

U.S. PROStitutes Collective

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The United States Prostitutes Collective (U.S. PROS) is a national network of women who work in the sex industry as well as other women who support our goals. We are part of the International Prostitutes Collective (IPC) and a sister organization of the English Collective of Prostitutes (ECP). U.S. PROS is an independent network that is part of the International Wages for Housework Campaign. Women in our network are working or have worked in all levels of the sex industry: women who work the streets, massage parlors, escort services, hotels, clubs, houses, strippers, dancers, mistresses, models, etc., full-time and part-time, black, Latino and white women.

We are campaigning for the abolition of the laws against prostitute women — not legalization or decriminalization — so that women can work as independent business women, controlling our own working conditions. Legalization in Nevada, in the United States, and in the Eros Centers of West Germany are basically the new sex assembly lines. The women have no control over working conditions, hours worked, the number of clients they see, tips they receive, etc. Women, when working, have to register with the police and therefore are registered as "known prostitute women." They are also subject to health checks and are restricted in their movements outside the brothels. Decriminalization in some countries has come to mean the same as legalization. Therefore the IPC is very careful to make the distinction between legalization/decriminalization and abolition of the laws. It is a dangerous game to go along with the "program" of some state planners for legalization that in no way would end the vulnerability that prostitute women face. We are not

building a movement to carry out our oppression under the guise of legalization or decriminalization.

We are also campaigning for economic independence for women, so that none of us will be forced into prostitution for economic reasons: safe houses for juvenile runaways, increases in all income transfer payments such as welfare (a study in San Francisco has shown that when welfare is cut, the numbers of AFDC mothers picked up for prostitution increases) and against immigration controls so that women and children can move freely from one country to another.

How We Began

U.S. PROS is an expansion of the New York Prostitutes Collective (NYP) that began in 1979 as a group of black sex industry workers and other black women who supported our goals. From the start we were a sister group of the ECP and used the organizing experience of the ECP to help us start out and to help in our on-going organization. NYP organized pickets, public meetings, and helped to support other organizations working on behalf of prostitute women's rights, such as Prostitutes of New York (PONY), whose spokeswoman was Iris de la Cruz. PONY concentrated its efforts on working with street walkers and was an important part of the history of the movement for prostitute women's rights. Although PONY no longer exists, it is important that their work be recognized and recorded.

We also organized within the City University campus for increased student grants, the right to get both welfare and student grants and for campus childcare. By 1980 we had both become multi-racial and grown into U.S. PROS. Nineteen eighty was also the year of the Democratic Convention in New York City and Mayor Koch had gotten an additional sixty-nine thousand dollars to crack down on prostitute women during the convention. U.S. PROS organized our first police watch teams, consisting of volunteer lawyers, students, members of PONY and ourselves. Street walkers had a particularly hard time during the Convention. There was increased police harassment and police illegality; one woman was so desperate to get away from New York City police that when they pursued her she jumped into the East River.

U.N. Mid-Decade Conference on Women

Until 1980, the New York Prostitutes Collective had done quite a bit of support work for Margo St. James' COYOTE, including raising money to help bring her to New York City. We parted ways with

COYOTE in Copenhagen in 1980 at the U.N. Mid-Decade Conference on Women when we found ourselves opposing the feminist moralists and COYOTE. The latter were actively supporting a U.N. resolution on trafficking for the purposes of prostitution. The resolution, if passed as written, would have made it difficult, if not impossible, for a woman with a record of prostitution to cross an international border. Non-white women from Third World countries would have suffered the brunt of its implementation. U.S. PROS and other groups in the IPC opposed the resolution and made it clear that if we couldn't get rid of it altogether, we would organize to get it modified to include some protection for prostitute women and children. We wanted a clause that said prostitute women and children should not be treated as criminals.*

Much to our surprise, COYOTE not only did not support our efforts, but publicly opposed us by issuing press releases stating that we were "dressed like whores but weren't really prostitute women," and by attacking the right of prostitute women to remain anonymous. This was especially dangerous at a conference crawling with Interpol officers. To expect prostitute women to come out in this environment, especially if they are black and/or immigrant women actively organizing against the establishment, amounts to nothing less than wanting to turn women over to the police. Despite efforts to undermine us, we did manage — through a consensus vote — to get the clause we wanted included in the official U.N. resolution. That experience, and others following, made it clear that the differences in the organized movement for prostitute women's rights were no different from those that have emerged in other movements with those with the least social power struggling not to be undermined by those with more power. We, however, were not to be deterred by the scabbing and continued our work minus a political relationship with COYOTE.

*Ed. Note: In Copenhagen, Margo St. James felt that it was important to recognize the concerns of the representatives of the countries of Latin America, Asia and Africa, as well as those from the North American and Western European countries. The resolution dealt primarily with the issue of forced prostitution. Although it was not perfect, St. James felt that it was more important to pass a resolution dealing with prostitution than to fight endlessly and end up with no resolution dealing with the issue at all. She and representatives of Wages for Housework Campaign disagreed rather violently about the proper approach to take in Copenhagen.

Who Are Prostitute Women?

In the United States women began to form support groups for the work of U.S. PROS in cities without active U.S. PROS chapters entitled No Bad Women, Just Bad Laws in Tulsa, Oklahoma; Boston, Massachusetts; New Haven, Connecticut and Portland, Oregon. They organized coalitions, pickets, press conferences, wrote letters, etc., on behalf of the rights of prostitute women. They stated clearly that the rights of prostitute women are the rights of all women. Both No Bad Women and the U.S. PROS networks are raising the public's awareness of who prostitutes are — in reality as diverse a group as any. We are mostly single mothers with children to support, women on welfare, women helping to support elderly relatives on fixed incomes, secretaries and other office workers supplementing low wages, students putting themselves through school, full-time housewives, nurses, teachers, juvenile runaways refusing to be raped and battered or emotionally abused at home, and other women refusing the low wages available to women in the straight job market. In other words, there is no real stereotype of who a prostitute woman is — she could be any of us. Prostitute women as drug addicts is one very common stereotype. Given how widespread the use of drugs in society is, we doubt there is much difference in the percentage of prostitute women on drugs and the percentage of others on drugs. AIDS is also misrepresented as being spread by prostitute women.

Another view we've had to challenge is that of feminists and anti-porn campaigners who like to blame sex industry workers for rape and violence against women. In Los Angeles we were instrumental, along with other women's groups, in overturning an anti-porn ordinance. We spoke out publicly about the devastating effects that greater censorship, and forcing sex industry workers underground, would have on working conditions and safety of women in the sex industry. The stereotype of prostitute women is promoted by the police, media and prostitute movement careerists whose funding and media access depends on putting forward the stereotype as the typical prostitute woman.

Racism and Police Illegality

Our day to day organizing includes fighting for the immediate civil rights of prostitute women and against the tremendous level of violence that prostitutes face because we are illegal. Our illegality makes us vulnerable to police brutality and racism, to extortion, kidnaping etc. by others who pimp off our vulnerability. The enforcement of the prostitution laws is both selective and racist. Although the majority

of prostitute women are white, the majority of those in jail for prostitution are black. Prostitute women are constantly subject to illegal arrests in street sweeps; they are beaten up and forced to have sex with police officers. U.S. PROS often organizes pickets outside the courthouse to protest these abuses and to bring to the public's attention just how much taxpayer money is wasted on harassing, prosecuting and jailing prostitute women. Money could be better spent on programs to assist women with childcare, housing, health care, academic scholarships, waged job training programs, increased welfare payments etc., all of which would reduce the reasons women go into prostitution in the first place. Prostitution is about money, not about sex. If women's basic economic situation does not change, then women will continue to work as prostitutes.

Given the economic status of women, how many of us are forced to rent our bodies, stay in marriages we want to get out of, make deals with the landlord, shop keeper, put up with sexual harassment on the job, smile when we don't want to, put out or get fired etc.? How many wives put in a greater effort at being sexy when they need extra money from their husbands? How many women choose the man who has better career prospects over the man who is a heartthrob? How much do we all have to prostitute ourselves because women internationally have so little to show for the tremendous amount of work we do? Perhaps in thinking over these things, non-prostitute women can see that they are really not so very far apart from the rest of us.

Street Sweeps

Street sweeps have never gotten rid of prostitution, just forced it into another neighborhood or further underground. The sweeps often result in women working under more isolated and dangerous conditions or in turning to a pimp for protection. Pimps and police have been known to have a close working relationship. During the Democratic Convention in 1984 in San Francisco, hundreds of women were threatened or arrested in street sweeps, brutalized and illegally jailed. U.S. PROS again organized police watch teams and went into the street every night with lawyers to monitor the police. In the areas we went to there was less police harassment, but we observed a number of illegal arrests and incidents of police brutality. We accompanied the women to court from the incidences we observed as witnesses during their cases and the charges against them were dropped.

New Entrapment Law

Recently in California a statewide law was passed making entrapment legal. This means that police officers can initiate a proposition and, if the woman accepts by going off with the officer or by undressing, she can be arrested. Under the old law, an officer could not do the soliciting. This new law will hit hardest the most vulnerable women. Given the selective and racist enforcement of the prostitution laws, black women will be hardest hit in its implementation.

We suspect this law can be challenged on the basis of its being unconstitutional. It remains to be seen whether civil liberties groups will take up the challenge.

Legal Action for Women (LAW)

U.S. PROS has also organized Legal Action for Women (LAW) in San Francisco, based on LAW in London (see ECP), a grassroots legal service for all women to challenge police and court practices. We've helped women plead not guilty to illegal arrests and win their cases. Since its formulation in 1984, LAW has helped hundreds of women, not only prostitute women, but any women who can't afford legal services. We have also set up a Prostitutes Complaint Bureau where we document cases of police and customer harassment or brutality.

Fighting Vigilantes

We have organized against vigilante harassment of prostitute women in Berkeley, Sacramento, Portland, Oregon and Tulsa, Oklahoma where vigilantes protected by the police patrolled the streets hunting down women they suspected of being prostitutes. We picketed City Hall protesting their support of the vigilantes, spoke at City Council meetings, met with local residents, spoke out to the public on television and radio. In a recent poll taken by a radio station in Berkeley in the neighborhood where the vigilantes patrolled, ninety-five percent of the residents interviewed were on our side.

The South Side Slayer and Other Serial Murers

Another immediate concern is prostitute women's vulnerability to violence, rape and murder. In Los Angeles, Margaret Prescod, who for a long time was public spokeswoman for U.S. PROS, founded the Black Coalition Fighting Black Serial Murders in response to police inaction and media inattention to the deaths of at least 17 women over a three-year period in South Central Los Angeles (a mainly black

neighborhood). All but three of the victims were black. All the bodies were found in the same forty-mile radius. The police waited until ten women were already dead before notifying the public that a serial murderer was operating, and fourteen women were murdered before they ever formed a task force to investigate the murders.

Three days following the police announcement of the murders, International Black Women for Wages for Housework organized a multi-racial vigil outside the Central Police Station, met with police representatives and the press demanding action on the murders. The Black Coalition Fighting Black Serial Murders was founded in January 1986 to expand and continue the work already begun by International Black Women for Wages for Housework in consultation with U.S. PROS and the ECP. The membership of the Black Coalition includes women who live and work in South Central L.A. as well as others from various fields: ministers, lawyers and organizations ranging from the Southern Region NAACP to the Coalition Against Police Abuse. Some mothers of victims of the South Side slayer are also active supporters of the Coalition.

The Black Coalition has stated again and again that they are not convinced that all the women murdered were prostitutes and that the police have offered little evidence to support that claim. When the police could not dig up a prostitution arrest record on victim 17, they immediately said, "but she was a street woman." This statement reflects the attitude of the police towards poor women generally, especially if they are black.

We all know only too well that any of us at any time can be labeled a prostitute woman, if we dare step out of line in the way we speak and dress, in the hours we keep, the number of friends we have, or if we are "sexual outlaws" of any kind. When prostitute women are not safe, no woman is safe. Historically, serial murderers who begin with prostitute women inevitably go on to murder any woman (e.g., the Ripper case in England — see ECP), so when the LAPD claimed that non-prostitute women were safe, they were only giving women in L.A. a false sense of security, therefore placing all of us in greater danger.

From the start, the police, the media, elected officials and civic leaders were slow to respond to the murders, giving the impression that the deaths of these women were not important enough to cause much of a stir. When compared to other cases of serial murders in L.A., such as the Night Stalker and the Hillside Strangler, which received far greater attention and were treated as a general crisis, it is apparent that the lives of the murdered women did not seem to have

much value. This implies that the value of human life is determined by economic standing, racial background, and how one's living is earned.

If you're poor, black and they claim you're a prostitute, your life is worth nothing. The Hillside Strangler, who murdered prostitutes in a predominantly white neighborhood and killed mainly white women, received far greater attention from the start than the South Side Slayer. At the height of the investigation, there were one hundred fifty officers assigned to the case, compared to the original thirteen officers first assigned to the South Side Slayer investigation — and forty to fifty officers presently assigned to the case.

From the start, the Black Coalition Fighting Black Serial Murders protested vigorously the police handling of the case. The Coalition succeeded in getting the police to change the name of the task force from Prostitute Killer Task Force to South Side Slayer Task Force and from referring to the murders as prostitute slayings to calling them the South Side slayings. The Coalition lobbied, picketed, protested, called press conferences and pressured the police to take the murders seriously. They got the size of the task force increased, and there's been an increase in the numbers of women and blacks promoted in the LAPD as a result of their work and other community pressures. They also successfully lobbied to get local government officials to issue a reward which now stands at thirty-five thousand dollars.

The question of police accountability to the community they serve is a bottom line issue. The police initially refused to meet with the Coalition, but the Coalition did win a series of police community meetings on the issue. These meetings up to now have not been as productive as they could be, so more work has to be done to make them more effective. The police so far have refused the coalition's demand for special assistance from the FBI.

Another issue that has emerged in the South Side Slaying organizing is the right of a grassroots network to demand accountability of the police, elected officials and civic leaders without compromising their basic demands and goals. The Coalition has been faced with the political establishment, both black and white, attempting to compromise their efforts and to ignore demands made from the grassroots. The police have attempted to use the political establishment and community scabs to get them to "cool out" their demands, diffuse their activities and cause confusion and conflict internally. During the course of the organizing, threats have been made against Coalition founder and coordinator Margaret Prescod, including a dead bird hung outside her bedroom window.

Also, Michael Zinzun, a steering committee member and longtime activist of the Coalition Against Police Abuse, was so badly beaten by police that he is now blinded in one eye.

In spite of the physical dangers of organizing against police racism and illegality, the Black Coalition pressed ahead. They initiated a public information campaign on the South Side Slayer that was then taken up by police and public officials, and they won the demand for billboards and posters on buses. Another issue has been dealing with the media, who always take the word of the police at face value and are not doing their own independent investigation. How do they know, for example, that most of the women were working as prostitutes at the time they were killed? Although media coverage has improved as a result of community pressure, a lot more still needs to be done. The murders have received very little national media attention, and residents of Southern California are still not aware of the murders or familiar with the available composite sketch.

The Green River Murders

In the Seattle area, somewhere between forty-five and one hundred five women have been killed over a four-year period. Again, as in L.A., most of the women supposedly worked in the sex industry and many, if not most, were black. The same attitudes on the part of the police in L.A. existed in Seattle. The IPC has organized several vigils and pickets protesting the murders, including an action in Nairobi, Kenya in July 1985 at the UN End of Decade conference for Women. U.S. PROS in San Francisco has organized several pickets on behalf of the murdered women in Seattle. Despite efforts by the Women's Coalition to Stop the Green River Murders, and other groups, the crimes have not been solved and in fact the Green River Task force has been dismantled. Bodies of women have also turned up in Vancouver, Canada; Portland, Oregon; San Diego and Fresno, California. They probably amount to the largest specific population ever targeted by serial murders. Yet local and national outcry remains practically nonexistent and response from organized feminist groups has been minimal.

Take Back the Night

A major development in the South Side Slayers organizing was the setting up of the Take Back the Night Coalition, different from other TBTN groups nationally because their focus was not only the violence of individual men against individual women but also the violence of the state against women generally, and in particular

against women of color. The Coalition is made up of thirty-two women's groups throughout the greater L.A. area. The Black Coalition — FBSM is a member of the Coalition which has organized weekly vigils outside Parker Center from June 1986 to December 1986. They have also organized a TBTN march to protest the South Side Slayings and the violence against immigrant and refugee women by the Immigration and Naturalization Service. There were approximately eight hundred participants in the March that many hail as the most multiracial demonstration they had ever attended in L.A.

International Action Protesting the South Side Slayings

In April 1986 at an international conference entitled "Implementing Nairobi: Counting All Women's Work in the GNP," organized by the International Wages for Housework Campaign and International Black Wages for Housework, women agreed to do a day on national and international action protesting the South Side Slayings. In July 1986 women in L.A., San Francisco, Tulsa, Oklahoma, Philadelphia, Vancouver, British Columbia, and London, England, held vigils and die-ins protesting the South Side Slayings. In London, English women wearing masks joined with the ECP and International Black Women for Wages for Housework outside the U.S. Embassy, where they made the connection with the mishandling of the South Side Slayings with the mishandling of the Atlanta child murders.

In San Francisco, U.S. PROS and our supporters took flowers and held a vigil outside the Federal Building. In Philadelphia, the Wages for Housework group organized a picket, demanded and won a letter from a congressman requesting a federal investigation in the way the murders were being handled by the joint task force of the LAPD and the Sheriff's Department. Over seventy women in Vancouver, Canada gathered in protest organized by Prostitutes and Other Women for Equal Rights (POWER). Meanwhile in Seattle in an independent action, the Women's Coalition to Stop the Green River Murders held a sit-in, one hour for the life of every woman taken in the Green River Murders. In Los Angeles, members of the Take Back the Night Coalition and the Black Coalition FBSM and others stood outside police headquarters with a mock coffin, flowers and women with sheets spread over them to symbolize the bodies of women. The international action was the first occasion for the South Side Slayings to get coverage on national television in the U.S.

U.S. PROS is frequently requested to turn up a "real" prostitute

woman by the media or feminist groups. It seems that the word of an organized group of sex industry workers is not good enough. Again non-prostitute women are imposing on us the way they want us to organize without taking into consideration the risks involved for us and our families. Those of us who are presently working as prostitute women in U.S. PROS greatly resent this. Prostitute women are not an exotic side show. We are working women who need the money and are exploited like millions of women are every day. We can't ignore or hide the specific problems our illegality creates, but we know the only way to end our exploitation is to confront the differences between us and find common ground with other women on which we can organize together.

Thanks to women in the U.S. PROS network for contributing to this article.