

## 40 Years After Sex Workers Took Over an English Church, the Fight for Justice Picks Up in San Francisco

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In 1917, [hundreds of San Francisco sex workers confronted a Tenderloin church pastor](#) for trying to chase them out of town with his sermons, effectively giving him a crash course on their inability to survive economically. That direct action laid the groundwork for sex workers in France, Canada and England to occupy churches, putting a spotlight on the economic conditions placed on women trying to make ends meet for their families.

“These actions helped start the sex workers’ rights movement,” Rachel West of the US PROStitutes Collective said Saturday afternoon at a community event called “Hookers in the House of the Lord.” “Most sex workers were mothers working to support children. There’s a direct connection between poverty and sex work.”

The plight of low-income mothers remains unresolved, the advocates said—and, more than a century later, the criminalization of San Francisco residents who turn to sex work is picking up once again. But advocates aren’t letting the criminal-justice system and lack of support for low-income families continue without a fight.

Despite Saturday’s dreary weather, the room at St. Francis Lutheran Church in the Duboce Triangle filled up with people who had gathered to watch old news clips of the [1982 occupation at the Church of the Holy Cross in England](#), connecting it to today’s issues of poverty disproportionately affecting women, women of color and poor women.

“That film we watched could have been made today, right here,” said Nell Myhand of the Women of Color Global Women’s Strike. “The issue is pervasive.”

About the same time 40 years ago, the US PROStitutes Collective formed to [better advocate for sex workers’ rights and mothers](#). They got San Francisco to track working conditions and make recommendations via a task force in the 1990s, which helped [bring sex workers out of the shadows](#) when it comes to reporting crimes without fear of retaliation.

Now, the focus is on restating the federal child tax credit—which essentially functions as supplemental monthly income—a piece of pandemic economic relief that lifted families out of poverty [but expired last year](#).