Rentboy.com Raid Renews Calls to Legalize Sex Work

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PIX 11 News covers the Rentboy.com arrests.

Earlier this week, federal agents with the Department of Homeland Security raided the New York City offices of Rentboy.com—self-described as "the world's largest male escort site"—and arrested the chief executive officer and six other employees, CNN reports.

They were charged with "conspiring to violate the Travel Act by promoting prostitution," according to the U.S. Attorney's office. "This Internet brothel made millions of dollars from the promotion of illegal prostitution," acting U.S. Attorney Kelly T. Currie said.

The raid comes just two weeks after Amnesty International called for the decriminalization of sex work and for policies to "respect, protect and fulfill the human rights of sex workers."

The Amnesty International resolution garnered support from Lambda Legal, which writes that "laws criminalizing sexual exchange—whether by the seller or the buyer—impede sex workers' ability to negotiate condom use and other boundaries, and force many to work in hidden or remote places where they are more vulnerable to violence.... And as UNAIDS and the World Health Organization have recognized, criminalization also seriously hampers efforts to prevent and treat HIV/AIDS—efforts in which people involved in the sex trades are crucial partners."

The Lambda Legal statement is co-signed by the Transgender Law Center, the Gay & Lesbian Advocates & Defenders (GLAD), the National Center for Lesbian Rights and the National Center for Transgender Equality

Since the Rentboy.com bust, other groups have made public statements condemning the arrests and supporting legalized sex work, including the Woodhull Sexual Freedom Alliance and the Harm Reduction Coalition.

The Rentboy arrests have also sparked wider debates regarding the links between sex work, sex panic and the gay rights and the feminist movements. Activist and writer Yasmin Nair makes the point that such arrests "are entirely to be expected in an era of The New Gay, post-gay marriage, a time when it's assumed that gay men don't actually copulate with each other in their marital

beds and if they do, it’s within the parameters of monogamy and never in front of their many adopted children.”

Nair continues: “The history of rentboys — of various genders — making their way out of often oppressive situations and mapping different literal and metaphorical geographies of desire and safety has also been a part of queer history of, again, blowjobs and street trade and hustling that was, to be sure, not always idyllic but was at least for some/many a ticket out.”

And Justin Vivian Bond, a New York artist, when asked from the New York Times for a quote regarding the raids, posted her response on Facebook. “Because of this raid,” Bond writes in part, “1,000s of independent workers worldwide will not be able to pay their rent this month and they are concerned about what this means for their safety and legal protection. There is a movement happening and many organizations creating Know Your Rights seminars this week. This is about workers’ rights--labor rights and equal protections for all kinds of workers without basic access to legal and healthcare support because they are deemed criminals or denied access to banking, housing or Facebook, in all sectors of the Adult industry, not just escorts. It’s about sex phobia and public shaming. Sex workers are strong and have organizations like Urban Justice Center and SWOP Sex Workers Outreach Project whom you might want to reach out to.”

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