

## NEWS

## Why These North Hollywood Dancers Are Trying To Form The Only Union For Strippers In The US

Phoenix Tso

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Dancers on strike outside of Star Garden topless bar in North Hollywood.

(Phoenix Tso / LAist)

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working conditions.



3:58

**Hear what lead Star Garden dancers to attempt to unionize.**

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They pick a different theme for each picket. In late May, it's the French Revolution. Most of the strippers and supporters there are dressed as peasants.

One dancer, Reagan, is dressed as Marie Antoinette. "You know: 'Oh, the peasants, they want safety. Let them eat cake.'"

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All of the dancers interviewed for this story go by their stage names for safety reasons.

It all started in late February, when Reagan says she was fired from Star Garden after going to management with safety concerns. A week later, she said another stripper was fired for intervening when a customer filmed a colleague without her consent.

And then, a week after that, Reagan says Star Garden announced that strippers were not allowed to go to security directly for help. They had to notify a manager, even

though there isn't always one on site.

Another dancer, Velveeta, says this rule puts strippers at risk. "If you have a developing situation with a customer, there's no time to leave the customer...then the customer might melt into the crowd."

She says it's important that strippers have control over their own safety. "In that moment, we need to be able to make that call."

Star Garden and its attorney have not responded to our requests for comment.

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## A Petition Calling For Safety Protections

In early March, a week after the new rule came down, 15 Star Garden strippers delivered a petition demanding safety protections. They say that, in response, management told them that they had to have private, individual meetings with one of the owners before returning to work.

Reagan calls the requirement a "union-busting tactic meant to destabilize our unity and cohesion" and contend that it is essentially a lockout.

They began picketing that night and have been holding regular pickets ever since. Recently, they voted to unionize with the help of Strippers United. The nonprofit was started by Antonia Crane to address workplace issues in the industry.

Crane and other dancers formed the first strippers union in the U.S. — in the late '90s — at the now closed Lusty Lady in San Francisco. She describes what the Star Garden dancers are doing as “incredibly inspiring.”



Pickers support the strippers on a night in May.  
(Phoenix Tso / LAist)



(Phoenix Tso / LAist)

“I hope that strippers everywhere, come to the picket line, and take their place at the table....we are a powerful organizing force, and we do care for one another and we're not disposable.”



The dancers are also fighting for changes including better wages. They say management was taking half of their lap dance tips.

## Power In Numbers

Jordan Palmer, a volunteer lawyer with Strippers United, says unionizing gives workers more power.

"When one person files a lawsuit, it's a lot easier to retaliate and pick people off when they're acting as individuals," Palmer said. "But when everyone is acting in concert, when you're engaging in collective action together, it's a lot harder for the employer to do that."

The strippers want Star Garden to voluntarily recognize their union. The dancers are applying pressure, not only with the pickets, but also by filing complaints with agencies including the National Labor Relations Board and Cal OSHA.

**I'm hoping they get everything that they're fighting for. Sex work is work. They should have the rights that everyone has.**

— Juan, supporter

If Star Garden does not agree to recognize their union, there's also the option of filing for an election with the NLRB.

On the night of the French Revolution picket, cars slow down as they pass the protest, some honk. One supporter, who gave only his first name, Juan, has set up a grill and is making crepes and chilaquiles for the picketers.

"I'm hoping they get everything that they're fighting for," he said. "Sex work is work. They should have the rights that everyone has."

The picketing dancers have been urging Star Garden customers to stop going to the club.

Another customer, who also gave just his first name, Steve, is one of them. He says after Reagan was fired he vowed to never return. "Then I was messaged about this protest and was happy to join."

Reagan says the show of support has been "amazing," but picketing for so long is taking a toll. Still, she says she's not giving up.

"We're going to be in full force to get this done and to get our demands met."

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