

It Looks Like a Strippers' Union Is About to Become a Reality

INTERVIEW WITH

VELVEETA

Dancers at the Star Garden Topless Dive Bar in Los Angeles have recently received positive signs from the National Labor Relations Board, which bodes well for their contested union drive. If all goes as expected, they will be the only unionized strippers in the country.

INTERVIEW BY

LIBBY RAINEY

In March of 2022, a group of strippers walked off the job in Los Angeles, drawing national attention in their bid to become the country's only unionized strip club.

Now the striking dancers of Star Garden Topless Dive Bar in North Hollywood may finally be close to winning their union.

In December, the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) said in a complaint that the dancers had been unlawfully fired and locked out for raising safety concerns. Next month, the NLRB is expected to seek the dancers' reinstatement in a hearing. This all bodes well for the dancers' union election, which was held in the fall but stalled after the strip club owners contested most of their ballots, claiming that the dancers aren't employees.

If they win, Star Garden dancers will join the union Actors' Equity, and become the first strip club to unionize since dancers at the now-closed Lusty Lady unionized in San Francisco in 1997.

Velveeta, one of the Star Garden dancers and a leader in the union drive, told *Jacobin* that she's confident they'll win their election and return to the club as union dancers.

LIBBY RAINEY The NLRB issued a complaint saying that Star Garden had violated labor law by firing and locking out its dancers, including yourself. How does it feel?

VELVEETA It's really exciting to get some movement on the legal front with these things, because we've had confidence all along that this would be the outcome. But as you're waiting, there's always a little bit of anxiety, and obviously we've been out of work, so getting this news is just a big weight off.

LIBBY RAINEY When did you start dancing at Star Garden, and what was it like working there?

VELVEETA Star Garden was the first club I ever worked at. That was 2017 to 2018. And I was fired for bringing up a labor issue, actually, because the club was misclassifying us. So I was fired, but then I sued and received a settlement. But when I did that, the conditions of the club and the policies did not change. So I learned firsthand that legal processes can only go so far, especially when you're an individual. And so to come back this year and be able to fight back as a group has just been a completely transformative experience for me — to experience that solidarity and to see actual change start to happen.

When the charges are resolved and we're back at work and negotiating a union contract, that's going to be huge not just for Star Garden but also for the industry, because it's the first opportunity in almost thirty years for dancers to have a say in the workplace.

LIBBY RAINEY When did you realize that you needed a union at your workplace? When did you become a union activist?

VELVEETA I became involved in union activism shortly after I was fired. I went to a show that [Star Garden dancer and union leader] Reagan was performing in that was a fundraiser for Strippers United, which was founded by Antonia Crane, who was a Lusty Lady union member. I learned about unions through that organization and began doing organizing work.

LIBBY RAINEY So then you were back at work, talking to your coworkers about why you should unionize. What were you saying to other dancers before the walkout and before the strike?

VELVEETA Initially we organized around safety, and it was just a really pressing issue. Reagan had just been fired. So a union wasn't really the end goal at that time. It was more immediate that we organized around the safety issues. And we were going to try to have that be the first step toward gaining greater rights and more privileges at work. That was really the first step.

And there was a lot of excitement around it in the group because we had been talking to Jordan Palmer, [a lawyer] with Strippers United, and she had a lot of information for us about how the law could protect us as we started on this path. And so it was like, not only is there a problem and a vision that we have to solve it, but that vision is also backed up by a legal strategy that would ultimately protect us. And now that is finally coming to fruition with the NLRB.

LIBBY RAINEY You were on the picket line every week for months, and your pickets really became known for their elaborate themes and fun costumes. What did you learn from your time on strike?

VELVEETA The picket line probably didn't need to go on as long as it did, because as an organizing strategy to pressure the owners, we weren't achieving our goals by picketing other than to basically hurt them. But the picket line really became more about bringing attention to what we were doing through the media and creating interest and spectacle. And also just building our community. Having that time with our allies and our supporters every week became really meaningful and important.

It was so cool. It was almost like a café society of sorts, where people would come and meet other like-minded people. There were conversations about labor and organizing and politics and all of that. It became a really vibrant community and a vibrant place of its own. It continued to drive the point home that a strip club is not primarily a bar. It's primarily a meeting place, and the dancers are at the heart of that. We weren't able to get them to bring us back into work because of the picket line, but we accomplished so much more beyond that and through it. It's incredibly validating and meaningful to have created a space that people want to be a part of.

LIBBY RAINEY What can the labor movement learn from you and the other Star Garden dancers?

VELVEETA Marginalized workers have a lot at stake, and that leads to some really innovative, creative, resourceful solutions to problems, because there's not as much support at hand. So like for us, early on, we had to be creative in creating an environment on the picket line that would draw people in. We had to use the skills that we had gained on the job as entertainers and hosts to bring people out. With some other fights, people are more comfortable with the work and it's sometimes more self-explanatory to bring people out onto the picket line. It's important to really have an ear out for what solutions marginalized workers are coming up with and then also to support them.

LIBBY RAINEY As you continue to wait for the results of your union election, what's your focus at this point in this struggle?

VELVEETA We've had this parallel thing going on this whole time, which is the Stripper Co-Op. The shows we've been having that have been fundraisers for the strike have also been stripper co-op shows, where we're experimenting with a cooperative business model by running these shows together and building an organization to ultimately own and operate a worker-owned strip club. It's going to supplement and really be a vital part of organizing in general, like for union campaigns, because if organizers are fired or different dancers are fired, they can work at the co-op.

LIBBY RAINEY Once you win your union, you'll be the only current strippers' union in the country. What do you want to win in your first union contract?

VELVEETA We want to address our safety concerns. Also high on our priority list is fixing the racist discrimination in hiring and treatment at work. We also want to put in protections for gender diversity and disability. And protections for immigrants. There are a lot of undocumented workers within the sex industry, and unions can protect undocumented workers.

We want to get paid a fair wage, get a fair cut of lap dances. Right now, the club takes 50 percent of our lap dance earnings. So there's a lot of improvement to be had there. Beyond that, just cause firing is something that we expect to have in our contract so that we don't have to worry about being fired arbitrarily. That's just a starter list.

CONTRIBUTORS

Velveeta is a dancer at Star Garden Topless Dive Bar in Los Angeles, California.

Libby Rainey is a writer and producer. She formerly worked at More Perfect Union and Democracy Now!

FILED UNDER

United States

Work / Unions

Sex Work / Union Organizing / Strikes