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These Strippers Are Protesting For Safer Work Conditions In Hollywood. Instagram “Mistakenly Removed” Their Account.

Strippers United had planned protests over unsafe working conditions and the firing of two dancers.



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Strippers and supporters outside Star Garden.

Brad Goldman, courtesy of Reagan

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Reagan was working as a dancer at a Los Angeles strip club called Star Garden before she got into an argument with the club's bartender who joked about a customer wanting to kill her. "He looked me square in the eyes," she told BuzzFeed News about the bartender, "and said, 'This customer is going to kill you.'" When she tried to return to work at the club a few days later, she wasn't allowed in. She had been fired.

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The incident was among a handful of complaints that propelled 19 of the club's 24 dancers to sign a petition demanding fundamental changes at the club, according to Velveeta, a dancer at Star Garden who's worked in the industry for 12 years. Velveeta, who uses a pseudonym while she's organizing to protect herself from retaliation, said that in the last month, two dancers have been fired after raising safety concerns, prompting a walkout and protests, which started on March 18. The group is demanding the reinstatement of the two dancers, changes to security protocols in the bar, and clear documentation of the bar's policies for both workers and dancers. They have also filed four charges alleging unfair labor practices with the National Labor Relations Board.

To publicize their efforts, they took to Instagram with the help of Strippers United, or @soldiers_of_pole_, which boasts more than 27,000 followers and advocates for the labor rights of strippers. But just before the protest at Star Garden, the group's president, who asked to use the stage name Selena (unrelated to the dancer who was fired), discovered the @soldiers_of_pole_ account had been taken down.

"We lost the microphone to our audience," Selena said. "It's incredibly precarious, trying to support this community, but essentially facing the wrath of the internet for talking about sex or talking about sex work as a labor issue."

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A spokesperson for Meta said the account had been “mistakenly removed” and was restored shortly after BuzzFeed News contacted the company asking about the closure. But Selena said that the account had been shuttered for nearly a week, damaging their organizing efforts and making it difficult to build support and distribute strike funds to impacted workers.

While strip club dancers around the country are typically classified as independent contractors, a 2018 California Supreme Court ruling and the passage of bill AB5 in 2019 meant that dancers in the state should be classified as employees, which would give them the right to unionize.

Both dancers who were fired from Star Garden had apparently been dismissed after raising safety issues with management, according to Velveeta, Reagan, and the group’s petition. Reagan was told that she would not be allowed to work because she had argued with staff at the bar. The second dancer, Selena, was fired after intervening when a customer was filming another dancer without their consent.

After the incident with the filming customer, Velveeta said that one of the managers told the dancers they were not allowed to ask a security guard to intervene in an issue with a customer but instead had to first ask a manager, who would decide whether to call a security guard. Velveeta said she had never faced similar rules.

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“We’re the ones being transgressed, we’re the ones being assaulted in the club, we’re the ones being sexually harassed and assaulted. We get to make the say, we’re not going to willingly disempower ourselves,” Velveeta said. “We just felt like we were vulnerable. Very viscerally vulnerable. It’s completely intolerable and we said we can’t work until you change this policy.”

In their petition, the dancers are demanding that management affirm that they can speak up about dangerous situations with customers without fearing they’ll be fired, enforce rules against filming and photographing dancers, require customers to leave the club after it closes rather than allowing them to linger, cut off drunk customers at the bar, and enable the dancers to ask security for help directly rather than going through a manager.

While management has not yet responded to the group’s petition, they have reached out to dancers to speak one on one, Velveeta said. But members have been declining those calls until they have a response to their demands as a group.

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Star Garden management did not respond to a request for comment.



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Sex workers have struggled to retain accounts on Instagram for years. The issue gained widespread attention after the passage of law FOSTA-SESTA in 2018, which led to the shut down of various personals sites and the removal of other sex-related content online. Sex workers face account closures and algorithmic suppression of their content (sometimes called shadowbanning) across social media — but Instagram is a particularly important promotional tool, and the company’s irregular enforcement of the rules has led to claims of discrimination against sex workers. A Meta spokesperson told BuzzFeed News in 2019 that the company does not target adult performers and would never disable an account simply because it was run by an adult performer.

Despite the obstacles, Wicked, another dancer at the club, said the group is determined to fight for their rights at work.

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“Exotic dancers deserve safety in the workplace just as much as any other service industry worker,” she said. “That’s what we’re fighting for. We’re asking for safety, we’re asking to be cared for. We bring in your customers. We’re your product. So you need to be on our side.”

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michaelavolio

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Thanks for writing this and spreading the word about this important issue. It's appalling they need to ask for basic safety at work. Very powerful ending, pointing out the obvious, which the Star Garden management apparently doesn't grasp - that you can't run a strip club without strippers.... [Read more](#)

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