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How A Group Of Dancers Sparked A Unionization Effort At A Los Angeles Strip Club

The women hope to make Star Garden the first unionized strip club in 25 years.



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When **Wicked** was hired as a stripper at Star Garden Topless Dive Bar last year, she was given three rules: no drugs, no getting drunk, and absolutely no drama.

But what counts as drama, really?

A dancer named Sinder was onstage at the Star Garden when a man pulled their panties to the side, shoved some cash in their crotch, and slapped them on the vagina, Sinder said. Sinder walked off stage and was told to take some “time off” two days later, but never got scheduled for another shift. Another dancer, Cece, said she was walloped on the thigh by a man so hard that it brought tears to her eyes, then told not to come back for her next shift after a customer alerted management that she was hurt. After Reagan yelled at a bartender who had joked about her being stalked and murdered by a customer, a manager told her she couldn’t come back for “a while,” she said. Selena said that after she told a customer not to record another dancer onstage, she was reprimanded for being a “drama queen” and wasn’t allowed to enter the club when she arrived for her next shift.

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It was all part of what Wicked described as “this fear culture” at Star Garden, a strip club that advertises “class entertainment” above its corinthian column-lined doorway on a strip of North Hollywood lined with auto shops and fast-food joints.



Wicked

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Holed up in the dressing room on March 18, though, the dancers prepared for a different kind of drama: They would refuse to work until managers listened to their concerns. After announcing a [petition](#) listing their demands, the dancers staged a walkout that became the first step in a [campaign to unionize](#). If the group is successful, it will mark the first time in 25 years that strip club dancers have had union representation.

In [interviews with BuzzFeed News](#), the petition, and complaints filed with the California Division of Occupational Safety and Health, 16 Star Garden dancers

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Stepan Kazaryan created unsafe working conditions — leaving them exposed to sexual assault and other health and safety hazards while limiting their access to security guards — and retaliated against them when the dancers raised concerns.

“For a workforce that has been so exploited and disregarded to be able to unionize and have that solidarity and unity, it represents a revolution,” said Velveeta, a mullet-wearing dancer with a philosophy degree who is one of the group’s organizers. Like Wicked and 11 other dancers who spoke to BuzzFeed News, Velveeta asked to be referred to by a name she uses professionally to protect her safety and privacy.

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In a statement responding to questions for this story, Joshua Kaplan, a lawyer representing the Star Garden, denied “all allegations of misconduct” and described them as “maliciously false,” saying “we have no further comment save to say we look forward to complete vindication in the proper legal forum.” In a declaration filed with the NLRB, Yevgenya Kazaryan, who goes by Jenny, also defended some of the dancers’ terminations, stating that Reagan was fired for “violent outbursts” and Selena for selling cannabis. Both women said the accusations were false.

The strippers are part of a wave of growing union activity across the US, and the announcement marks a new chapter in the long fight for labor rights among sex workers. As the pandemic spurs more people to speak up about their working conditions and legislation, including California’s AB-5, grants gig economy workers more protections, the Star Garden dancers said they hope their effort opens the door for organizing pushes at other strip clubs. But in an industry where many workers face racism, anti-fat bias, and stigmatization for their profession itself, the relative privilege of the Star Garden dancers, many of whom are white and college-educated, highlights questions about who has access to such remedies and how to serve those who remain on the fringes.





Velveeta

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Velveeta, who said she started stripping because it seemed better than retail after a boss at a film job never paid her, was inspired to pursue unionization when she learned about a San Francisco peep show called the Lusty Lady from other dancers in the dressing room.

The Lusty Lady's 1996 campaign to unionize was built in the wake of the AIDS crisis, which hit San Francisco especially hard. Antonia Crane, who was a Lusty Lady dancer at the time, said that witnessing the power and camaraderie of groups like ACT UP that fought for better treatment of people who have HIV showed her and her colleagues what could be accomplished if they decided to stand together.

The group won raises and sick pay in their first contract, and Black dancers were able to negotiate with the business, over what they said was discrimination excluding them from higher-paying work in the private booth.

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In the years that followed, though, Crane said the rise of corporate chains made the industry more brutal. While the chains tend to promote themselves as more upscale and friendlier to women visitors, Crane said they charged dancers arbitrary fees to perform and that she started selling sexual favors to cover the rising costs while working at Deja Vu. De'Vu did not respond to a request for comment.

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“They made us feel just lucky to exist,” said Crane, who founded the labor organization Strippers United, which is now backing Star Garden dancers’ unionization efforts. “I remember the minute it happened. I wasn’t giving handjobs, and then all of a sudden I was.”

The Lusty Lady closed in 2013, driven out of business by [online porn](#) and rising rents. The business’ landlord, Robert Forbes, who had an ownership stake in most of the city’s other strip clubs, filed for eviction after he [said](#) he grew tired of dealing with late rent and garbage bills.

Two stripper strikes in recent years have focused on racial discrimination in strip clubs — one in [2017 in New York](#) led by Gizelle Marie, and another in [2020 in Portland](#) led by Cat Hollis — but neither has attempted to pursue unionization. Marie told BuzzFeed News that she thought that “unionizing would probably be the best thing for us,” but felt that concerns about union dues and apparent threats by club managers had influenced dancers’ thinking.

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One major obstacle to organizing is that strippers are often hired as independent contractors — meaning that they are technically self-employed — which disqualifies them from unionizing their workplace. Some dancers have begun to dispute their employment status in a handful of [court cases](#) and charges filed to the [NLRB](#), where judges have ruled that the clubs in question managed the dancers with the same level of control they would with employees.

In California, the 2019 passage of the AB-5 bill required that many gig workers — including strippers — be reclassified as employees with benefits like unemployment insurance and greater legal protections. But many clubs have failed to comply or created workarounds, according to AM Davies, the Secretary of Strippers United. Unionization has not been an easy sell to dancers fearful of losing their jobs.

Reagan, a leader on the Star Garden picket line who exudes the glamorous confidence of a Hollywood star, said an earlier campaign had failed at Jumbo’s Clown Room, a legendary club where [Courtney Love used to perform](#). When Reagan came to LA in 2010 for a grad program at the California Institute of the Arts and landed a coveted job at the club, she said “it felt like an identity more than a job, being a part of something that was considered to be so cool.

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Reagan

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But managers exploited the club's cachet, Reagan alleged. "The dancers really had internalized this feeling of disposability... It was gospel... we would quote all the time that our boss had called us 'paper towels' — you just use one up and then there's another one."

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Those fears were reinforced after the club made deep cuts to its roster to cover the new cost of hiring the dancers as employees when a court ruled in 2018 they had to be paid minimum wage, Reagan and another former dancer said. The cuts contributed to the union organizing drive. After months of meeting in secret, they came close to announcing their plan to form a union, according to Reagan and three other former dancers. But then the pandemic hit, putting everything on pause. "It kind of just ripped to shreds our organizing efforts for a year," said Davies, who used to dance at Jumbo's.

Representatives for Jumbo's did not respond to a request for comment.

As the world went to hell, out-of-work strippers who were largely excluded from pandemic assistance suddenly needed to find a new income source. Sex work, like so many other jobs, moved online. OnlyFans exploded. Instagram strip shows like Demon Time built massive followings. And Reagan and a couple of other former Jumbo's dancers founded a strip show on Zoom that they called the Cyber Clown Girls.

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The dancers embraced the freedom of running their own show and built a following with outrageous, experimental performances. Velveeta, who joined the show and used a chainsaw to decapitate a Marilyn Manson mannequin in one routine, said it was a first look at what it might be like to work in a stripper-run club. “We were making money together, we had this community of customers and loyal supporters... It was really empowering in that sense,” she said.

But Reagan saw firsthand how a misstep could threaten the movement after the Cyber Clown Girls accepted a sponsorship deal from a clothing company, Dolls Kill, accused of supporting police in the aftermath of the 2020 racial justice protests: After Dolls Kill’s founder, Shoddy Lynn, posted a photo showing officers in front of the store, a wave of people on social media, including singer SZA, led a high-profile backlash. The company said the post had been misinterpreted. Meanwhile, the Cyber Clown Girls had been vocal about donating a portion of proceeds from each show to social justice causes, and the sponsorship seemed like a betrayal of the political stances the group had taken. They hosted a town hall on Zoom open to any strippers or other sex workers who wanted to discuss concerns, and Reagan later issued an apology, but she said “with certain people, we never rubbed that stain away. It created a divide within the community that I still feel the wound from.”

Privileged workers, with more choice about where they work and greater access to resources, have been at the forefront of union politics in recent years, leading the charge in the Starbucks union movement and pushing for unionization in classically white-collar professions like journalism and architecture. But those workers can only organize colleagues their employers have already hired.

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At the Star Garden, questions about privilege and what it means to leverage that are especially potent. The majority of the dancers at the club are white, and three dancers say the Kazaryans have not hired any Black dancers after reopening in 2021.





Bree Holt

Courtesy Bree Holt

Bree Holt, a Black woman from [South Carolina](#), told BuzzFeed News that she tried to audition at the club, but security guards initially turned her away at the door, and a manager refused to let her onstage. Holt, who had been a mentor to Wicked when they both worked in Fayetteville, North Carolina, flew out to [Los Angeles](#) in July looking for work and a change of scenery. Wicked said she had vouched for Holt and the managers had agreed to give her an audition, but they later chastised her for going outside the usual application process after Holt came in. “I’ve been shut down by white clubs before,” Holt said. “[The manager] judged me by looking at me.”

The Star Garden dancers say fighting against discrimination, which is an issue in clubs [across the country](#), would be a priority in contract bargaining. “We want an end to racist hiring practices,” said Velveeta. “They don’t audition Black dancers, so we want to end that.”

But with no Black women hired at the club under current management, some have already raised doubts about the union group’s ability to be inclusive, echoing the experiences of Black dancers at the Lusty Lady. Siobhan Brooks, a Black woman who had been a dancer at the Lusty Lady at one time and is now a sociologist, said in [a 2017 interview](#) that she was proud of pushing back against discrimination in the club but ultimately felt the group had shortchanged Black dancers. “The race issue was kind of a footnote,” she said. “People didn’t really understand the unique issues women of color faced.”

After the Star Garden dancers titled a recent fundraiser “No Justice, No Piece,” one user on Instagram commented, “How can we ever hope to combat colorism and racism in the industry while this is happening.” The slogan — a play on words inspired by a chant originated by protesters against racially motivated killings of Black people — had been used by Lusty Lady dancers during their union campaign but was criticized as inappropriate for a group that does not include Black dancers. They later changed the name, but the incident reflects a larger challenge that the dancers face as they seek to build support across an industry where Black women feature prominently in the pop cultural imagination at high-profile clubs like Atlanta’s Magic City or on shows like *P-Valley* but often face worse conditions.

“Black women built the strip club industry,” Wicked said. “We’re not trying to be white saviors here, we know how it looks: a bunch of entitled white women standing up and saying we deserve to be safe... I cannot speak to the experience of Black dancers in the industry...[but] we want them to know we will not set it aside.”



Workers protest outside the Star Garden in North Hollywood, Los Angeles, on April 1, 2022.
Alyson Aliano for BuzzFeed News

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Top left: Wicked; bottom left: Ava, Riv, Sinder; right: Charm

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When Lilith was hired at the Star Garden in January, she said, one of the managers warned her to “do the opposite of whatever” Wicked said. “He said ‘you know what you’re doing,’ as though she would be sabotaging me,” Lilith said.

It’s common for managers to foster competition, and dressing rooms can be rife with bullying as dancers jockey for preferential treatment, leading many to feel it’s best to stick to themselves — *get your money and go*.

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But Wicked, who had moved to LA from North Carolina with a newly minted psychology degree just before the pandemic, was tired of being so isolated in her new city. She had lost more than 30 pounds from the stress, and as the so-ncer working at the club when she was hired after the lockdown, she saw a chance to do things differently. “Most of the time when you’re rolling up [to a new club], you’re v

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in your own space,” she said. Instead, she made a promise. “Every girl that comes in is my girl, I promised them I would protect them. Any time, anything you need, come find me.”

Lilith said Wicked was true to her word, and so she disregarded the manager’s warning, embracing the community that had begun to bloom in the dressing room and later in group chats on Instagram and Slack. The experienced dancers were generous with advice and helped the many “baby strippers” whom Wicked said the Kazaryans seemed to prefer hiring navigate customer interactions. The strippers collaborated, selling dances together, encouraging customers to tip others, and stepping in to protect one another if a customer got out of line.

With their bonds forged, the firings of Reagan and Selena galvanized the group. By St. Patrick’s Day, a plan to confront management was in place, and the dancers hustled among the holiday crowd as they worked to gather last-minute signatures on their petition.

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From left: Kitty, Riv, Reagan, Charli, Sinder, and Ava

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At the end of the night, still a few signatures short, Velveeta told the group she thought they should postpone. “It was all extremely scary going into this because we knew that we were at risk of being fired and we all cared about our jobs enough to do this,” Velveeta said. But Lilith, who said being part of a strike was a life goal, wasn’t ready to give up. In the wee morning hours, she made her case in the group chat, saying she was worried about losing momentum: “Backing down at the last minute might read as a sign of weakness or losing our nerve.”

The next day, eight dancers gathered anxiously in the dressing room and confronted manager Yevgenya Kazaryan, who said that “any girl that doesn’t feel safe can go home no problem,” Velveeta recalled. They walked out feeling victorious — believing they would return to work to discuss the issues — and gathered in the parking lot across the street, where Reagan told [Fox 11 News](#) that “it’s a very desperate, desperate culture right now in the strip clubs.”

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When they arrived the next day, though, security wouldn’t let them past the velvet rope. Over the following weeks, the picket line became a party livestreamed on Instagram, with themed costume nights, karaoke to the tune of Aretha Franklin’s “Respect,” and quesadillas cooked up along the curb as the women lobbied customers to skip the club and join their protest instead. The vibe is undeniably fun, but of course, these are professional performers of fun, and they’re here for business.

“What we do is going to set the pace for the next 30 years in our industry,” Wicked said. “Big change comes really slowly. But the current is finally going our way.” ●



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