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What happened after the nation's only unionized strip club reopened in North Hollywood — 6 months later



By [Emma Alabaster](#) and [Natalie Chudnovsky](#)

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May, one of the strippers who has worked to unionize Star Garden, holds up some swag: a pro-union thong.

(Samanta Helou Hernandez / LAist)

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Strippers Union: Part 1



Part 1: In 2023, North Hollywood's Star Garden reopened as the only unionized strip club in the U.S. LAist Producer Emma Alabaster tells us the behind-the-scenes story of the workplace conditions that pushed the dancers into action. **CONTENT WARNING:** This episode includes sensitive content about sexual assault. For sexual assault and harassment support and resources, call the National Sexual Assault Hotline at 1-800-656-4673, which is a service of RAINN (Rape, Abuse, & Incest National Network). For more, visit <https://LAist.com/ImperfectParadise> Support LAist Today: <https://LAist.com/donate> Grow your business—no matter what stage you're in. Sign up for a one-dollar-per-month trial period at SHOPIFY.COM/paradise Support for this podcast is made possible by Gordon and Dona Crawford, who believe that quality journalism makes Los Angeles a better place to live.

In May 2023, the strippers of Star Garden Topless Dive Bar in North Hollywood won a 15-month campaign to unionize, making national headlines and becoming the second ever union strip club in U.S. history.

This week, LAist Studios debuts Imperfect Paradise: Strippers Union, a four-part series which takes listeners behind the scenes of the club's tight-knit community, to examine the workplace conditions that led them to organize, how their campaign sparked conversations around race, class and privilege in sex work, and the limits and challenges of unionization.

Don't miss Episode 1, listen below or wherever you get your podcasts.

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Strippers Union: Part 1

46:35

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It was history in the making Thursday night as Star Garden reopened as the only currently unionized strip club in the U.S. — and the second ever in the country. (The very first, the now defunct Lusty Lady in San Francisco, unionized in 1996.)

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It was part union rally, part sidewalk party, part reopening celebration at Star Garden Topless Dive Bar in North Hollywood. Customers were lined up outside waiting for its doors to open at 8 p.m. A group from the United Farm Workers chanted, “Si, se puede!” Tom Morello of Rage Against the Machine played union songs on acoustic guitar to the sidewalk scene.

Among the crowd, in bikinis, corsets and crop tops, were some of the strippers who used to dance inside this bar. After almost a year and a half of being on strike, much of it on this same sidewalk, these dancers were finally going back inside.

“I’ve been on strike 17 months and now I’m going back in. It’s very surreal,” said one Star Garden stripper, whose stage name is Wicked. (For safety reasons, we are using stage names for all the strippers in this story.)

Five dancers — Charlie, May, Wicked, Sinder and Velveeta — gather outside the Star Garden strip club on opening night to celebrate their successful unionizing efforts.

(Samanta Helou Hernandez / LAist)

Even though the dancers and their supporters are celebrating, their work isn't over.

The club was reopening under an interim contract, but negotiations for the more permanent contract are still underway. Dancers say they want more say over scheduling, protection against retaliatory firings, as well as security protocols to protect dancers from aggressive customers and anti-discrimination provisions in hiring.

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“Bargaining’s not over. Nothing is done yet,” Wicked said. “So it’s a little uncomfortable to be going in under less than ideal circumstances. But my friends have reminded me that you have to take your little victories where you find them. We fought for it, we worked for it, we bled for it, we cried for it. We made history.”

An Nguyen Ruda, Star Garden management’s chief labor negotiator, said club management was “happy to have its customers there to support it and its employees.”

“We continue to negotiate in good faith with the Union as we continue to rebuild business,” Ruda said in a written statement. “We look forward to a continued and successful weekend reopening, and to continued productive discussions with the Union.”

A tense opening night

Inside the club on reopening night, the tensions between management and the dancers were palpable. The bar previously did not have a cover charge but was charging \$40 per person on opening night, about four times more than other strip clubs in the area. The drink prices were also significantly increased. And the lap dance booth was not open since workers and management have not come to a financial agreement yet on that aspect of the workplace.

On this opening night, patrons wait to get in and celebrate the unionization.
(Samanta Helou Hernandez / LAist)

In another surprising move, the club was also going cashless, unusual for a strip club where customers normally tip dancers by throwing money onstage.

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A dancer named Reagan came prepared with her own stack of singles and walked around the club breaking up larger bills for customers. There was no DJ, so the dancers played their own songs.

Also present in the crowd was Kate Shindle, president of Actors' Equity, the union representing the Star Garden strippers. She reflected on what she called the "unpleasant surprises" of the night.

"It seems to me consistently baffling that management does not see a path for everyone to come out of this a hero and for everyone to make a lot of money," said Shindle.

Ruda, Star Garden management's representative, said the cover charge and cashless systems were "a business decision which is lawful and not retaliatory."

Wicked said she hopes management will find value in the club's new era.

"We want to prove to them how things are different now in a great way," she said. "Being a union club makes us notorious. It makes us really something special. Something people will come from other places to go to."

Shindle said she was proud of the Star Garden dancers' ability to carry on.

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“They’ve hung in there for so long and have been so tough and supportive of each other. It’s consistently felt like their solidarity is the thing that’s kept this together,” she said. “We got this part done. Now we still have some serious ground to cover.”

At one point, while onstage, dancer Reagan led the customers in a chant that they previously used on the picket line:

“Whose club?”

“Our club!”



Sinder, one of the strippers at Star Garden, who worked to unionize the club.

(Samanta Helou Hernandez / LAist)



Charlie and Wicked pose together on the reopening night of Star Garden after unionization.

(Samanta Helou Hernandez / LAist)

The backstory

The Star Garden strippers' fight for a union started in 2022 when they had various workplace health and safety concerns, including unsanitary bathrooms, broken equipment and assault from customers. The dancers were also unhappy with the cut management was taking of their tips. The dancers delivered a [petition](#) to management demanding better working conditions. The club owners responded by locking the dancers out.

This set off eight months of the strippers picketing outside the club with the support of an advocacy organization called Strippers United.

A turning point in the battle came in August 2022, when Actors' Equity, a union that represents over 51,000 live theater performers and stage managers, announced that they would be representing the Star Garden strippers.

The dancers went on to cast their ballots to vote for union representation.

The union vote was challenged by Star Garden management, so the National Labor Relations Board set a hearing on the matter. In the meantime, the club declared bankruptcy and closed for several months.

But right before the NLRB hearing date, Star Garden dancers told us, management reached out and decided to close the bankruptcy case, sit down with the dancers to negotiate and recognize them as unionized employees.

Which brings us to this week.

What now?

(Samanta Helou Hernandez / LAist)

The strippers we spoke with on the scene are hopeful that things can become less tense.

“Hopefully we can prove to [the management] that there's a future where employees and employers can all have equitable contracts and systems. And everyone makes the money that they deserve,” said a dancer who goes by the stage name Charlie.

In this so-called “hot labor summer,” the Star Garden dancers have also brought their pole out to dance on the WGA and SAG picket lines in support of those ongoing strikes.

And they're supporting another unionization effort by dancers at Magic Tavern strip club in Portland, Oregon. The Magic Tavern dancers have been on strike since April. In June they announced they, too, will be joining Actors' Equity.

“Once we have it set up, others will follow,” Wicked said. “It will be something that people can take up and be like, this is solid. This can be implemented. There is a pathway.”

Her dream? That other clubs will follow Star Garden's lead, leading to “more union strip clubs where strippers are safe and well paid.”

What's happened since reopening over six months ago?

Since Star Garden reopened in August 2023, tensions have persisted between dancers and management as they've continued to negotiate their first union contract – a process that often takes more than a year.

In the meantime, dancers told us they felt management was taking steps to weaken their position at the bargaining table, inhibiting customers with the high cover charge cost and by not providing cash change.

Recently, Star Garden has reinstalled an ATM, lowered its cover charge from \$40 to \$25 and hired an human resources consultant.

The dancers also said they felt the club's management was trying to undermine them by writing up dancers for various HR infractions they felt were unfair.

Dancers sent us copies of written warnings they've received from HR, which included write-ups for “simulating a sexual act.”

“We're not allowed to touch ourselves on stage. Lots of girls have gotten written up for that,” said Star Garden dancer Wicked (stage name). “And I'm like, do you not understand what this performance art is?”

Star Garden management declined our request for an interview, but in an email, their attorneys wrote that the rules are there for “general safety” and that the club's goal is to get the business to “cost neutral, rather than unprofitable as it has been since reopening.”

In the months after reopening, Actors Equity union filed several Unfair Labor Practice charges (ULPs) with the National Labor Relations Board, alleging that the club was bargaining in bad faith, had gotten in the way of strippers' earning tips, that management was taking undue disciplinary actions toward the dancers, and had refused club entry or charged higher fees to some union supporters.

In December 2023, the strippers went on a weekend long picket to draw attention to the charges.

In a news release sent to LAist, the club's attorney alleged that it was the dancers who were disrupting business and making it unprofitable and that "Star Garden denies engaging in any unfair labor practice."

The NLRB has yet to rule on the charges. Since the strike, dancers and management have resumed bargaining over the union contract.

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