

When we occupy the churches,

you are scandalised,

religious bigots!

You who threatened us with hell,

we have come to eat at your table,

at Saint Nizier.

– Protest song penned by sex workers who occupied French churches during an eight-day 1975 strike.

It is a little-known fact that New South Wales was the first government in the world to remove all prostitution laws from the criminal law books in 1995. Since then NSW and New Zealand remain the only two places in the world to have maintained a fully decriminalised sex industry.

Even less well known is the story of the eight-day nationwide strike by French sex workers in 1975. They inspired not just the Australian sex workers who agitated for change in their own country, but sex workers around the world.

Downing tools

Sex workers of the world unite! How striking French sex workers inspired a global labour movement

Written by The Conversation USA

I first heard about the French sex workers' strike in the 1980s as a young sex worker rights activist handing out condoms, lube and legal information on the streets and in the brothels of NSW.

As a volunteer for the Australian Prostitutes Collective, my fearless outreach partner was researcher and activist Roberta Perkins, one of its founding members. On outreach Roberta would often try to inspire sex workers (a term they were already using to describe themselves) in their struggle for labour rights by telling stories about the French sex workers' strike.

The strike began when sex workers took refuge in a church with the support of one of the most powerful institutions in France – the Catholic Church. As pointed out by Father Louis Blanc, the priest in charge at St Nizier when the strike took place:

It is, after all, Mary Magdalene to whom Jesus appeared.

Hundreds of sex workers occupied a total of five French churches during the strike. Many more of the approximately 20,000 French sex workers nationwide “downed tools” in solidarity.

The Sydney Morning Herald reported at the time that the sex workers demanded, among other things, an end to police harassment, the re-opening of the hotels where they worked, and the scrapping of anti-pimping laws. Their spokesperson was reported as saying:

We want to live with the fathers of our children without them being harassed as pimps.

The women also wanted a series of brutal sex worker murders properly investigated by police.

When the strikers occupied the Parisienne Chapel of St Bernard, Simone de Beauvoir joined the queue of high-profile feminist well-wishers. She told the Miami Times:

I hope they are successful and I am ready, with my friends in the women's liberation movement, to support this movement.

Swiss feminist director [Carole Roussopoulos](#) filmed a documentary inside the church during the occupation. Books were written by the principal leaders of the strike.

A place in history

The strike ended on June 10, 1975, when the interior minister ordered police to clear the striking sex workers from the churches, but the movement for sex workers' rights continued.

Some years later, in 1985, over a hundred sex workers met in Amsterdam for the first of two [World Whores Congresses](#)

. They drew up the World Charter for Sex Worker Rights, which called first and foremost for the decriminalisation of prostitution.

The [2015 decision by Amnesty International](#) to advocate for the worldwide decriminalisation of sex work was applauded by sex worker rights groups, but there's still a lot of work to be done.

It's been more than 40 years since the French strike kicked off a lively and committed human rights movement, yet sex workers are still most commonly depicted in the mainstream media as victims, pests or, in the odd case, saints.

As such they can be saved, exterminated or patronised, but they are almost completely denied a legitimate worker "history".

There's nothing at the St Nizier Church today that hints at its role in the international sex workers' rights movement. NSW has also failed to fully celebrate its 20-year history of a decriminalised sex industry.

Hello and thank you

It needs to be said that the French sex workers I interviewed working in their vans in the Gerland industrial estate on the outskirts of Lyon had far more important things to worry about than history.

They worried about things like the introduction of [laws](#) that would criminalise their clients, the police fines stacking up on the dashboards of their working vans, and the councils' determination to replace red light districts with apartments, pushing workers out from the safer more populated streets into disused factory areas and highways.

Little has changed for these workers since the strike in 1975. I spoke to "Evelyn" (who did not want her real name to be used), one of the original St Nizier strikers who now works in her van in Gerland. I asked if she knew that the St Nizier Church occupation was commemorated in Australia and across the world as International Whores' Day.

"No, I didn't know that. Really?" she said. "And in Australia, are there lots of sex workers? And they aren't being hassled by the police?"

I told her that no, sex work is decriminalised in NSW. She replied:

That's fantastic! Give the sex workers a big kiss from me, and tell them that it is very good that you met a girl from Lyon. And tell them that, simply, she was a very happy girl. She was happy to have chosen this profession.

We kissed goodbye and she returned to work. I take this opportunity now to pass on her greetings to sex workers in Australia and I know that they would wish to thank her as well for what she and other sex workers did in France in 1975.

Eurydice Aroney's radio documentary, The Sex Workers Revolt, will be broadcast Tuesday, March 8, on [Earshot](#) on ABC Radio National. It was [broadcast](#) as La Revolte des Prostituées

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on June 1, 2015, across France and Brussels. The English script translation of the program is [here](#)

Eurydice Aroney is the producer of The Sex Workers Revolt commissioned by ABC Radio with funding from the University of Technology Sydney. She is a member of Scarlet Alliance, Australia's national sex worker organisation body.

Read more <http://theconversation.com/sex-workers-of-the-world-unite-how-striking-french-sex-workers-inspired-a-global-labour-movement-43353>