



Hollywood Strippers Expect to Join Actors Union

By Sascha Cohen



Source: Actors Equity

The pole dancers at North Hollywood's Star Garden Topless Dive Bar are tenacious. For over six months, they've been picketing outside of the club every week, after two were allegedly fired in retaliation for complaining about unsafe conditions. Starting without the infrastructure that traditional labor unions can provide, like strike funds to sustain them and labor lawyers to represent them, the strippers have used their media smarts to crowdfund and cultivate supportive press coverage. They maintain a popular Instagram account, collaborate with Los Angeles comedians and podcasters, and count Amazon Labor Union



elaborate tableaux on the Lankershim Boulevard picket line, with cosplay themes like “Moulin Rouge,” “Medieval Times,” and “Hoedown Show Down.” It makes perfect sense, then, that they’ve decided to join the Actors’ Equity Association (AEA), a union representing mostly stage actors and stage managers. Their election, which organizers expect to win, is set to take place within the next month, and will make Star Garden the only unionized strip club in America.

Like actors, strippers trade in fantasy and illusion. Like many workers throughout the gig economy, they contend with bosses who commit wage theft through a system of misclassification, in which employees are treated as independent contractors. At the same time, strippers face the added injury of being expected to endure routine sexual harassment as if it’s part of their job description. At Star Garden, dancers say this harassment has ranged from non-consensual filming to physical assault – and that security guards and management have failed to intervene. In March of this year, they finally had enough.

First, a group of dancers presented their bosses with a list of safety demands and a request that the women who were fired, Selena and Reagan, be reinstated. After the owners ignored this – and locked out those who spoke up – the strippers connected with lawyers and filed a Cal/OSHA complaint detailing over thirty labor violations. In August, they filed a petition with the National Labor Relations Board to officially join AEA.

One dancer, Velveeta, says a union could improve the conditions at Star Garden by implementing effective safety measures, addressing the problem of bouncers “willfully neglecting” abusive behavior, and ending the “customer is always right” mentality that governs the club. Once unionized, the strippers hope to negotiate for a number of changes. They’d like to address various health hazards, alleging that Star Garden has a rodent and insect problem



Additionally, the strippers want benefits like health insurance and worker's compensation, so that they won't have to decide between losing income and working while sick or injured.

A “David Lynchian” Dive Bar

Reagan calls Star Garden a, “funky, eclectic dive bar, like something out of another time.” It's smaller than a typical gentleman's club, with a “neighborhood-y and friendly” atmosphere that engenders a sense of community. When she first walked into the bar a decade ago, it was love at first sight. “I like to describe it as having a David Lynchian vibe,” she says.

A bar like this stands out in an age of the “Walmartization” of strip clubs, in which a handful of investors own most of the properties. Star Garden is unique, Reagan observes, “in that it's not owned by one of the big, ugly corporations that have taken over the industry and homogenized everything and made it so boring.” The dancers want to reshape it into an environment where they can safely do their jobs. “We actually love this club and we really loved working there,” says Reagan. “We're fighting *for* the club.”

A Changing Labor Movement

Sex workers are not typically understood as laborers in possession of their own political consciousness. “Traditional labor unions, mainstream feminists, and many other progressives have underestimated the organizing power of strippers,” writes Antonia Crane, a veteran stripper and the founder of the nonprofit Strippers United, in *The Nation*. Indeed, the idea that sex workers deserve protections and benefits still prompts a fair amount of incredulity. But attitudes are changing, however slowly, evident by the warm reception dancers have gotten from union members across a variety of industries.



have to prove they belonged in the space, but her experience was “the total opposite” – everyone was welcomed unanimously. “The labor movement has really accepted us,” she says. On the picket line in Noho, local members of IATSE, the Teamsters, UNITE HERE, ILWU, and the CWA Game Workers show their solidarity, making signs and buttons and bringing the strikers food and coffee.

“Theater has always benefited from the stories of sex workers”

Support from others within the entertainment industry is a key aspect of their current fight, and fortunately, AEA leaders and the rank-and-file alike recognize the artistic contributions of the Star Garden strippers. At an August rally, Actors’ Equity President Kate Shindle declared, “they work hard, they are entertainers and artists and athletes, and now they are our siblings in the labor movement.” The crowd chanted, “strippers and actors, shout it from the rafters!”

As Velveeta points out, “actors and sex workers actually share a history — on the stage, many actors, especially female actors, faced the same kind of stigma that sex workers do today.” As far back as the vaudeville era, chorus girls shared a sordid social status with so-called “public women.” It’s possible that the formation of guilds and unions for actors, by highlighting their professional skills, contributed to the trade becoming more respectable over time. Nowadays, theater actors – especially the Equity members who work in Broadway productions – enjoy a legitimacy and respect seldom afforded to erotic entertainers.

Ashley Matthews, an actor and AEA member on the union’s National Council, sees the irony here. She explains, “it’s no secret that theater has always benefitted from the stories of sex workers. From *Les Misérables* to *Miss Saigon* and *Pretty Woman* to *Flashdance* to *Moulin Rouge* and *The Full Monty*, there’s a good



world to represent the lives of these workers. The big difference is that when we do it, we have union protections and prestige.”

A Proud History of Stripper Strikes

The Star Garden dancers aren’t the first strippers to unionize, nor the first to protest mistreatment on the job. Over the past several years, BIPOC dancers in Chicago, Portland, and New York City have gone on strike specifically against racist practices in gentleman’s clubs. Perhaps most famously, strippers at the Lusty Lady, a peep show in a once bohemian San Francisco neighborhood, unionized with SEIU in 1996.

Jennifer Worley, who helped lead that campaign, was excited to learn of the Star Garden dancers “picking up the baton where we left off,” calling them “part of a storied, proud, strong history of women standing up against bullshit.” The decision to unionize the Lusty was similarly a response to racial discrimination and unwanted videotaping, and the dancers eventually bought out the club and turned it into a worker-owned co-op. Although it closed in 2013, Worley views Lusty as a success story. “The dancers made their livings [there] for ten years – that’s hundreds of women raising their kids and going through school and supporting themselves in this cooperative.” Even during a moment when most erotic entertainment was moving online, she says, “unionization and collective organizing allowed us to thrive.”

The Star Garden strippers will need to bring this collectivist spirit to the difficult fight ahead. In some ways, they face typical union-busting tactics that bosses in every industry employ; for example, the club owners have brought on scab labor to replace the organizing dancers, and are trying to arrange for these replacement workers to vote in the upcoming election. In addition, the social stigma unique to erotic labor presents its own challenge – at a D.C. meeting with federal OSHA representatives, Reagan



each other's backs.”

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