

PROTEST CALLS ATTENTION TO SEX WORKERS AND BACKPAGE

“Sex work is work, sex workers are people and no person is ever more safe when you eliminate their work options,” says Lia, a local activist and sex worker. Lia and fellow sex worker and activist Vera are putting on a rally Oct. 28 in downtown Eugene to “Protest the Raid on Backpage.”

Vera and Lia declined to give their full names because as sex workers they fear police retaliation.

Backpage was launched in 2004 by Village Voice Media, which publishes several alternative newsweeklies. On Oct. 6, agents in Texas raided the Dallas headquarters of Backpage and arrested Chief Executive Officer Carl Ferrer in response to allegations that adult and child sex-trafficking victims had been forced into prostitution through escort ads posted on the site.

Later warrants were issued for the arrest of former *Phoenix New Times* owners Michael Lacey and James Larkin for conspiracy to commit pimping in connection with their controlling interest in the Backpage. They turned themselves in. *EW* does not use Backpage, but does list “dating service” ads.

Lia says, “The elimination of Backpage, a Craigslist type site that includes listings for ‘adult services’ — which can be anything from a private lap dance (legal) to a call girl (illegal) — under the largely trumped up guise of ‘saviorism’ does more to damage and endanger the lives of sex workers, then ‘save’ them.”

She calls laws against sex work “whorephobic,” and says, “Backpage is being shut down now of all times, due to pressures during election season to crack down on crime and show results.” Lia says, “Consensual sex work is illegal due to moral panic, and nothing in history has ever been more effective at fueling moral panics as the appeal to protect the innocence of children.”

Oregon Attorney General Ellen Rosenblum, who is currently up for re-election, has worked to end sex trafficking. It is frequently pointed out in Portland media that Rosenblum is married to *Willamette Week* co-owner Richard Meeker and *Willamette Week* uses Backpage. However, it does not list escort ads.

Lia says that groups from Amnesty International to the World Health Organization and the Global Alliance Against Trafficking Women “urge countries to adopt the complete decriminalization of all sex work — then and only then, with at-risk workers no longer having to hide online or in back alleys, will we see true and real protection for the lives and livelihoods of sex workers.”

She adds, “We have no interest in being used as political pawns anymore; stop disenfranchising us.”

Vera says that many people think “sex work is demeaning or that we are forced into it somehow.” But she says that she finds a regular 9 to 5 job more demeaning. “I am underpaid and forced to deal with lewd comments from my boss.”

Vera continues, “At least in the context of sex work, I am being paid handsomely to be objectified, or have my race, sexuality etc., commodified. I am informed of this happening and consent to it in advance. I also can work on my own time, build my own schedule, spend more time with my family, and maximize the hours that I do work.”

She says that shutting down Backpage “harms sex workers across all platforms, because clients/hobbyists are scared and laying low.” This means sex workers, particularly those who are trans or non-gender binary, will have a hard time paying bills in the next few months. “We should be concerned with the plight of all sex workers, sure, but especially the most vulnerable amongst us.”

Vera says, “Liberation doesn’t mean shit if it doesn’t uplift the most marginalized of us.”

The Protest on the Raid on Backpage is 5 pm Friday, Oct. 28, at the Lane County Courthouse, 125 E. 8th Avenue. Organizers say to wear red, bring red umbrellas and wear a bandana on your face. For more info, email decriminalizesexwork@gmail.com.



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