



## Out and About CARY GEE

### Decriminalisation means more safety for sex workers

Fact. Most women trafficked to Britain sell sex. Fact. Most women who sell sex in Britain are not trafficked. Yet to read the recently published report from the all-party Parliamentary Group on Prostitution you might believe that trafficking – an abominable form of modern-day slavery – and prostitution are one and the same thing. They are not.

Last year, I was invited to sign an open letter calling for prostitution to be decriminalised in the United Kingdom. I hesitated. Like most people, I was ambivalent about a profession that until recently I knew relatively little about. All that changed one sunny afternoon in Soho. It was the day of the annual Soho carnival, a village fete like no other, and members of the English Collective of Prostitutes were marching in defence of their right to work safely. My partner and I were surprised, particularly given where we were, that there were no men on the march. So, in the interests of equality and gender balance, we appropriated some placards and made up the numbers. As a journalist, my action was unlikely to cause much fuss. It was not the first time I have marched in defence of people's right to work, and it won't be the last. For him indoors, a baroque violinist and teacher, it was a much more courageous act of solidarity.

Why? Because sex work, even when entered into freely, is still deemed to be something that nice people should have no truck with. At least on the supply side, which is perhaps why the parliamentary report, authored by the group chair, Labour MP Gavin Shuker, concludes that the best way to eradicate prostitution is to criminalise not the sellers of sex, but the buyers. Based on the Scandinavian model, the report recommends a "general offence" banning the purchase of sexual services, while dispensing with the offense of soliciting. This would be in the interests of women working in the profession, who would no longer be subject to a criminal conviction for selling sex. It is commendable. It's also rather like suggesting that banning the purchase of newspapers would protect journalists from low wages and exploitation.

You will never eradicate prostitution. All you can hope to achieve is the safety of women, 70 per cent of whom are

mothers, who, governed by the same economic imperatives as the rest of us, elect to sell sex as a means to avoiding poverty. (This comment does not apply to women who do not elect to sell sex). Yet you will find no mention in the report on prostitution of low pay, benefit sanctions, cuts to the Local Housing Allowance or the cost of childcare – all issues that might make selling sex a more attractive option than working in Poundland.

It's for the women's own good, cry abolitionists, somehow imagining they are William Wilberforce when they are merely missionaries, evangelising on an issue they find morally repugnant. I could make the same argument for the abolition of capitalism, with a similar expectation of success. Would I be happy knowing my child/sister/best friend was working as a prostitute? Of course not. I would fear for their safety every minute of every day. However, I would probably fear a little less knowing that there was a relative safety to be found from working with other women, in a legal brothel.

This has been possible for women working in New Zealand, since the Prostitution Reform Act (2003), which decriminalised brothels, escort agencies and soliciting, effectively legalising prostitution. Sexual coercion remains a crime, as does working as a prostitute beneath the age of 18. Recent prosecutions in London suggest that disproving coercion remains a lot harder than proving coercion, a "fact" the police rely on as they apparently work hand in hand with property developers to sanitise Soho. Meanwhile, women who worked in relative safety are dispersed to other areas where they face the real and daily threat of violence, rape and murder. Currently, women who dare to report these attacks are far more likely to face prosecution than their attackers, a scandal which will hopefully end under the Scandinavian model. However, in order to prevent this appalling level of violence against women from happening in the first place, perhaps we should, as a society, stop treating sex workers as pariahs, bite the bullet and legalise brothels, while simultaneously offering women viable economic alternatives. This is why I signed the letter: <http://prostitutescollective.net/2013/09/09/3171/>

## Footnotes

# Strength of steel, spirit of its makers

### A new DVD salutes an industry at its peak before Thatcher wrecked it, writes Michael Pattison

Steel is everywhere. It is, in fact, so pervasive today that it might be considered one of the few taken-for-granted substances that define our modern age. From the smallest of household appliances to the world's tallest skyscrapers, steel is an escapable part of our everyday life, and is even integral to places not part of common visibility, such as pipelines, offshore construction, military equipment and the aerospace industry. Indeed, because of its necessity in worldwide infrastructural developments, the production, transportation and employment of steel became in the last century one of the key ways by which to gauge a nation's economic progress.

"Imagine a world without steel – there's a thought!" So asks Peter Sachs' 1951 animated short *River of Steel*, produced for the British Iron and Steel Federation. Sadly, although it's impossible to envisage a world without so ubiquitous an alloy, the systematic destruction of the industry surrounding it has proved to be all too feasible in Britain. A major part of the United Kingdom's nationalisation and economic boom in the years following the Second World War, the steel industry is now the stuff of nostalgic dust. With its privatisation and obliteration at the hands of Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s, there appears to have also been a decline in communal spirit.

A quick survey of the selection of films included in *Steel*, the third and final DVD release in the British Film Institute's *This Working Life* series last year, offers a telling case in point. *Steel Town* and *Men of Consett*, both from the late 1950s, depict the impact local steelmaking has on the communities that form around the industry: the former captures life in Stocksbridge, Sheffield, the latter in County Durham. On the same release is included an 11-minute extract from Northern Newsreel No. 7, made in 1987, which shows the palpable effects of mass unemployment and the overnight annihilation of an industry, as a group of disenfranchised young men in Consett express an affinity for growing fascist tendencies.



Britain was once pre-eminent in steelmaking. And then came Margaret Thatcher

*River of Steel*, *Steel Town* and *Men of Consett* are among the many films that feature in *The Big Melt*, a specially commissioned feature directed by Martin Wallace and Jarvis Cocker to celebrate Sheffield's steelmaking history. The film premiered with live orchestral accompaniment last year at Sheffield's Crucible Theatre as part of Doc/Fest, the city's annual documentary and digital media festival, and the BFI release a DVD of the film itself on 17 March following its broadcast on BBC 4's *Storyville* strand in January.

More a tapestry than a chronology, *The Big Melt* is a spirited and energetic foray through the BFI National Archive. Merseyside-born Wallace and Sheffield native Cocker have stitched together a rich range of materials here to celebrate the women and men for whom the steel industry meant so much: these were the unsung local heroes behind a truly international commodity, and the film repeatedly emphasises the resilient spirit of their community. Ice rinks, dance halls, summer parks – there's even a segment here suggestive of sexual liberation, showing a man's hands caressing a woman's knees in juxtaposition with footage of women taking to the factories to assemble munitions as part of the war effort.

Writing about steel and Sheffield's attitude to it, Cocker says in the booklet accompanying this release that he was drawn again and again to footage of a small lad sticking a V-sign up to the camera in the 1901 film *Parkgate Iron*

*and Steel Co., Rotherham*. Billy Casper is making the same gesture on the iconic posters for *Kes* (1969), and part of the soundtrack here repurposes John Cameron's flute score for Ken Loach's classic film to hauntingly cheery effect. Overseen by Cocker, the film's musical arrangement is as seamless as the steelmaking process itself, as "Watching Stars on Sunday", by Cocker's own band Pulp, segues perfectly into the sound of a bingo hall, foregrounding the needs and desires of ordinary working people. It's very moving.

This is not only an anthropological study (one, by the way, that deserves wider distribution, overseas and beyond). As a collection of clips from films made when the UK's steel industry was at its peak, *The Big Melt* is also a document of some of the nation's finest cinematic accomplishments. In basic visual terms, films such as the aforementioned *Men of Consett*, or *Steel* (1945), boast colour cinematography that is rarely matched today. The latter film, directed by Ronald H Riley, was filmed by Jack Cardiff, famed collaborator of Powell and Pressburger, whose pioneering use of Technicolor was arguably the defining feature of that directing duo's body of work. Fearlessly capturing the steelmaking process, Cardiff and other contemporary cinematographers' contributions to these films are felt again here. As a result, while watching *The Big Melt*, the sense of loss is twofold.