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Partying on the Picket Line with the Strippers Making Labor History

By Katie Way

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The labor movement's hottest club is the stretch of sidewalk in front of Star Garden Topless Dive Bar in North Hollywood, Los Angeles. For the past six months, a core group of strippers have organized themed picket lines on weekends in order to spread the word about dirty labor practices. On Wednesday, news broke that they filed a petition for a union recognition election with the National Labor Review Board. If they win, Star Garden's workers will be card-carrying members of the Actor's Equity Association, becoming the third strip club workforce in the U.S. to successfully unionize... ever.



“We reached out to Actors Equity a few months ago, and from day one, they were wonderful in every way,” said Lilith, who serves as the press coordinator for Star Garden's core group of organizers. “They completely understood the similarities between their workers that they already cover and our workplace struggles, and also the differences, so we thought it was a perfect fit.”

VIDEOS BY VICE



KEY ORGANIZER LILITH.

Those common struggles: racism, sexual harassment, compensation issues, the need to protect workers from being filmed without their knowledge and consent, and the safety concerns that come from working with your body. But strippers have unique struggles, too, like pay-to-dance agreements that make a serious dent in how much dancers earn, or arcane independent contractor systems that vary on a venue-by-venue basis and can allow clubs to duck responsibility for providing their workers with benefits and protections that come with employee status. And, to state the obvious, they also have to deal with the lingering stigma of sex work.

Star Garden's dancers wield the skills they used roll out onstage—the ability to dress up, mesmerize, and put on a fucking *show*—in weekly picket lines outside their former venue, where they put on performances with themes like “Twerking Class Heroes” and “French Revolution” and invite supporters to the party in a demonstration of exuberant, sexy solidarity. On Friday, they strapped on heels, slipped into body stockings and celebrated the union election on their horizon with a rally and a picket couture fashion show.

VICE talked to Lilith and Charm about what it's like to devote almost half a year to workplace organizing, how they've been received by the wider labor movement, and how much hard work it takes to make looking good and having fun seem easy.



DANCER WALKING THE CATWALK.

VICE: First of all, congratulations on the upcoming union election! It's been so cool to keep up with your campaign, especially all of the great stuff you all post on Instagram. Did any of you have prior experience organizing?

Lilith: Star Garden was my first club, and by the time we actually walked out, I was stripping for like, three months at most. So it was very new to me. But I've had years and years of pent-up frustration with the service industry specifically, and all of the workplaces that I've been a part of where managers exploit their workers.

It's been really beautiful to watch everyone really step into their roles as organizers. We've all had to step up as leaders and as the voices of this massive industry.

Charm: Something that was really helpful was during the pandemic, a lot of us were out of work. Because of that, we were really involved in these virtual strip shows that we were putting on, and we set a precedent of performing mutual aid for one another and also getting really into these themes and producing and putting on an event or, and a show, and that's really translated in putting on a picket.

What's it been like on the picket line?

Charm: As strippers, we have that thing where we can make something that's actually hard work look really fun and effortless and inviting. That's been a huge help to us. Don't

get me wrong, we do have a lot of fun on the picket line. But I think some people see our videos and photos and stories of us out there with these crazy costumes, singing and dancing, and think that we're just partying in front of the club all night. And I'm like, "Yes, *exactly*. It takes a lot of work for you to see it that way." It's like stripping—it is fun, but it's not easy.



LOOKS WENT HARD.



Lilith: And that fun is so necessary, because the kind of conversations that happen on the picket line can be so grueling. You encounter the most apathetic people, where you can literally describe ways that you're sexually assaulted in a club, and they will say to your face, "I don't care. I want to go inside and drink a beer." So if we didn't kind of balance it out that way, I think we would be burnt out so fast.

God, yeah, fuck that. Has that been the most common response?

Lilith: No—in the first few months, at least, when people weren't aware of what we were doing, we turned away so many people. As the months go on, people know not to come, so it's dead the majority of the time, and the people that are coming are aware of what we're doing and just don't care and will go inside anyway. As far as the whole history of our pickets, we've turned away, probably like 80 percent of the customers who've tried, so it's been extremely successful.

Charm: And their block of high-value customers, we've turned away from the beginning.

Lilith: And they stand with us on the picket line! The support goes beyond just like, not seeing tits that night. They will stand with us on the picket line for multiple nights.

That's awesome. How has the broader labor movement reacted to your campaign?

Lilith: I think the moment where I realized how supportive the labor movement movement is of our campaign is when four of us went to the Labor Notes conference in Chicago. I was not prepared for the level of like, support and love that we received. We literally could not walk anywhere without being recognized and stopped and encouraged. And Chris [Smalls, founder of the Amazon Labor Union] has definitely helped us shine a light in the LA labor community, and we've seen a lot of people reaching out and supporting here. It's been very heartening to see. The labor movement is just so down with sex work being organized.

CHRIS SMALLS JOINED THE CAUSE.

Charm, you mentioned that some of you have another project going on right now: a stripper co-op. Could you tell me a little about that?

Charm: Yeah! So the stripper co-op has put on four shows so far. It's a pop-up show. Something that we saw when we were doing like the first couple virtual shows during the pandemic is that a lot of customers aren't really satisfied with that old exploitative model, particularly younger people.

One of the big things is that we're able to cast whoever we want. Star Garden was a very specific type of femme-bodied, light skinned, young, thin stripper. We're able to have

people of all different races, ages, sizes,

genders, and everybody dances and can do whatever they want, and not have to subscribe to a cookie-cutter stage routine. All of the tips and profits get pooled and split evenly among the workers, the dancers, who are also running the show. We have merch, we do set-up and break-down organizing.

We've sold out every show, and this is just at venues where we're really only able to dance, we're not even really able to have nudity. If we were able to secure a venue where we could have nudity, and we could have actual lap dances, I think these places would be extremely profitable and extremely attractive, not just to the customers, but to dancers too. I really think it's the future of the strip club industry.

A DANCER WITH THEIR WALKER.

If you all win the election and Star Garden becomes a unionized strip club, that will be the second successful strip club union drive... ever. Why do you think unionization is so rare in your industry?

Charm: It's really easy to just be like, "Oh, well, that's what happens in stripping. There's a lot of turnover, people fall off. And if you can't go by the rules, then you just go to another club." You can do that forever, basically. At Star Garden, we had all these safety issues, but like there's always someplace that's worse. There's always somebody who will want you to do more work for less money, or more degrading work. But I, for one, I'm really happy that we made the decision to organize, because that's the only way to stop people from being in a position where they're like, "OK, well, I'll just go to the least horrible thing I can find." We shouldn't have to choose between evils.

Lilith: Yeah, one of the main effects I've seen in the online stripping community is that it's made explicit that these working conditions aren't necessary. Our main goal is to have Strippers United as an organization be a resource for dancers who decide that unionizing their strip club is what is best for them, and to have a home in Actor's Equity for people who do decide to take that path.

Charm: I think it's really important that we make the distinction that what we're doing to unionize Star Garden is just what *we're* doing to unionize *our* club. There is some misunderstanding out there that we're like, "Now everybody unionize, you must!" We're not. You can do whatever you want. All I'm saying is, this has been an extremely fulfilling experience for me. I would hope that more strippers would have the opportunity to feel so

close to their workforce, to feel so supported by their workforce, and to end up in a position where they make more money because their workforce supports them.

Lilith: And I think just this concept of union strip clubs popping up wherever they decide to could possibly raise the standard of how strip club owners treat their workers widespread in the industry, just in order to compete with the union strip clubs, where I'm sure dancers will eventually be pooling too. So even if our goal isn't to, like, make stripping as an industry completely unionized, I do think that it'll have lasting effects at other clubs.

Charm: I think other clubs must be terrified of being in the position Star Garden is right now.

Lilith: Exactly. We want to instill a little healthy fear in strip club owners that your illegal business practices are being noticed and at any moment, the law can come knocking on your door.

PICKETING THE STAR GARDEN.

Totally. And how are you both feeling ahead of the election?

Charm: I'm very excited, and very anxious to see what happens. The people whose opinions I respect want us to win, and there's gonna be a lot of pressure. Our management at Star Garden has spent a lot of time being really resolute, but now they're finally up against a force that is more powerful than them. We've been so lucky to work with Strippers United, but they are tireless volunteers who are busting their backs. Now, we've got even more lawyers who are being paid to do exactly this. I don't think they can't hold out forever.

Like I said earlier, I think there were a lot of elements of divine timing as far as the inception of this movement. We've had a lot of grace on our side. And I think that the universe wants us to win.

KEY ORGANIZER CHARM.

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