, or I don't know if it ever was a decision, that we didn't focus on making a campaign or conventional advocacy film, as this would already be yesterday's film. Whereas hopefully *Workers!* can have a longer time span, particularly thinking about the location of the Scottish Trade Union Congress in Glasgow. Everything there, the ephemera, group portraits and so on have an anachronistic aesthetic. When creating imagery that addresses this historical movement through a contemporary lens, different time zones are suddenly crossing.

You see this clearly in the scene where you are preparing the workers' banner. Up until then the film has focused on close-ups of gestures, that we could describe as socially reproductive labour... and then you, Gem, say: "Do you think we will get a chance to watch the Lyon occupation film again? ... It's sort of inspiring, and it's sort of depressing... well, that's why I cried: because you know it was 40 years ago, and we have not moved anywhere. Nothing has changed. They are talking about my life." As you say these very words, you are all at the same time busy sewing the banner, a feminised activity as it is traditionally understood, but in 2018. Time becomes compressed, both in what you say, and in what we see. Present meets the past, and we have to think of how they connect or disconnect. We have to think of where we are, where we have been and where we are going.

FS: Yes, the ephemera in the STUC building, the different union banners function as a backdrop or character in the film. We enter the topic of work without the need for dialogue and this connects the viewer to the alliances SCOT-PEP have been forming for many years with groups fighting for migrant rights, reproductive rights, disabled rights and so on.

PB: It is also clear that there is a gender issue at play in the STUC, which is a male-dominated place or at least visually has a strong male history. This is actually more present than I thought it would be.

FS: It appears as a constant in the film and means every action is sited in relation to the role of women and people that are marginalised from the formal union movement. Although there is a Women's Committee at the STUC, women's labour is addressed from a very specific idea of who is an acceptable woman.

G: I admit it never crossed my mind to think of the STUC as a patriarchal institution.

MS: Oh, it definitely crossed my mind to think of it like that. It is similar to NGOs that are quite dominated by women, but still function as patriarchal institutions, not least in their exclusion of sex workers.

PB: Yes, and the history in itself is quite exclusive in terms of what a struggle consists of and who is part of that struggle. I actually love the first part of the film with fairly slow gestures of doing and making, feminised forms of work in this building. Throughout the process we started to connect sex work not only to work (in the formal sense) but also to social reproduction, blurring these lines between these different forms of labour.

Footnotes

1

Collective was established in 1984 as an artist-led space and has long supported new work by artists who are at a pivotal stage in their development. *Nothing About Us Without Us* and *Workers!* were commissioned as part of the organisation's development of a new kind of City Observatory, placing collaborative and co-authored practice at the heart of a project to reimagine the historic nineteenth-century observatory on Calton Hill in Edinburgh.² Women refers to an identity not a biological category.³ Maciotti, P.G. and Geymonat, Giulia Garofalo (eds.). *Sex Workers Speak. Who Listens?* 2016. p. 12.⁴ Thanks to all the members of the Social Reproduction Reading Group in Scotland, particularly to Laura Guy for leading a session that focused on "On Sexuality as Work", "Fucking Is Work" and a selection of manifestos relating to sex work. The group, founded by Victoria Horne and Kirsten Lloyd in 2015, was hosted by Collective over two years, supporting conversation and activities that centre on art's intersection with social reproduction and feminist thought.⁵ "For Prostitutes and Against Prostitution", Power of Women Collective, 1975. In English Collective of Prostitutes, *For Prostitutes Against Prostitution—Crossing the Divides between Sex Work and Others*, March 1990.