

BLACK
LIVES
MATTER
CHICAGO

BLACK TRANS LIVES + LABOR



Written By | Jaz

*“People take what goes on in their mind and
make our bodies pay for it,”—Miss Major*

When asked what the Movement for Black Lives and the Trans justice has in common with the labor movement, I’ve had to take time to pause. It’s a difficult question to ponder when so many of my sisters, brothers and gender outlaw comrades are facing the unrelenting violence of state repression, incarceration, sexual violence, and economic disenfranchisement. How many Trans women of color doing survival sex work even think about joining a union, or struggling for wages? Frankly, from my seasoned experience, these sorts of questions are unfortunately beyond the rationale of Trans people in the survival, informal street economies.

With the labor movement experiencing resurgence, at a time in our history that “class warfare” becomes less of a dirty word, and more of a social imperative for the swelling ranks of the working poor, Trans women find themselves systematically excluded. Sometimes, open bigotry is not as harmful as ignorance of the disenfranchisement that is systemically perpetuated. Even living in the state of Illinois, where it’s technically illegal for employers to discriminate based on trans history or gender identity and presentation, trans people and trans women still face disproportionate risk of discrimination and workplace

“Pay it no mind”—Marsha P Johnson

harassment. When “right to work” and “at will employment” are the law of the land and mantra of the rich business owners, and when trans people stand at the three way intersection gender, race and class oppression, we’re bound to get run over at some point.

With that being said, I’d like the coalition of black trade unionists to for recognizing the need for this event and for prioritizing the presence of black Trans women, some of the most policed and violated bodies in our society, in this room tonight. My hope, along with educating and enlightening those in the labor movement of the drastic need for our inclusion and what that may look like, is to inspire a spirit of resistance in my sisters here tonight.

At what point can we consider our labor to be one that is given freely, with full agency and consent? Can we ask the same questions of our bodies? With so many black Trans women working in survival economies, specifically sex work, what deal can we make with the capitalist society that would be the least unbearable? Is it truly the survival economy that offers the best deal? It sure as hell seems that way, especially considering the fact that the unions have never been there for us. There is a failure of the labor movement to address the intersections of oppression where Trans

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women find ourselves sleeping on benches, or looking for a car to get into for a little bit of money. Considering our often short lifespans (the average life expectancy of trans women of color being only 35 years by some accounts), what advantages would there be to assimilation into the work culture that systematically excludes, or worse yet, temporarily tokenizes us as a diversity coin, to be spent quickly and written off as soon as our drawer comes up short.

I’ve taken this opportunity to talk about some of my work history, although make no mistake, this is not a resume. At this point, I’ve given up on the idea of being stably “gainfully employed” for any significant period of time. This is not out of helplessness or laziness, but a real understanding of my space in the racist, capitalist system as a black trans woman.

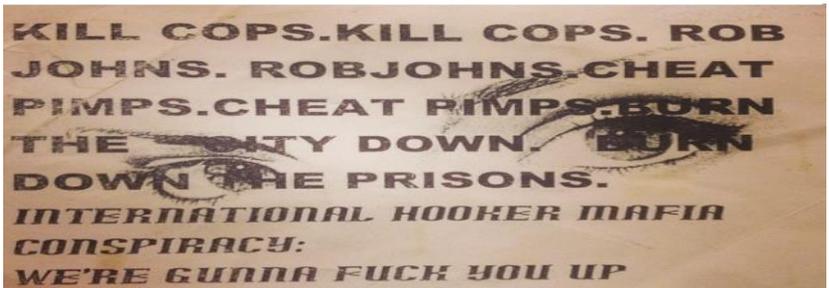
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The myth of the importance of “productivity” i.e. performing wage labor that results in probability for our employer, is most harmful to low wage workers, the ranks of which are disproportionately made up of black Trans women, is most harmful to the most oppressed of workers. With a large majority of non-criminalized labor being made up of low wage, thankless, non-unionized jobs with little room for advancement, the nihilism of black trans women toward the jobs that may be available to us, that are so benevolent to provide over-work for under-pay, or part-time, temporary work that doesn’t pay our bills, the attraction to criminalized work, which we trade safety for profitability and having more time to live our lives and heal from the trauma inherent in being black and trans in a white supremacist, cis sexist world. This culture that hates us, simultaneously sexually fetishizes us, thus, the most ample employment opportunities for black transwomen is often the sex trade. Why pour coffee, flip burgers, wait tables for customers who may be so offended by our presence that they may go so far as to ask for another server, putting our jobs in jeopardy, when you can supply for yourself a nearly guaranteed source of income. The issue here is the emotional toll that such work takes, the robbery of our sexual agency, and the objectification of our bodies as oddities which dehumanizes us, furthering the

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sense of lack of self-worth that such a survival economy instills on those who rely on it for survival. Within this economy a complex emotional labyrinth of emotions where one can find both freedom, and chains.

While I will not speak too much about my personal experience as a sex worker, I do hope that other black Trans people have more that they're willing to share about this. It's not that I can't provide some enlightening observations and experiences, I simply choose to not elaborate to respect my privacy and healing process from the violent capitalist, patriarchal and anti-trans systems that pushed me into this work.



My most recent experience with “gainful employment” was at a call center. Its entry/exit level employees were almost all black. The job had a high

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turnover rate due to its stress, remote location, and monotony. The work involved cold calling, through use of an automated dialing system (that rarely allowed more than thirty seconds in between calls) and attempting to add the “customers” (who could more accurately be described as “victims”) to the calling lists of for profit colleges. I won’t allow this piece to go tangentially stray too much in denouncing these fraudulent institutions,(or my ambivalence to even so-called “legitimate” post-secondary educational institutions like the bourgeoisie ivory tower) but I’d encourage the reader to do some research on the unscrupulous tactics of these institutions that prey on working class and poor people of color, many of whom are single parents, veterans, and persons with disabilities, offering them credits that will not transfer, and non-accredited degrees (or programs “accredited” by bodies created by the for-profit college industry and not the Department of Education).

Being held to a strict quota, and in an overcrowded office, filled with the noise nonstop grind of keyboards clacking, scripts being read by well over a hundred bored employees,) packed into an office that could only comfortably seat fifty) and the meaningless edicts of supervisors to “focus people, we got to get these

numbers up” is both insulting to the intelligence of workers, and demoralizing to our conscience. Employers would try and convince us that we’re offering a “service” when in actuality, we’re simply reading a script tested and designed to wear down the person on the other end of the line to allow them to be incessantly called by these degree mills for the purpose of wasting federal student aid monies on useless “degrees” that don’t serve the student in the job market. This is not to mention the unscrupulous ways that the contact info was generated in the first place, using sham job search websites and sites posing as government aid offices. The absurdity of the whole scheme is indicative of the labor alienation of late capitalism.

Before the call center, I worked in a nonprofit re-sale shop that, allegedly, serves the LGBTQ community. The unfortunate reality here is that the organization that my work benefited has come under fire for years for its financial mismanagement. When there was a crisis related to this in 2011, some of the first employees laid off were not the executive positions, but the lowest paid workers in the organization, meaning the resale shop workers. Even though I had seniority over a few workers, I was targeted for layoffs. I can’t help but wonder if that had to do with the fact that I was the only Trans person in the shop and was frequently micro-managed and over supervised to the

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exclusion of the normative gay and lesbian workers. Infarctions that would otherwise be overlooked got me in a disproportionate amount of trouble and passive aggressive behavior by other employees and even customers was not uncommon. Of course, I was left in a disempowered position to report this to my supervisor. It was after being laid off from this job, which I'd found only days after moving to Chicago, that I came to understand myself as a displaced worker, black and trans, my labor would be more valued in the streets as a sex worker or inside a privatized prison by this system created to destroy me than it ever would be behind a cash register or within the ranks of the nonprofit industrial complex.

I've worked a number of other jobs prior to and during my transition too, most notably for four years in retail, working all summer and after school every day, in hopes of saving up enough money to independently live without the limitations imposed on me by the nuclear family and its hyper-religious abuse and gaslighting. This money was often gone before I had any to save, paying for the upkeep and insurance of a car that I could barely afford to purchase, that allowed me some freedom (which, at the time, meant the ability to go to the gay clubs that frankly bored me). Having that car also offered me a place to sleep as well, but paying for gas during

the continued and escalating wars in Iraq and Afghanistan , as well as the necessities of my survival meant that I was never able to achieve the independence necessary for me to claim full autonomy over my existence. As I grew older and wiser, I realized that this is the life situation for all working poor and that a drastic change in the way that we work live, our level of compensation, and our structures in which we relate to one another as a class of oppressed workers must be.

Today, I survive through various means that leave me unrecognized by the government as employed. I've learned some skills which I can make some money outside of the sex trade, and maybe I'll be a dog walker or something, but it's been a concrete decision of mine to spend as much time in revolt against the system that keeps me and my sisters oppressed as most people do working a wage job in drudgery. If were offered \$15 or \$20 per hour job tomorrow, perhaps that would change, but for a black Trans woman, college dropout and unabashed radical, I remain pessimistic (or maybe one could say "realistic") about the opportunity of that happening. Instead of sitting in an office or standing in a store all day; being disposable as a non-biodegradable starbucks cup, forgotten half empty on a bus stop bench, I work on radical projects, including those related to racial justice, violence against women and Trans people, organizing political demonstrations and direct actions, and opening up community

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spaces of healing and resistance.



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I've said this many times 'if every black and brown worker dropped out of the system that requires our labor and instead spent their time actively working to undermine it, struggling for our collective labor, we will win.' Moving forward, I ask you, the reader, to think critically about the systems of racism, capitalism, sexism/cis-sexism and other oppressive social trends and institutions and how you as an individual can autonomously organize pockets of resistance against them, emboldening others to do the same...then, you gotta do it. Be fearless. The system can and probably will hit you back, but you can either let it get you in retaliation to your resistance, or you can let it slowly kill you in your passivity.

I leave you with the words of Sister Assata Shakur :

“It is our duty to fight for our freedom. It is our duty to win. We must love and protect each other. We have nothing to lose but our chains.”

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"Pay it no mind"—Marsha P Johnson

KANDIS CAPRI



BLACK TRANS LIVES MATTER

ASHTON O'HARA



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#BlackTransLivesMatter

DAY OF ACTION

8/25/15

#SAYHERNAME **#TRANSLIBERATION**

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