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North Hollywood strippers set to vote on joining a union

By [Natasha Chen](#), CNN

🕒 4 min read · Updated 4:56 PM EDT, Wed October 12, 2022

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Los Angeles (CNN) — Strippers at the Star Garden topless dive bar in North Hollywood will soon receive ballots to hold an election for collective bargaining, which may result in the first stripper union in the US in more than a decade.

On Thursday, the National Labor Relations Board's Los Angeles regional director issued the decision and order for an election in a case that started when 18 dancers were locked out of the club in March.

Among the issues that the strippers say they want addressed are the club's security guards repeatedly failing to protect them from threatening and abusive behavior from patrons.

On Nov. 7, the NLRB will count the votes from Star Garden dancers, entertainers and DJs, determining if they will join the Actors Equity Association, a union of performers and other show business professionals. If they're successful, they would be the first unionized strippers in the United States since the nation's only unionized strip club, the Lusty Lady in San Francisco, which closed in 2013, according to Actors Equity.

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"The NLRB ruling comes as no surprise. The facts are clear: The workers at Star Garden are entitled to a union election," said Andrea Hoeschen, assistant executive director and general counsel for Actors' Equity Association. "We look forward to a successful election and the contract negotiation that will follow."

The owner of Star Garden, Stephan Kazaryan, did not respond to CNN regarding two earlier stories about the unionization effort. But in reaction to the NLRB decision, lawyers representing Kazaryan said "it is not clear that the election is legitimate."

Attorneys Amy Gaylord and John Linker of Akerman LLP said in an email that they continue to stand by the position of their client, which is that no matter the industry, the rules of union representation should be consistent.

"Most of the purportedly eligible voters have never been employees of Star Garden; they were in fact, and in law, merely lessees with no employment relationship," Gaylord and Linker wrote. "We will reserve our full arguments for the appropriate forum, but we remain confident that our client will prevail."



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CNN asked Actor's Equity whether the dancers should be considered employees or lessees, to which Hoeschen replied, "The employer is incorrect. The employer called them lessees in an attempt to misclassify them. It is a more creative approach than calling them independent contractors, but no less evasive and incorrect. The strippers seeking an election are employees."

This election comes as the NLRB reported a 53 percent increase in union representation petitions filed in the 12 months ending Sept. 30, compared to the year before. The agency said this is the highest number of union representation petitions filed since fiscal year 2016.

The NLRB also reported a 19 percent increase in unfair labor practice charges, compared to the same 12 months the previous year.

Dancers at Star Garden told CNN they were inspired by other unionization efforts in other industries, and even attended a labor conference over the summer in Chicago, where they met other organizers.

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Their issues developed in the spring, when a few dancers tried to get a patron to delete a video he took of their colleague on stage, which is against club rules, according to one of the dancers, who goes by the stage name Velveeta.

But one of the workers who complained was fired. Several dancers signed a petition asking for their colleagues to be reinstated, along with enforcement of the no-photography policy. They were locked out of the club the next day.

Since then, the dancers have been picketing most weekends outside the Star Garden, dressed in themed costumes, urging patrons to go to different clubs.

Velveeta asked CNN to identify her only by her professional name, for fear of being blacklisted or stalked.

She told CNN in August that the owners ran the establishment assuming the customer was always right, with one of them frequently dismissing dancers' complaints as merely "starting drama."

Yet she said she had witnessed a dancer being dragged by her shoe across the stage by a customer, another dancer being slapped, and others being inappropriately touched by customers.

In reaction to the NLRB decision to allow a union election, Velveeta said, "This is a big step forward for us in this fight and is giving us renewed energy to keep the pressure on until we get our union contract. I am so proud of the work we've done and what we've accomplished. We are buzzing with excitement and love for one another and we are stronger than ever going into this election."

About 30 strippers are eligible to vote on whether or not to join the union, according to Actors Equity. The 109-

ye **CNN** d union represents 51,000 actors and other professionals working on everything from Broadway shows **Related** to performances at Disney World and scores of theaters across the country.



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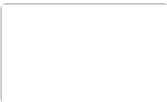
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