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Strippers in North Hollywood Are Twerking for Their Rights

Three unfair labor practice charges have been filed against Star Garden.

Nessa Moreno | April 15, 2022



Dancers protest unfair labor practices outside of the Star Garden strip club. (Image: Brendan Lott | Knock LA)

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The [Great Resignation](#) is in full swing. Workers across the country are walking out, going on [strike](#), and [unionizing](#) their jobs they find less than satisfactory. Strippers, no exception to this movement, are now coming together to paint a clearer picture of labor abuses in strip clubs. On Friday March 18, dancers walked out on their job at Star Garden, a strip club in North Hollywood, launching Stripper Strike NoHo.

Star Garden promises strippers no tip out, a common standard in strip club practice, where tips are pooled and split between staff. This entices people into work, but management also expects half of the dancers' earnings. Not meeting a \$200 minimum tip total for each shift is considered grounds for immediate termination.

"I've seen girls get fired for literally no reason, mainly girls feeling unsafe, which is the common dialogue at this club. Girls have been getting fired for standing up for their safety," said Charlie,* one of the strippers holding down on the picket line at Star Garden Club.

"We can't report directly to security, [and] a lot of issues we face are immediate, like physical harm," said Sofia. "My impression is that [management] have always placed profit over our safety. They act as though if we don't make the quota then [we can be] fired at any moment."

Knock LA reached out to Star Garden owners and management Akop Gasparyan, Stepan "Steve" Kazaryan, and Yevgenya "Jenny" Kararyan, but they declined our request for comment.

There have been multiple incidents of management disregarding dancers' safety. Several dancers informed Knock LA that they have been instructed by management to not interfere when dancers need help. Problematic customers cannot be removed without the management's permission.

Dancers delivered a petition demanding that management:

- *Immediately reinstate fired dancers.*



- Affirm that we will not be fired for standing up for ourselves in dangerous situations with customers, when we call on security to protect us, and when raising issues to the attention of management.
- Implement a strict policy that no customers can film or photograph dances in the club.
- Implement a strict policy that no customers can remain in the club after closing unless they are actively getting a lap dance.
- Stop overserving customers.
- Issue us copies of our signed contracts and an employee handbook listing all of Star Garden's work rules and policies, including policies towards customers.
- Give security authorization to respond to our calls immediately without going to management first.

Dancers face lockout from the club, a clear retaliation from management for speaking out about safety concerns. It's also a violation of the [National Labor Relations Act](#) (NLRA), which supports unionizing and engaging in collective concerted activities for protection. "Not only can you, but you have that right, and when you're retaliated against for exercising that right, that's against the law," said Jordan Palmer, a staff attorney for Unite Here Local 11. Palmer serves as the pro bono legal department head for Strippers United.

Three ULP ("unfair labor practice") charges have been filed against Star Garden as a result of their NLRA violations with Region 31 of the National Labor Relations Board.

"They told us we can only come back to work if we have one-on-one meetings with them," said Charm, who was a dancer at Star Garden before the lockout. "We want[ed] to be spoken to as a group when the management came to us with the new safety protocols we disagreed with — that's how all clubs that operate in LA work. They charge people more to work for their minimum wage."

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California Assembly Bill 5 (AB5) affects independent contractors

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throughout California, radically changing worker classification and classifying millions as employees. While this status change successfully reclassified strippers as employees as opposed to independent contractors, the measure has major shortcomings. It does a huge disservice by providing no explicit protections for strippers. Businesses are expected to follow AB5, but spotty regulation allows clubs to find loopholes.

Reagan, who was a dancer at Star Garden off and on for years, organized Stripper Strike NoHo. “This is one of the clubs that use a loophole to [get around] AB5 legislation; they’re not classifying us as employees. There is no protection for strippers under the AB5 law, which is upsetting... [so] our safety has been bulldozed. We come to these drastic measures because we have no other recourse.”

More than half of the dancers Knock LA spoke with at the picket line were not under contract, which is a violation of AB5. “I think these guys can’t breathe without violating some kind of ordinance or labor law, state or federal,” said Palmer. “But in terms of the payment scheme, there’s no loophole in California. It’s very clear under AB5 that dancers are employees by law, so there’s nothing you can write in your contract that is going to supersede what the law says about somebody’s classification... Regardless of whether or not it’s lawful to take a 50% cut of every lap dance, which I firmly believe it is not... there is no question that dancers need to be getting paid \$15 an hour for every hour worked.”

When asked if any documents the dancers have signed could be referenced for this piece, Palmer’s response was shocking: “No, because the club has also unlawfully denied dancers copies of their signed contracts. There’s another wage-an-hour law in California that says that, if an employee asks for basically anything that they’ve signed or any pay stub on file, these employers are obligated to furnish it. Dancers have asked for their contracts, and were denied copies.”

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A protester holds a sign outside of the Star Garden strip club. (Image: Brendan Lott | Knock LA)

“You have to be sophisticated to get it right so you’re not violating any laws; you’re trying to fit in that loophole. [Star Garden] isn’t doing it right, and on top of that, they aren’t paying the dancers an hourly wage, which is a really clear violation of the law,” said Palmer.

There’s also a clear racial aspect to Star Garden’s hiring practices. Palmer continued, “We know that there’s race discrimination here because we can look at the numbers. You can just look at the dancers that dance at this club and see that there’s not a single Black dancer there, and we know that Black dancers have auditioned and been denied work.” Discrimination in hiring is infamously difficult to prove since employers can easily control the narrative about their hiring and there’s a lack of communication between rejected applicants. “When people apply for a job and they don’t get it, they’re not organized. It’s not like you know every other Black dancer who applied for a job at that same place and didn’t get it.”

As the strike intensified, word spread among the larger stripper community. Palmer’s optimism is infectious: “It’s catching fire among other dancers... Dancers in other clubs have been reaching out to them... sharing their horror stories, and cheering these dancers on. ... I hope that this will just keep happening, and maybe this will create an opportunity for some of

the dancers who have been discriminated against to come together and
their rights.”

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h lays their philosophy out simply: “Dancers’ safety is our bottom
o matter what your views are on sex work, you can get behind safety
ippers in their workplace.”

**Dancers at the picket line use stage names for their anonymity.*

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