

LABOR DISPATCH

Off the Pole, Onto the Picket Line: Why North Hollywood Strippers Are Unionizing

After nine months on strike, California strippers are poised to make Star Garden the country's only unionized strip club

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Donning protest couture, striking entertainers from North Hollywood's Star Garden Topless Dive Bar rally support for their union vote, November 2022.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ACTORS EQUITY

Dancers at North Hollywood's Star Garden Topless Dive Bar performed their final themed demonstration and picket line Nov. 5, 2022, just outside the club where they'd been on strike since March. The night's theme, celebrating the dancers' months on the picket line ending in a Nov. 7 union election, was "graduation." The club's security guards were not amused when they won the "Best Bootlickers" award;

club owners Steve and Jenny Kazaryan, in absentia, won “Least Likely to Succeed (at preventing us from unionizing).”

While election results are pending due to legal challenges from club owners, the dancers are confident that they will win their vote to join Actors’ Equity (a union for live theater performers). Such a victory would make Star Garden the only unionized strip club in the country—the first since The Lusty Lady in San Francisco closed in 2013.

Star Garden dancers first brought a petition to the Kazaryans in March 2021, documenting the club’s failure to respond to alleged sexual assault, nonconsensual filming by patrons and verbal intimidation by staff. Dancers say their petition was ignored. By March 2022, they began holding funny, sexy, theatrical, themed protests outside the club, complete with costumes, props and guests ranging from Amazon Labor Union President Chris Smalls to musician Tom Morello. “We’re professional entertainers,” explains Lilith, one of the dancers. “This encapsulates our take on what a picket line could be.”

Meanwhile, the club’s armed security allegedly “work[ed] proactively to get customers inside the club,” according to a dancer who goes by the name Velveeta. She calls the behavior “really indicative of the misogynistic climate that we have been forced to work under, with management and security who see us as disposable.” Despite these obstacles, says fellow dancer Reagan, by the end of the strike, half of the people on the picket line were customers who had been convinced not to cross.

While striking dancers prevented most customers from crossing the picket line, replacement dancers did make it into the club. In response, strikers shared social media images of “Scabatha”—a strike-breaking cartoon stripper rat. One stripper on Instagram criticized the cartoon, arguing that “someone that is doing survival sex work is not a scab.” But Lilith takes the position that “Scabatha is any of us before we are educated about our rights.” The cartoon’s creator similarly hopes to help “create a world where someone as individualistic and boss-aligned as Scabatha could still find a path to solidarity and community.”

Debates around Scabatha echo larger strategic disagreements within the sex work community, at the heart of which is Assembly Bill 5 (AB5), a new California law that makes it difficult for businesses to skirt labor law by misclassifying employees as “independent contractors.” The law, which was designed with tech-reliant gig-work giants like Uber, Lyft and Doordash in mind, now applies to workers ranging from truckers to hairstylists to strippers.

Some advocacy groups, such as Sex Workers Outreach Project Los Angeles and Artist’s Revolt, advocated against AB5. The latter group, which focuses on mutual aid and harm reduction efforts in marginalized Los Angeles communities, argues that employee status reduces take-home pay and makes stripping less accessible, disproportionately affecting the industry’s Black, brown, disabled, trans and undocumented workers.

According to Onyx Black, a dancer who founded Artist’s Revolt, many strippers specifically depended on the informality and anonymity of their status as independent contractors, especially in the context of widespread discrimination against sex workers. “Now, it’s on the books that you work at Betty’s Boom Boom Room—how are you going to be viable?” Black says. “Most of us live in a judgmental, whore-phobic world.” Further, many of the benefits that come with employee status, such as health insurance and

overtime, are only available to full-time employees, but most exotic dancers do not work 40 hours a week, Black says, because the job is far too taxing.

Velveeta says that after AB5 passed, a number of California clubs, including Star Garden, gave dancers a choice on whether they wanted to continue being classified independent contractors or become employees. Employee status brought some perks, such as an hourly minimum wage, but it also had disadvantages: unlike independent contractors, employees at Star Garden were required to meet a \$200 per shift quota in private dance sales in order to receive a cut of those earnings. According to Black, these quotas and fees made it difficult for dancers to turn down customers they felt unsafe around, or simply didn't want physical contact with: in a September testimony before the California Advisory Committee to the U. S. Commission on Civil Rights, Black referred to these post-AB5 experiences as being "like having a pimp."

In May 2022, Strippers United president Christianna Clark told Bloomberg News that AB5 had worsened working conditions for California dancers: "You have to work doubly hard, and a lot aren't making quota with the pandemic." Strippers United's website states that though the group once supported AB5, it now has "mixed views" about it due to clubs' exploitative use of quotas as well as the increased discrimination Black, brown and Indigenous dancers have faced in the wake of the law.

While AB5 can give employees legal protections against strip clubs' rampant racial discrimination, Black says the law makes it harder for dancers of color to find work in the first place because clubs prefer to invest in who they see as conventionally "attractive" dancers—young, thin, white, and cis. Reagan and Lilith say Star Garden's owners do not hire Black dancers as employees; NPR also reports that the club turned away Black applicants. "As soon as [AB5] was enacted, [many] strippers lost their jobs," Black says. "The most marginalized people are on the streets. We don't work in the clubs anymore."

Strippers United and Artists Revolt-aligned dancers largely agree that "AB5 was not written with strippers in mind," as Reagan puts it. For Black, this means there needs to be an option for dancers to be independent contractors, which might require exempting dancers from AB5 or increasing independent contractors' ability to collectively bargain. For Reagan, there isn't any going back from AB5: "The way forward is to unionize. It's the only way to make sure we have a seat at the table."

It's clear that club owners are terrified workers might successfully unionize, which requires claiming employee status. Throughout the Star Garden unionization drive, owners insisted their dancers are independent "lessees" who simply lease stage space. In practice, however, dancers say they were treated like employees with regular shift assignments and rules—all without, according to Velveeta and Lilith, any of the protections of employee status, such as paid sick leave or a guaranteed wage.

As of Nov. 7, 2022, Star Garden owners had challenged 16 of the dancers' 18 submitted union ballots on the grounds that they simply aren't employees. The dancers believe that the National Labor Relations Board will rule in their favor at a hearing predicted to take place in March.

To any other dancers trying to organize their workplace, Lilith says: "Talk to your fellow stripper, confide in your fellow stripper ... those conversations will breed trust, and can lead to something really powerful."

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