

Strippers Unionize at California Club After Long Fight

The club agreed not to block the dancers from affiliating with Actors' Equity in what appears to be the industry's first unionization since the 1990s.

By Noam Scheiber and Ava Sasani

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For much of last year, a group of strippers at a California club called Star Garden raised concerns about safety issues like handsy customers and a poorly maintained stage — as well as retaliation from management when they spoke up. The complaints led the dancers to picket the club and seek a union vote.

But while support for the union appeared strong in last fall's election, the results have been delayed for months as the two sides litigated the dancers' eligibility to unionize. The club, in North Hollywood, filed for bankruptcy in the meantime.

Now, under a set of agreements finalized Monday, Star Garden has dropped its ballot challenges and agreed to work with the union, paving the way for the dancers to join the century-old actors and stage managers union, Actors' Equity Association.

The National Labor Relations Board announced Thursday that the workers had voted 17 to 0 in favor of the union. That appears to make them the first strip-club dancers to unionize in the United States since the 1990s.

Kate Shindle, the union's president, said the victory could help advance workers' rights in an industry rife with exploitation and physical hazards.

"We felt like we could help them," Ms. Shindle said in an interview during last fall's mail-in election. "The things we already pay attention to in contract negotiations and enforcement are also issues that these dancers were confronting: Audience interaction, unsafe stages, broken glass, sexual harassment."

In a statement, Star Garden said that it had “reached a resolution of all disputes” with the National Labor Relations Board, the union and the workers, and that it “is committed to negotiating in good faith with Actors’ Equity, a first-of-its-kind collective bargaining agreement which is fair to all parties.”

Star Garden dancers said they were driven to unionize because of unsafe working conditions in which inebriated customers were allowed to grope them, and because they had been barred from working at the club after raising their concerns. Some said the physical space was often hazardous, including exposed nails and holes onstage and broken glass on the floor.

“I’ve been picked up and carried without security intervening,” said a dancer who goes by the stage name Lilith. Lilith and other dancers asked not to be identified by their legal names for fear of being harassed or stalked.

Another dancer, who uses the name Velveeta, said the club put dancers at risk by allowing customers to linger after hours. “Customers will be there watching us cash out, seeing the cash we’re taking with us,” she said. “They would be able to follow us to our cars and stalk us pretty easily.”

The strippers held pickets in front of the club nearly every weekend in the months leading up to the election, announcing themes like “twerking-class heroes” and “French Revolution” to a growing group of supporters on social media. At one point the guitarist Tom Morello, of Rage Against the Machine, turned up to provide musical entertainment.

The pickets appeared to have their desired effect: On the Saturday night before the scheduled vote count in November, a crowd of a few dozen people gathered outside the club to watch, while no customers appeared to enter or exit for more than 90 minutes. The club had operated for weeks with a small number of replacement workers.

In December, Star Garden filed for bankruptcy.

Strippers and other sex workers have organized for years to protest working conditions and press for policy changes, like mandating panic buttons and other safety measures or decriminalizing and regulating certain activities, like erotic massages.

The activism appeared to grow when the economic disruption of the pandemic made sex work an option of last resort for some workers at the same time that safety concerns proliferated.

The racial reckoning that followed the killing of George Floyd also highlighted rampant racial discrimination in the industry.

In Portland, Ore., dozens of strippers began protesting what they said were discriminatory policies at local clubs, which included bringing on few people of color, giving them undesirable hours and refusing to allow them to dance to certain types of music, like rap.

Cat Hollis, the lead organizer of the protests, which came to be known as the Portland Stripper Strike, said that several clubs began to comply with some basic workplace regulations, but that few if any appear to have reformed their hiring or contracting policies.

The organizing at Star Garden began early last year after the club severed its relationship with two dancers in what they say was retaliation for speaking up about safety and privacy concerns. One of the dancers, who uses the stage name Reagan, said she was fired after complaining that a customer was becoming possessive and criticizing the club for not requiring customers to leave at closing time.

In March 2022, more than a dozen signed a petition to management describing a workplace “full of belligerently drunk men who push our boundaries and often scare us” and calling on management to employ better safety and security measures, like cutting off alcohol to drunken customers. The dancers say they were locked out by management shortly after submitting the petition, which also sought the reinstatement of the two ousted dancers.

A lawyer representing the club said in the fall that Star Garden had adhered to all state and federal labor laws.

In July, the dancers met with Ms. Shindle, the Actors’ Equity president, and other union officials. The union was beginning to invest in organizing nonunion workers after years in which it largely refrained from doing so, and officials became excited about the prospect of representing the dancers.

“It feels like something whose time has come, which means the time was probably 10 to 15 years ago, at least,” Ms. Shindle said.

The workers filed a petition for a unionization vote in August.

The initial results of the election were inconclusive. The National Labor Relations Board allowed roughly 20 workers who said they had been locked out for months to cast votes, then spent months trying to determine their eligibility.

Under the agreement signed Monday, Star Garden withdrew its contention that the workers were never employees but independent businesspeople ineligible to vote, allowing the vote count to go forward.

Under the accord, the company will seek to have its bankruptcy case dismissed and the workers, who are creditors in the case, will not object to the dismissal. The company will reinstate eight workers and add the rest to a preferential hiring list. It will also award the dancers back pay and agree to begin bargaining within 30 days of the vote's certification.

Many clubs have traditionally classified dancers as contractors or lessees in business for themselves. Critics of this model argue that the clubs' influence over hours and pay rates reflects an employment relationship, and that the clubs have illegally denied dancers the basic protections of employment, like a minimum wage, overtime pay and the right to unionize.

In 2019, California passed a law that effectively required many companies, including strip clubs, to classify workers as employees. But some strippers argue that while employment status offered them more benefits and protections in principle, employers responded by putting dancers out of work or by pocketing more of their earnings by claiming a large portion of the revenue they brought in above the minimum wage.

Laws that lead to employment status "can be historic and significant for those who benefit, but not necessarily everyone benefits," said Ilana Turner, a former dancer and a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Minnesota whose research focuses on strip club workers. Many performers who may have a harder time finding work to begin with — including Black, trans, disabled, larger and older dancers — say they had fewer opportunities to work after the law was enacted, she added.

Mariah Grant, the former director of research and advocacy for the Sex Workers Project of the Urban Justice Center, a nonprofit law firm, said unionization could be a significant step forward but added, "I have concerns about the fact that it's a mostly white-led effort."

The dancers have acknowledged the issue and said they had long been concerned about racial discrimination at the club. In an online message in the fall, the Star Garden dancers said they were "committed to speaking up when we witness racism in and around our community."

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