



-44%

-41%



LABOR STRIKES UNIONS

Strippers Seize the Moment, Turning a Lockout Into a Picket Line

How many assaults, rapes, and shootings will it take for these performers to be afforded even the basic protections a union could provide?

[Antonia Crane](#)

MAY 5, 2022



The Star Garden picket line. (Photo by Juliana Parr)

LOS ANGELES, CALIF.—On a rainy night in March, a picket line of cat ears, purple wigs, and neon-yellow ski masks paraded in front of Star Garden, a dinky topless dive bar in North Hollywood. A masked protester broke into a chicken dance under the cheap red club lights. Another held a bright sign reading “We Feel Unsafe” in loopy letters. Drivers honked as they rolled by, sending cheers through the crowd. As magical as the night seemed, there’s nothing whimsical about what the Star Garden Strippers were protesting: sexual harassment and unsafe working conditions.

In late April, the Star Garden strippers voted to unionize with Strippers United, a labor organization I founded in 2018. They will become a new union created entirely for and by strippers, which will operate independently from the traditional trade union bureaucracy. On May 3, the Star Garden strippers asked their employer to resolve their ongoing labor dispute through a card check agreement, which states that Star Garden will bring the dancers back to work with appropriate safety measures and voluntarily recognize Strippers United as their union.

The last time strippers decided to unionize was in 1996, in San Francisco. As a live nude dancer there, I voted alongside my colleagues at the Lusty Lady Peepshow to become the Exotic Dancer's Alliance (SEIU Local 790). We secured a contract that included regular pay raises, antidiscrimination and grievance policies, and removal of the one-way glass that violated our security and our privacy. Our Lusty Lady triumph replenished the bleak American labor landscape, where union membership had waned. The *San Francisco Chronicle* shouted, "The sex industry is ripe for labor organizing." I assumed that, like myself, strippers in other clubs would believe that unionization was imminent. Instead, the opposite occurred.

For far too long, strip clubs have cultivated dangerous, racist, and precarious working conditions. Although strippers are a massive, diverse workforce, we have few protections in an unregulated workplace rife with social stigma. Club owners make money by charging strippers to work

landlords; they are our employers. Dancers do not owe club owners “rent” for dancing on a stage, using the bathroom, or dancing for clients.

CURRENT ISSUE

[View our current issue](#)

[Subscribe today and Save up to \\$129.](#)

SUBSCRIBE

For 25 years, I’ve wondered how many assaults, rapes, and shootings it will take for strippers to be afforded even the basic protections a union could provide. In the case of the Star Garden Strippers in North Hollywood, the last straw was a bevy of threats to their collective safety.

For “Tess” (all of the dancers quoted have been assigned false names to protect their privacy), one of the Star Garden strippers on the picket line, her safety was compromised in several ways. “As a woman of color, I was led to believe it could be worse—like I should be grateful to not be dead.” She described a scenario in which a customer slapped a stripper and the stripper slapped him back. That dancer was fired.

On February 23, when she arrived to work her shift, dancer “Reagan” was stopped in the Star Garden parking lot. She was fired for expressing concern for her physical safety the previous week.

Ten days later, Star Garden dancer “Ava” was informed of a new rule regarding security. Instead of asking for help from the security guards, even in urgent situations, strippers were instructed to wait for a chance to talk to management. Ava was alarmed. “I have seen borderline assault, nonconsensual videotaping of dancers by customers, and men so drunk from being overserved that I found them in the women’s restroom,” Ava said. The next day, another Star Garden performer, “Selena,” spoke up about the non-consensual filming. She was fired.

On March 18, the Star Garden Strippers delivered a signed petition requesting the rehiring of Selena and Reagan, as well as improved safety procedures in the club—but the owners were not on site and refused to meet with them as a group. That night, all scheduled dancers at Star Garden walked out with the understanding that they would return to work and discuss the petition in person. When they returned to work, they were locked out. They’ve been picketing ever since.

Star Garden Strippers have had enough.

The locked-out Star Garden Strippers are unionizing, and they are doing it with a sense of urgency. As Reagan put it, “It felt really dangerous

Don't let JD Vance silence our independent journalism

On September 15, Vice President JD Vance attacked *The Nation* while hosting *The Charlie Kirk Show*.

In a clip seen millions of times, Vance singled out *The Nation* in a dog whistle to his far-right followers. Predictably, a torrent of abuse followed.

Throughout our 160 years of publishing fierce, independent journalism, we've operated with the belief that dissent is the highest form of patriotism. We've been criticized by both Democratic and Republican officeholders—and we're pleased that the White House is reading *The Nation*. As long as Vance is free to criticize us and we are free to criticize him, the American experiment will continue as it should.

To correct the record on Vance's false claims about the source of our funding: *The Nation* is proudly reader-supported by progressives like you who support independent journalism and won't be intimidated by those in power.

Vance and Trump administration officials also laid out their plans for widespread repression against progressive groups. Instead of calling for national healing, the administration is using Kirk's death as pretext for a concerted attack on Trump's enemies on the left.

Now we know *The Nation* is front and center on their minds.

Your support today will make our critical work possible in the months and years ahead. If you believe in the First Amendment right to maintain a free and independent press, please donate today.

With gratitude,

Bhaskar Sunkara
President, *The Nation*

DONATE

Club owners have gone to ridiculous lengths to avoid classifying their workers as employees: coercing strippers to sign bizarre contracts, arbitration agreements, and NDAs before their shifts; requiring strippers to hand over all money earned for the first ten dances; stealing half their tips, and calling it a “chair fee,” a “dance tip-out,” or even “making wages.” The methods they use to extort strippers are as inventive as they are illegal, but it has gone on for so long that it's been normalized. Strip club owners have also gotten good at sowing division among strippers. But at Star Garden, according to Reagan, “there was a culture of solidarity, helpfulness and a level of trust.” Stripper-organizer “Velveeta” also sensed potential: “Cohesion among us seemed really strong and presented a real strong possibility of unionizing.”

Strippers United member and organizer “Stoney” knows the battle is only beginning. “To stop one club from fostering that toxic environment and making people unsafe,” she told me, “is probably the most noble work I will ever be a part of.”

Star Garden Strippers are building an arsenal of support. They have raised over \$20,000 in donations and filed five unfair labor practice complaints with the NLRB. Some members became OSHA-certified through the Teamsters and proceeded to file complaints for over 30 OSHA violations—from roach infestation to fostering an environment where employees are blamed for unwanted touching and harassment from customers. When

approaching more established unions, Velveeta said, “Longer term, a union by strippers for strippers holds the power to revolutionize the industry.”

Traditional labor unions, mainstream feminists, and many other progressives have underestimated the organizing power of strippers. Perhaps they believe that strippers will fail—or that the sex industry should not exist at all. They are wrong. Strippers are taking up space in the new labor landscape, along with Christian Smalls, Derrick Palmer, and the organizing team at [Amazon Labor Union](#). And just like them, the Star Garden Strippers plan to win.

Back on the picket line, “Charm” leaps towards two guys approaching Star Garden’s front entrance. She hands them a flyer with a [QR code for donations](#) to help keep the strikers afloat. A bearded security guard with a gun on his hip sits on a stool, arms crossed, watching Charm. The would-be customers walk away from the club. Velveeta cheers them on for supporting strippers, and the crowd claps for them. On this night, and every night for the following five weeks, Star Garden dancers are turning away many more customers than the few who dare cross the picket line. Drizzle becomes rain. Black umbrellas appear on the sidewalk, as if dropped from above. Music erupts from a wireless speaker. Dancers twerk, as if on command. Dollar bills are tossed at them, making it rain in the rain. Velveeta grins and says, “This is my dream.”

Antonia Crane Antonia Crane is a writer, activist, and PhD candidate at the University of Southern California. She is the author of the memoir [Spent](#).

LATEST FROM THE NATION

TODAY 11:14 AM

CHINA IS NOW THE WORLD'S CLIMATE CHAMPION

[Paul Hokenos](#)

TODAY 11:07 AM

WHO'S AFRAID OF THE EPSTEIN FILES?

[Chris Lehmann](#)

TODAY 10:27 AM

SPORTS MEDIA HAS FORGOTTEN ABOUT CTE EVEN AFTER PLAYER DEATHS

[Dave Zirin](#)

TODAY 9:57 AM

TEXAS ALMOST EXECUTED A MAN BASED ON “JUNK SCIENCE.” HIS ORDEAL ISN'T OVER.

[Elizabeth Weill-Greenberg](#)

TODAY 8:45 AM

KNIGHT

[Robert Minor](#)

Follow The Nation

Sections

The Nation

Magazine

Copyright (c) 2023 The Nation Company LLC