

‘TWERKING-CLASS HEROES’: LA STRIPPERS ARE FIGHTING FOR A UNION

Dancers at the Star Garden Topless Dive Bar in North Hollywood turned a lockout by management into a picket and unionization drive that could bring long-needed changes to strip clubs around the country.

BY **MAXIMILLIAN ALVAREZ** MAY 17, 2022

TRNN Editor-in-Chief Maximillian Alvarez speaks with Reagan, a dancer who was unjustly fired from the Star Garden Topless Dive Bar in North Hollywood, California, and is fighting with her coworkers to unionize with Strippers United. Screenshot/TRNN.

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On March 18, dancers working at the Star Garden Topless Dive Bar in North Hollywood, California, presented a petition to the owners of the club “demanding an end to retaliatory firings and bad club policies that put their safety at risk.” The next day, dancers were locked out of their jobs and told they could only meet with management individually, not as a group. In response, the workers have turned the lockout into a picket and a unionization drive that could have major implications for workers in strip clubs around the country. TRNN Editor-in-Chief Maximillian Alvarez speaks with Reagan, one of the dancers at Star Garden who was unjustly fired and who is fighting alongside her coworkers to unionize with Strippers United.

Pre-Production/Studio: Maximillian Alvarez

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TRANSCRIPT

Maximillian Alvarez: Welcome, everyone, to The Real News Network. My name is Maxmillian Alvarez, I’m the editor-in-chief here at The Real News, and it’s so great to have you all with us. Since March 18, current and former dancers at the Star Garden Topless Dive Bar in North Hollywood, California, have been locked out of their jobs by management. And they’ve turned that lockout into a strike, picketing and twerking and informing passersby about the abuses they face on the job and their need to have their union formally recognized.

A petition open to the public that was created by the dancers describes the situation this way, “On Friday, March 18, 2022 dancers working in the North Hollywood strip club, Star Garden, presented to the owners, a petition signed by 15 out of the 23 coworkers demanding an end to retaliatory firings and bad club policies that put their safety at risk.” Included in that petition are the following sentences, “At the club, we navigate a room which is regularly full of belligerently drunk men who push our boundaries and often scare us. Our employers should not prioritize customers’ desire for entertainment over our health and safety. When customers become drunk, we expect the bar to cut them off, as is required by law. When customers film us performing without our consent, we need the club to demand that they stop.”

The petition continues, “The club owner, Yevgenya ‘Jenny’ Kararyan, who was sick at home, told the dancers over the phone that if they didn’t feel safe to work that night, they could go home, “no problem.” She said she’d give them notice when she’d be back at the club, and at that time they’d have their meeting. When the dancers returned to work the next night, they weren’t allowed to enter and were told to schedule one-on-one meetings with Jenny. Since then, the locked out dancers have remained unified in their request to meet with Jenny as a group, and have been picketing in front of the club, fighting for their jobs and their right to a safe workplace.”

Now, reporting on the strike for *The Nation* and explaining how the fight at Star Garden fits into the larger picture of the long running struggles that dancers face, author, scholar, and co-founder the labor organization Strippers United Antonia Crane writes, “For 25 years, I’ve wondered how many assaults, rapes, and shootings it will take for strippers to be afforded even the basic protections a union can provide. In the case of the Star Garden strippers in North Hollywood, the last straw was a bevy of threats to their collective safety. For far too long, strip clubs have cultivated dangerous, racist, and precarious working conditions. Although strippers are a massive, diverse workforce, we have few protections in an unregulated workplace rife with social stigma. Club owners make money by charging strippers to work while claiming dancers are ‘renting space,’ but strip club owners are not landlords. They are our employers. Dancers do not owe club owners ‘rent’ for dancing on a stage, using the bathroom, or dancing for clients.

“Club owners have gone to ridiculous lengths to avoid classifying their workers as employees. Coercing strippers to sign bizarre contracts, arbitration agreements, and NDAs before their shifts requiring strippers to hand over all money earned for the first 10 dances, stealing half their tips and calling it a chair fee, a dance tip out, or even ‘making wages.’ The methods they use to extort strippers are as inventive as they are illegal, but it has gone on for so long that it’s been normalized.” To talk about all of this and more, I’m honored to be joined today by Reagan, one of the dancers at Star Garden who was unjustly fired and whose reinstatement is included in the list of demands from the strikers. Reagan, thank you so much for joining me today.

Reagan: Thank you for having me. I’m honored to be here.

Maximillian Alvarez: Well, we’re honored to have you, and we’re really glad that we were able to make this happen. Because as you know, here at The Real News, we do our best to cover important workers’ struggles around the country and beyond, and this is one of them. As the quote that I read mentioned, we should say from up top that we know that there is a heavy stigma with workers who are in this industry, and that becomes a justification for the exploitation that you all face, for the dangerous conditions that you work under, and for people not caring about it.

And we want to, and we all need to, I think, push against that. So I wanted to ask viewers and listeners from the top, please listen to this, and please try to set your preconceptions aside, and let’s talk about this like adults. So Reagan, before we start talking about the lockout and the strike and how things have been going for you all over the past... Was that two months almost? I was wondering if you could tell us a little bit more about your own path into dancing at this club. And for folks who have either never been in a club or who have never been in there as a worker, but only as a client, I was wondering if you could kind of help paint a picture for us about what the day to day looks like for you as a worker in this kind of club.

Reagan: Yeah. Thank you for the opportunity to address that. I personally found my way to dancing right after I graduated undergrad. And for me, it made a lot of sense. I studied women, gender, and sexuality studies in my courses, with a concentration on performance studies. And so going into this, albeit fringe, but still a creative, artistic, performative avenue just made a lot of sense to me. And I really enjoyed it, and I actually still do. I really love dancing.

And I do want to acknowledge that in this industry, there is, first of all, a really diverse workforce of dancers, entertainers in this industry. And we all have different backgrounds. We have different stories and we come to the work for different reasons. And I do feel that I have privilege in the sense that I came to this industry not out of desperation. So I can’t speak for every dancer, because my situation is different. Everyone’s situation is different. So I just want to, first of all, acknowledge that not all of us come to this work voluntarily, but there is a big difference between even the ones who come to it out of desperation, but come to it voluntarily versus sex trafficking, that is a separate issue. And so I am speaking on behalf... Not for other dancers, but from my own story, I speak from the position of a dancer who has come to this industry and really enjoyed it, and come to it out of my own volition, and happily.

Even though, of course, like any job, there are always issues and we have complaints. And in this industry, the issues and complaints might be a little bit different than what some people deal with day-to-day at their jobs. But that being said, I really feel like now is the time to acknowledge that this is work, and this is a job, and it is legal work. And that’s not to say that illegal work is illegitimate either, but just putting it out there that stripping is a perfectly legal job, and the fact that we have been left out of a lot of conversations about workplace safety and basic worker rights, I think now is a great time for that to end.

Maximillian Alvarez: Hell, yeah. No, I think you’re absolutely right. Like you said, and it’s not to say that folks who make their living through trades that have been made illegal aren’t in some way doing work, and that their issues are there, [they’re not] illegitimate, but we’ve got to take this conversation in steps. And I think what you said is really important, just like, we’re not even there, right? We’re doing what is, by the law of the land, an accepted form of work. It just isn’t accepted in the cultural sense.

Legally, it might be. But culturally, you see the power of that stigma and how that translates to people, whether that be customers treating dancers like shit, whether that be club owners doing the same. That really does show, I think, a common theme that we have looked at in a number of other workers struggles. The ways that bosses and clients and customers treat workers with disrespect and even circumvent the law to do so. But I think when we’re talking about dancers, there’s this sort of... I don’t know. There’s this group consensus that we’re all just going to refuse to acknowledge

dancers as workers for no other basis than just, I don’t know, bullshit puritanical squeamishness. Pardon my French. But anyway, I didn’t mean to interrupt. So I was wondering if you could say a bit more about what it was like when you got to working at Star Garden. What does that job entail? What are the skills involved that folks don’t necessarily see or think about? How does the pay work? Whatever you’re comfortable talking about.

Reagan: Yeah. So Star Garden, it falls under the category of a dive bar. It’s a smaller kind of establishment, as opposed to some people might have heard of the big chains like Spearmint Rhino and Dejavu. Those are the sort of corporations of strip clubs that are big chains across the country. But this one, it’s a smaller club, and it changed ownership during COVID. So I actually used to work at Star Garden years ago under the previous business ownership.

I like to tell this story because I think it’s funny. But the first time that I was fired from this club was because I was complaining about unfair labor practices even then, although I didn’t really have a name for it. I was just really upset at something that I found really unfair. And it was because the club was taking so much money from the dancers. And it gets murky, because I have to go into some California laws that came onto the scene in 2018 and were enforced in 2019. There was a law that reclassified dancers in California as employees, full stop. So there was a lot of misclassification happening for decades where we were misclassified as independent contractors. But in 2018, it was codified into law that we fall under this workforce umbrella of gig workers that used to be passed off as independent contractors, but we are actually, under the law, employees. But every club had a different loophole for how to get around paying us our wages.

And some of them, like Antonia mentions in her article, they’re as inventive as they are illegal. And they were so outrageous. And so the previous ownership of Star Garden charged... This was supposed to be the end of dancers having to pay a house fee to be able to work, and it was supposed to be the beginning of dancers getting paid a wage for coming to work. But this club instead charged the dancers double, just doubled the house fee, doubled all of the late fees. So the later you came into work, you would have to pay a bigger fee. And then also took more of our lap dance money. So instead of a quarter of it, now they’re taking half. And then they had the nerve to make us sign our name next to a statement that said, “I am being paid an hourly wage in cash for this many hours,” and then you’d have to sign your name. And it just drove me crazy, because I was just like, not only are you taking more of our money illegally, but you’re making us sign our name next to a statement saying that you’re not? How cruel.

So, I was overheard belligerently complaining about that. And then I was fired from Star Garden the first time. And I did not tell this story when I re-auditioned and came back to work at Star Garden the second time. But when they changed ownership – I have a big soft spot for this club. And when I first walked into that club years ago, I noticed that it had this kind of faded glamor aesthetic. It reminded me of like a David Lynch movie. I loved all the dancers, and they were so nice.

There was just a great vibe there. And I like the bars and the clubs that are a little bit divey. That’s just my style. So I wanted to come back and I wanted to see how it was post pandemic and everything. So I came back, and I loved the dancers that were working there even more. Even within a few short months, I felt so close to those dancers, and it felt like... This is the interesting part because the new owners were trying to be very careful, it seemed.

This is an observation, but it seemed that they were trying to be very careful to hire brand new dancers. We lovingly refer to them in the industry as baby strippers. So she was hiring all these baby strippers that had little to no experience. And there were a couple of us that were more experienced in the industry, and it seemed that they were hiring these baby strippers because they figured that they would be easier to control, easier to manipulate in various ways. But I think the turning point in the story is that they got a lot more than they bargained for, because I don't think that things went according to plan whatsoever.

Those of us who had this sort of attitude, it's a post pandemic world, and strippers have learned a lot in that period. I learned the power that I hold. When the pandemic shut everything down, I was one of the organizers of an online virtual platform that was ongoing throughout the pandemic giving work to dancers. And we didn't have to pay anybody for that. So feeling self-sufficient and feeling powerful and feeling empowered with each other as a collective was something that we all had learned.

And so coming back to the club was like, we can rebuild this. We have more power than we thought we did. And so with these baby strippers coming in, we took them under our wing. And at that point, organizing wasn't even on the radar. And I say that in surprise, because, I don't even know why it didn't occur to me from the beginning. But to me it was just like, let's make the workplace what we want. Let's help each other, and let's encourage each other. Just really basic, simple stuff. But going against the trope of the catty stripper that is competitive and just wants to put others down. We cultivated a culture in that dressing room specifically that was warm and inviting and helpful. And inviting the baby strippers to join our dances with our regulars like, oh, let's see if my regular wants to do a double dance. I'll show you how it's done. Just very helpful and accommodating and maternal.

And so then when all these red flags started happening, started popping up in the club, and we really had some serious concerns for our safety, then it was like, the ball just got rolling so fast because we had already set up this little greenhouse of fast-growing comradery. And then it was like a no brainer. It was like, Oh we can do this. We actually already have the loyalty and the trust and the bond that we all thought was impossible in a work environment like this. And so we really wanted to make changes. And things started happening at a crazy pace, and I was fired, and then another dancer was fired. And then this new rule, what was imposed, made everyone feel really unsafe. And those three things are how I see the catalyst developing. And then that week it was like, all right, we're handing in this petition, and this is happening. So it was really exciting.

Maximillian Alvarez: Yeah, I'm just kind of floored hearing that for a number of reasons. And you and I were joking about this before we started the recording. It feels like a lot of those old paradigms that were held true when we started working have broken apart. And I don't know how much of that is a generational thing. Not like we're old, but I mean we got these gen Zers coming into the ranks, and they're not taking anyone's shit, as folks who watched our interview with the Starbucks workers can attest to.

So that's a component of it. But the pandemic, like you said, was a huge, I think, catalyst for a lot of workers in different workplaces to realize this can't keep going on. Whether that's because you're in manufacturing, or shipping in logistics, and the pandemic meant that you were basically doing twice as much work in the same amount of time because everyone

was ordering shit from home. So you were pushed into forced overtime, you got hero pay from your company for like two months, and then they ripped that shit away from you.

And then you realize, oh, if we were all banded together maybe we could do something about this again. I’m just saying that it feels like a lot of those paradigms have broken. And what that looks like is those beautiful moments that you were describing in the dressing room where you have a diverse workforce, people who have come to work there for different reasons, looking out for each other, you don’t forget that. I still remember when the veteran workers at restaurants I worked at or warehouses I worked at just showed me a little bit of kindness and made me feel like I wasn’t totally and [imperial] alone.

That really means a whole hell of a lot to you. And so I think it’s a really beautiful thing to behold. And you see what that can turn into, and how quickly it can turn into a full fledged campaign that could revolutionize the industry. Not to be hyperbolic, but like you said, these problems are longstanding, and you all are taking a stand against them. And so before we zero in on those issues that you brought to management, I just wanted to follow up on one thing that you said.

I remember when I spoke to author and dancer Reese Piper for my show *Working People* a few years back, she kind of described this. She described how owners pit dancers against each other, and how even the structure of the job makes you feel competitive, because you’re competing for clients, you get certain hours of the day on stage, but there’s also the... I guess I just wanted to ask if you could explain a little more for viewers and listeners the whackadoo bullshit of you basically paying to work, and renting space, and how tips work? Could you just say a little more about that before we move on to the petition?

Reagan: Yeah, yeah. It’s so hard to track because every club does it a little differently. And the main theme that stays the same is, how much money can we squeeze out of every dancer? And so that seems to be the sort of through line. They call it different things, and there’s different fees for different things. A lot of the corporate clubs have a whole long list of fees for different things. I worked at one club, because I’ve worked at quite a few clubs across the country, so I have a little bit, at least, of a sampling of different places and different kinds of club structures.

But one club had multiple different fees for different infractions, like infractions that you’re wearing the wrong kind of outfit, or infractions for you taking too many smoke breaks, or you missed your stage time. You didn’t hear your name called and you missed your stage time. All these weird... I can’t even remember them anymore. And I didn’t stay there for long because there’s no way I was going to put up with any of that. But I remember reading this list, or maybe someone was telling me, and I was like, what is this? Oh my gosh. It’s like we’re children or something, being reprimanded for the most bizarre things. But in general –

Maximillian Alvarez: You’re breathing too much air.

Reagan: Yeah. I mean, it was very, very bizarre, and it felt very nickel and dimey. Like, oh, my God. Can we live? Let us work. But yeah, most clubs have some kind of a stage fee. That is pretty typical, although not all. It really depends on the club. So Star Garden, they actually don’t impose a stage fee, but they take other money. So you are paying them, but they

take 50% of your lap dance money. In California or Los Angeles specifically, I just feel like the landscape of strip clubs is so bleak right now. Everything sucks.

And I’m an optimistic person at heart, but it sucks, and it’s really, really hard. And you have to basically find the club that you can tolerate. Where are they on your scale of what you can tolerate? And so for this, I actually thought that we were getting a pretty good deal at first, because half of your lap dance money, okay. So they’re not taking our stage money. But then what they would do – And this was one of the things that, I think, organized us before we even knew what organizing really was or what it looked like. But there were so many things that felt so unfair.

So we’re in this system where we can keep all of our stage money, but then if the management sees you making a lot of money on stage, they cut you off. They say, you’re not allowed to go up on stage until you sell some more dances. And that just felt so slimy. Just like, oh, you’re not making enough money off my back at the moment? You have to interrupt my working flow and tell me what I can and cannot do, and take me out of the rotation? Or they would just stop the rotation and be like, no one can dance on stage until they sell some more lap dances. Which is hilarious and idiotic because the whole point of dancing on stage is to advertise yourself to the customers.

So they’re all waiting for someone to go up on stage and entertain them so that they can pick what dancer they want to dance for them. And we have to go around and be like, yeah, well, we can’t dance on stage at the moment, but maybe we can after you buy a lap dance, because we have to fill the pockets of our boss real quick before we can get back to our work. But let me know... And it was so infuriating. And that was just one of the things that it’s like, if strippers were in control, we know how to do this, we are experts at this job, basically.

We know what’s best for us, so we know how to make the flow of an evening work, and to make the workflow of a club. Keeping the customers entertained, keeping the dancers safe. It should be what the club is built on, is the entertainment and the safety. Work intermingled and working together. But instead, it just became really clear really fast that the customer is always right is their philosophy, and the dancers are just completely disposable. And that was something that we were not going to put up with.

Maximillian Alvarez: That all was crystallized in the safety issues that you brought to management. If I recall correctly – And please correct me if I don’t – The complaint that you raised that got you fired was people were videotaping you with their phones without your consent. Is that right? And management didn’t do shit about it.

Reagan: That was actually Selena, who was the other dancer who was fired. And yeah, she was fired for intervening when a customer was filming another dancer on stage. And the security wasn’t doing anything, and the customers were belligerent. And she was intervening herself on behalf of this other dancer. And then she was fired for basically not going to the management first, because their policy is you can’t do anything without management’s permission.

This was another issue with the security guards, that they told us that we weren’t allowed to go to the security guards for help. We had to go to the management first, get their permission, or rather get them to get the security involved. We couldn’t advocate for ourselves or for our own safety. We would have to get management as a middle man, and they would

then deem worthy our request or not. So does this really merit an intervention or is she being dramatic? Or whatever they were assuming about us.

Maximillian Alvarez: And so to put that in context, if you have – As we read at the top, this is one of the things noted in the petition that you all submitted – If you have a client who’s had too much to drink, hasn’t been cut off, is being belligerent, if you are the one closest to that belligerent client, these rules mean that you cannot go to a security person, a bouncer, and ask for help. You have to walk over to management, to the manager’s office and say, hey, this drunk asshole is being a drunk asshole. Can I do something about it? Do I have that right?

Reagan: Yeah, yeah, yeah, exactly. And something that is important to us dancers as well that might not be obvious is that our job is to placate. Our job is to soothe, to be entertaining, and to be agreeable. Our job is very multifaceted in terms of giving someone an experience and getting paid for it. And so if the onus is on us to walk away from the sale, basically, because in a certain respect we are salespeople at that moment. If the only recourse we have is to walk away, which is what the boss would tell us to do. Smile and walk away and go get one of the bosses and the managers.

And it was like, okay, but then we’re losing the sale. We’re losing the tip that we could have otherwise gotten. The alternative, all that we were asking for is an intervention by the security to keep people in line. And that is not asking too much. I’ve worked at many clubs where this is the norm. It’s just a matter of being aware of a situation, seeing things escalate, and then the security guy walks over, and all he has to do is say something like, hey man, take it easy. Or, is there a problem over here? Or, sir, can you please mind your manners. Or whatever it is. It can be something so innocuous.

And then the customer gets reigned in, and that allows us to fill that role that we’re being paid for. Like, oh, sorry about that. Yeah, we have some rules here, but I know you didn’t mean it. There’s a way for us to keep that customer happy and feeling good and spending, and then everyone is happy and everyone gets what they want. And the customer gets the experience that they want, which is the manager’s prime concern, apparently. And the strippers get what we want because we retain a customer, the customer is happy, and the security has done their job.

That is clear to me that that is how an interaction like that should go. Instead of having things escalate to situations like a customer is getting a lap dance from a dancer and he’s so drunk and unattended to that he feels that he can pick up a dancer in the middle of the dance, pick her up off the floor, but then he’s so drunk that he falls, drops her on the floor and falls on top of her.

And so now there’s people falling on the floor, and the security is not doing anything. And it’s like, at what point is this extremely dangerous? Because it just keeps escalating more and more and more with boundaries being crossed and crazy physical things happening. And there’s no one reprimanding anybody. And all we’re told is, smile and walk away, and then go get a manager. And it’s like, that’s not useful.

Maximillian Alvarez: Well, I just really, really appreciate you breaking down the nuance of that situation. And I didn’t mean to imply that you’re solely in a helpless position. I think that’s really useful context for everyone, present company included, to remember about the labor side of this. You’re trying to make those tips. You’re trying to keep those clients. As

long as everyone’s playing within the well set boundaries of this world, go for it. It’s great. We can make money. People can get the experience that they’re paying for. No one’s put in any jeopardy. Great.

But I think, yeah, as you described, the way that management was sort of removing those safeguards that dancers rely on, the more it was putting the onus on you to essentially have to decide between your safety and your paycheck. And that’s not a choice that you should be put in. And as you described, it’s ultimately something that’s easily avoidable a lot of the time. And so I think yeah, I would be too. I’m just thinking about all the tip jobs that I’ve had before and all the little, bullshit requirements that could have been put in my way to prevent me from getting those tips.

But I wanted to then ask, okay, I don’t want to keep you too long. Clearly I could talk to you for days about this, but I don’t want to keep you too long. I know you’ve got a lot going on. So workers went to management with these issues. Management said, oh, we’ll talk about it tomorrow. And then they locked you all out. And so, I guess, could you pick it up there and paint us a picture. What happened, and what has been happening since then until now?

Reagan: So the dancers that were still employed delivered this petition, and the bosses weren’t there. So they called Jenny on the phone, and she was sick at home. She sort of sounded concerned, is what I heard from Velveeta, who was the one who called. She said that she sounded really concerned, and said, well, if anyone feels unsafe, then of course they can leave, and they can come back to work no problem. So that was the understanding of why the dancers felt that they were empowered to walk out.

So they staged a walkout, all the dancers that were working that shift, it was a Friday night, they all walked out. It was really wild and we were very hopeful. We were like, okay, so now they can see that we’re serious, and now we’re going to have this conversation. Of course, that’s not what happened. They showed up the next day, and they were informed that they weren’t allowed to work until they had a one-on-one meeting with Jenny, and then they could discuss their employment there.

That wasn’t going to work for this group of really powerful, badass dancers, because we had already decided that we’re in this together. And she made the announcement about the new... It wasn’t a new rule, but really clarifying the rule. In the dressing room, she had made that announcement a week prior in the dressing room to all of the dancers. you’re not allowed to go to the security, you have to come to me. And if I’m not there, they have to call me on the phone. You’re not allowed to go to the security for anything. It was a week after that when all of this went down.

So at that point, we decided that we were going to do a lockout picket. And then everything just started. And that first week, I think, we were picketing every single day. And it was just crazy. It was wild, and we were learning as we went what this was and how we were doing it. We’re so lucky to have Jordan Palmer, who is our amazing lawyer, and a great resource that we got from Strippers United. And I’m just like, God, I just love her so much. And she’s been instrumental in all of this. And it’s just like our hot, super smart lawyer that we have in our back pocket at all times.

And she’s just on top of everything. I just love it. So she was helping us make sure that our picket was lawful, the cops out there have been really supportive of us, which was a little shocking, but they have been really supportive. And even when

the boss will call the cops on us a lot, so we actually have the cops called on us from the club, and then the cops come by because they have to, and they’re like, yeah, we have a lot of better things to be doing with our time, but we’re just checking up on you. How’s it going?

It’s been a very, very interesting picket line, that’s for sure. I think that we have really shown other labor organizations that have been supporting us and coming out and everything, we’ve shown them a totally new picketing style. And also, because we didn’t have an idea, at least I didn’t come to this situation having really any idea about labor movements beyond what I had learned about in school or something. It hadn’t applied to me so personally before. And so we have karaoke on the picket line. We have really fun chants that everyone really gets into, because they are a little spicier because they’re for strippers and stuff.

And we have themes on the picket line. So every night on the picket line is a different theme, and that’s exciting for the dancers and keeps our energy up. And because it is a grueling process picketing a club, because the hours are so late and everything. So it is exhausting. But it also keeps the customers engaged. We announce on our Instagram what the theme is going to be, and then people can come and dress up. And it’s really fun. It’s like a party. And we try to tread that line because we don’t want it to be... We’re doing our very best to follow every ordinance and every law.

So it’s not like a block party, we are a picket line. But we have these really fun ways to make it a real experience and make people want to stand up with us and hold our signs and chant with us and support us. And that’s been really cool too. And especially meeting people from other unions and other labor organizations that come and stand with us. And they always have something to say like, man, we need to take classes, take lessons from you all. You’re really doing this in a completely new way and this is really exciting. And they’ve been really, really supportive.

Maximillian Alvarez: Well that really warms my heart to hear, because I think it’s a lesson that all of us should take to heart. It’s no secret that the organized labor movement is in a bad way in this country. We’re at historic lows in terms of union density in this country. Labor law has been stacked in favor of the bosses for decades. For most of our lifetimes, the culture was very anti-union, anti-labor, and that seems to be changing, which is really positive.

But I think we should all be a little bit humble and say, look, clearly there are things that we’ve been doing for these past decades that haven’t been working. Or we need to basically regroup and think of more creative ways to fight the fight. And that’s what you all are doing. That’s what Starbucks workers are doing, and Starbucks is shitting its pants right now because it’s got stores filing petitions left and right and it can’t keep up.

And Amazon is doing everything it can to crush the Amazon Labor Union because it’s terrified of stuff like that happening in Amazon warehouses around the country, just like I’m sure club owners are watching you all and praying that this doesn’t catch fire. But when folks around the country see you all having fun on the picket line, see you all getting creative, see that energy and that camaraderie, that’s all it takes. That spark starts a prairie fire, I believe was the quote that one of the Target workers in Virginia who just filed for union election said. It was a great piece in *The New Republic*.

But anyway, before I wax too philosophic, I just wanted to kind of wrap that into a final question, to ask, where do things stand now? Because like you said, with your badass lawyer’s help, I know that you all have filed unfair labor practice charges. You’re demanding to meet as a group with management. So I guess I wanted to ask where things stand now, what folks watching and listening can do to show solidarity with you all. And if you had any final words on that topic of why it’s so important for people in general to set aside whatever deep set, puritanical misconceptions they may have about dancers, but also why folks who are supporting worker struggles need to support this as well. And maybe any examples that you’ve seen of that that you want to lift up. So yeah, I guess where do things stand now? What can folks do to help? And what does this struggle show us about the importance of dancers, and all manner of workers who have been left out of the labor of conversation being brought in because we are all ultimately stronger together?

Reagan: As far as where things stand now, we’re formally asking the Star Garden management to recognize our union, and that offer is on the table. Not going to hold our breath there, but we are formally asking for voluntary recognition right now. And then of course we have steps planned for if that part fails. But I’m super optimistic about this, and I really feel like it’s going to happen. I feel like we are going to win. I don’t even know what that looks like exactly.

But I do know that we’re going to win because I feel like this whole campaign has just felt so timely, and, I don’t know... Without getting too woo, kind of magical. It just has been touching people in a way that I find so heartening, and I’m inspired by people being inspired by this, and that this is meaningful to so many people. And I really feel like dancers across the board have been fed this narrative and have internalized this narrative for themselves and for each other, for the community, that dancers are crabs in a barrel, and it’s every stripper for herself.

And I think that a lot of that comes from the qualities that this work asks you to have. And there are a lot of strippers with a kind of a cowboy persona mentality. And I get that. It’s the freedom to go from club to club. And it’s like a solo. It feels like it can be solo work. And I can definitely see that. I can see that persona in the clubs and dancers identifying with that. But then I also see the camaraderie and the sort of chosen family aspect of what a dressing room can look like. And that’s not reflected everywhere yet, because I feel like this narrative is so persistent.

This narrative has existed for a long time, and there’s a lot of complacency in the industry that this is how it is, it’s not going to change, and so don’t waste your breath and don’t waste your energy. And it’s packaged in this new way, of protect your energy and don’t rock the boat because you’re just going to hurt yourself. And it’s like, okay, but when is enough enough? When is that narrative hurting you more than trying to change things hurts you?

So I feel like I’m in a privileged enough position where I can put my life aside and be an organizer, and organize this club and make an example. Not by myself, of course. I have an amazing, amazing team of incredible organizers, incredible, incredible dancers. And making this example, like you said, a spark can start a prairie fire. I really feel like all we need is an example that it’s possible, that that narrative, that story doesn’t have to be true. It’s only true because we all believe it.

But if you stop believing in that story that says you’re replaceable, don’t rock the boat because a younger, hotter version of you is going to walk through that door right after they kick your ass out. That is the prevalent mindset. That is so harmful

and idiotic and wrong, if you decide that it is. All anybody has to do – This is my personal opinion – But all any of us have to do is decide not to believe that story anymore, and change. Change the narrative. And so that’s what we’re trying to do.

We’re trying to write a new script for the strip club industry so that strippers can stand together, that it doesn’t have to be this crabs in a barrel mentality and every stripper for herself. And nothing’s going to change, and don’t waste your time. And we’re trying to say, no, it can change. And it can look like a fun party on the picket line, and people will stand with you. And people driving by all night long will honk in solidarity. And you can actually feel like your community gives a fuck. Sorry for my language.

But you can feel your community kind of holding you up for the first time. And you’re like, man, I’m kind of proud to be a stripper right now. This is kind of cool. And it can change everything. I really believe that. But I’m a very optimistic soul, and an idealist. But I really feel like we’re onto something. I keep bringing this up, and so I’ll do it again. But a couple of months ago, John Oliver did a piece on sex work. That was a week before we delivered that petition, is when I saw that episode, or it was something like that.

It was very recently that I had seen that piece that he did. And I was so moved by it. And it really felt like a sign to me. It was like, okay, if sex work can be talked about with the kind of nuance that this story is using on such a mainstream platform and reaching so many people, then this is our moment. And that’s how I walked into it. I think this is our moment because I think people’s minds are cracked open a tiny, tiny bit more today than they were. And if we can sneak in there and convince them that strippers are people who deserve basic safety and rights, and workers in this society that deserve the same basic things, then I think we’re going to win.

Maximillian Alvarez: Hell yeah. Well that was beautifully put. And that is Reagan, one of the dancers, former dancers at the Star Garden Topless Dive Bar in North Hollywood, California, where current and former dancers have been picketing since March 18. Please don’t forget about them. We will provide links in the show notes where you can be following their picket and Strippers United. And Reagan, are there any other places that you’d want to point folks to who are watching or listening to this?

Reagan: Yeah, I think you said you might put it in the notes, but most of our updates and really timely information and fun recaps and calls to action, all that stuff can be found on our Instagram. So that’s @stripperstrikenoho. And noho stands for North Hollywood, it’s an abbreviation of the neighborhood that we’re in. So @stripperstrikenoho.

Maximillian Alvarez: Hell yeah. Well Reagan, thank you so much for chatting with me today. I really, really appreciate it. And yeah, we’re going to have to have you back on in the near future. But until then, stay strong, solidarity forever. For everyone watching, this is Maxmillian Alvarez for The Real News Network. Before you go, please head on over to the [realnews.com/support](https://therealnews.com/support), become a monthly sustainer of our work so we can keep bringing you important coverage and conversations just like this. Thank you so much for watching.

