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These Strippers Are Planning To Unionize

The dancers at Star Gardens in Los Angeles would be the only unionized club in the country.



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Velveeta and Reagan, dancers who have worked at the Star Garden Topless Dive Bar in Los Angeles, protest working conditions.

Alyson Aliano for BuzzFeed News



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Strip club dancers at the Star Garden Topless Dive Bar in Los Angeles announced Thursday that they plan to form a union. If successful, the group says they would become the only strip club in the country to currently have union representation.

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“When we stand together and demand our rights we are declaring proudly that our work is valuable and we deserve respect,” said Velveeta, one of the group’s leaders, who is using a pseudonym for organizing in order to protect her identity.

The Star Garden dancers voted to unionize in late March, according to Velveeta, and plan to become an independent entity under the auspices of labor organization Strippers United. They began negotiating with the Star Garden management on May 3 over recognition of their union. The announcement comes after a walkout over safety concerns and weeks of picketing in front of the North Hollywood club.





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The union drive was organized in a matter of weeks, after the group says two dancers, who are known in the club as Reagan and Selena, were wrongfully terminated after speaking out about safety concerns. Eight dancers gathered in the club on March 18 to present a petition to management, which demanded the reinstatement of the dancers along with changes to security protocols and copies of contracts and the club's policies. They say they were told they could leave that night if they felt unsafe, but would be allowed to retain their jobs. However, management demanded one-on-one conversations before they would be allowed to return, and the picketers have declined, demanding instead a response to their petition.

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"We need the club to meet our demands if we're going to go back to work," said Velveeta.

In addition to the union announcement, they have also filed five charges of unfair labor practices with the National Labor Relations Board, and a complaint with the California Division of Occupational Safety and Health over what they say are more than 30 violations of health and safety regulations.

Star Garden management could not immediately be reached for comment.

It has been 25 years since strippers last unionized at the Lusty Lady in San Francisco. The peep show club shut down in 2013 after they were unable to keep up with rising rents, and the landlord, who also owned most of San Francisco's strip clubs, declined to negotiate.

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Strippers United, the organization backing the Star Garden dancers, was founded by Antonia Crane, who worked at the Lusty Lady when it unionized in 1996. Crane, who first wrote about the Star Garden unionization announcement for the Nation, founded Strippers United with the intent of helping strip club dancers unionize after changes to California labor law in 2018 meant that strip club dancers should be reclassified from independent contractors to employees, giving them the right to form a union.

“Strippers are ready to have a ‘seat at the table’ and have a say in their workplace,” said Reagan, one of the dancers who was fired. “I’m hopeful that this is the beginning of a wave, and strippers start unionizing everywhere.”

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