

BUSINESS

Strippers have a new tactic in a North Hollywood labor fight. Organizing with an actors union



Dancers protest outside Star Garden earlier this year. (Francine Orr / Los Angeles Times)



By **Suhauna Hussain**
Staff Writer | [X](#) Follow

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On Saturday nights, the strip clubs fill up. But at Star Garden, a dingy dive bar in North Hollywood advertising topless girls, the real action is outside.

For nearly five months a group of former Star Garden dancers have positioned themselves on the sidewalk on busy nights with picket signs and costumes. They make it hard to enter the bar without first hearing why exactly they believe Star Garden does not deserve your business. They allege it's a workplace plagued by unsafe conditions, a lax attitude toward dangerous patron behavior, and unfair terminations.

The dancers keep a nightly tally on a white board of how many customers they deter; they say they average about an 80% success rate.

"We are very good at our job," said a dancer who goes by the stage name Reagan. "We are very persuasive. We *lightly* shame."

But after dozens of nights of protests, the dancers on Wednesday tried a new tactic. In a landmark move, they filed a petition for a union election with the National Labor Relations Board, through the Actors' Equity Assn., an established union.

The union bid comes amid a broader push to formalize and bring job protections to a historically marginalized and little-regulated industry.

If the dancers succeed, it would be the first time strippers would be among the ranks of the century-old union that represents actors and stage managers on Broadway and at venues such as the Hollywood Pantages Theatre. Star Garden would become the first unionized strip club in the U.S. since 1996, when strippers formed the Exotic Dancers Union at the Lusty Lady Peepshow in San Francisco with the Service Employees International Union. Lusty Lady closed in 2013.

"Every worker who wants a union deserves a union and should be able to have the protections of fair wages, safe working conditions, benefits and a workplace free from discrimination and harassment and wage theft and all of the things that the Star Garden strippers are telling us they've experienced. So this feels like the right thing to do," said Actors' Equity Assn. President Kate Shindle.

The owners and managers of Star Garden did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

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Aug. 12, 2022

Star Garden dancers have expressed goals of achieving a recognized union for months. They hope their chances of success will rise with the backing of an established union's resources.

But the path to a recognized union is not straightforward. Most of the strippers seeking representation said they have not worked at Star Garden since mid-March, when they raised safety concerns and were subsequently barred from working. Union lawyers will need to convince the National Labor Relations Board the strippers are Star Garden employees who were unduly terminated in order to be eligible to participate in a union vote and secure a shot at winning.

The Times interviewed eight dancers who say they were wrongfully terminated by Star Garden. They spoke on the condition they be identified only by their stage names, fearing professional and personal repercussions. They said the friction began with the firings.

One dancer, they said, was told not to come back because she hadn't sold enough lap dances. Another was fired after she argued with a bartender who dismissed concerns she raised about a customer's possessive behavior that made her feel unsafe. A third dancer was fired after telling a customer to stop video recording her friend, who was dancing on stage.

On March 18, 15 of the club's then-23 dancers submitted a petition demanding better working conditions and alleging management had failed to take "basic steps" to protect their safety and privacy. The petition called for Star Garden to enforce safety policies preventing customers from filming and photographing dancers and lingering after closing time. It urged management to provide them copies of their work

contracts and to stop overserving customers who they said get more belligerent when drinking heavily.

Management should “respect our right to a safe and healthy work environment free of unlawful retaliation. We demand to be treated with basic dignity and humanity at work,” the petition said.

Most of the dancers involved in the petition said they were barred from entering the club when they showed up for work the next day. Four dancers said they were told they could return to work if they were willing to have private meetings with management.

Two dancers who signed the petition attended the meetings and returned to work, union organizers said. The ranks of protesting dancers has grown to 19, they said, as others have added their names to the petition and lodged complaints with federal and state regulators. Eleven dancers currently work at Star Garden, according to the Actors’ Equity Assn.

Akop Gasparyan, listed as Star Garden Enterprise’s director or chief executive in documents filed to the state, did not respond to multiple calls from a Times reporter. Stepan K. Kazaryan and Yevgenya Jenny Kazaryan, both named by strippers as managers overseeing Star Garden’s operations, did not respond to calls or a letter the reporter dropped off at the club outlining allegations made by dancers. In records filed with the state, Stepan Kazaryan is named as owner of 21st Century Valet Parking, which operates the club under Star Garden Enterprise.

Star Garden’s attorney Joshua Kaplan of Joshua Kaplan Law declined to comment and did not respond to emailed questions from The Times about the allegations. [In a statement to BuzzFeed News in July](#), Kaplan denied allegations of misconduct and described strippers’ accusations as “maliciously false.”

“We have no further comment save to say we look forward to complete vindication in the proper legal forum,” Kaplan told BuzzFeed.

The Times reviewed written testimony four dancers submitted in signed affidavits to the National Labor Relations Board. In the four affidavits, dancers allege that Star

Garden managers disregarded dancers' safety and failed to protect them from threatening customers and unwanted touching.

Eight dancers alleged in interviews that Star Garden managers discouraged security guards from intervening to restrain threatening or rowdy customers. They said they were told they weren't allowed to ask guards for help when dealing with a customer or situation they felt was potentially dangerous, but were instead required to consult management, which was slow to respond.

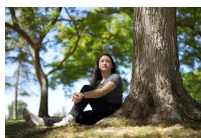
Left to deal with inappropriate behavior from customers on their own, every dancer who spoke with The Times described feeling vulnerable to abuse. All said they had been groped, picked up, smacked, restrained or grabbed by customers without their consent.

A dancer who goes by the stage name Wicked said she realized her supervisors didn't have her back when one night, while she stood in the middle of the main floor, a man came up behind her and "bear hugged" her from behind.

"He was just holding me. He wasn't hurting me. But I was off balance and I couldn't break his grip," she said. "I was held for about three minutes with him just rocking me back and forth. And I did not consent to it. And nobody did anything."

The club is a "very, very small place," said a dancer who goes by the stage name Ava, and managers have a clear view of what is going on.

"Despite all these girls' complaints, nothing happens," she said.



CALIFORNIA

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Four dancers criticized Star Garden's hiring practices, saying that they had not worked with a single Black stripper in their time at the club. Two dancers said they observed Star Garden owners turning away darker-skinned applicants.

Five dancers have filed unfair labor practice charges against the club with the National Labor Relations Board. Dancers together submitted an April 15 complaint with Cal/OSHA describing various physical and environmental hazards, which their lawyer says amount to more than 30 alleged violations of the Cal/OSHA regulations over the course of nine months.

The Cal/OSHA complaint describes the stage where dancers perform as frequently in disrepair, with holes, broken tiles, broken or incorrectly installed pole equipment and wobbly rails. The main floor, where dancers give private performances, is often littered with broken glass and strippers have sustained cuts because they are encouraged to remove their shoes while dancing, according to the complaint.

Gathering the details of alleged legal violations at Star Garden and trying to figure out which ones to address and in what order has “been like drinking from a firehose,” said Jordan Palmer, a labor lawyer who volunteers with Strippers United, a nonprofit sex worker advocacy organization that has assisted the dancers.

The dancers first sought to unionize with the help of Strippers United by seeking voluntary recognition from Star Garden. That didn’t work. Strippers United said in an emailed statement that it will continue to work in “close connection” with Star Garden workers as they partner with Actors’ Equity “to form the first stripper union in over 25 years.”

Stripper protests are not new. In 2017, a group in New York protested what they described as Black strippers increasingly losing out on cash to light-skinned “bottle girls.” In 2020 in Portland, Ore., dancers organized against racist practices that pinned blame for clubs’ shrinking clientele on Black strippers.

With an unprecedented wave of successful organizing at Starbucks, Amazon and Trader Joe’s — employers that have long staved off organized labor — there’s a perception that unions are making strides. Broader national unionization rates, however, haven’t risen in a significant way, leaving established unions primed to find ways to expand their membership.

Shindle, president of Actors’ Equity, said she thinks it’s “an absolute possibility” that dancers from other clubs seeking to unionize could join Actors’ Equity.

Other efforts to improve the working conditions of strippers have made headway in various states.



POLITICS

Labor unions are hot, but their moment may not last

Aug. 11, 2022

[A 2019 Washington law](#) requires that strip clubs install panic buttons and maintain a list of customers accused of violence or harassment. Customers can be banned from a business for three years if a valid complaint is filed against them. A [Minneapolis city ordinance](#) approved the same year mandated adult entertainment businesses provide workers with copies of their contracts and post rules for customer conduct and workers' rights. The law prohibits retaliation against workers who report violations, and establishes more robust sanitary cleaning standards in clubs.

In California, activism in strip clubs was catalyzed by [a divisive and seismic California labor law approved in 2019](#) intended to curb the widespread use of independent contractors across the state. The law, AB 5, required that strippers, [as well as workers in a host of other industries](#), be classified as employees in an effort to provide them workplace protections and benefits.

The law has been controversial among strip club workers, who were largely misclassified as independent contractors.

[Implementation of the law](#) has been far from smooth. In reaction to AB 5, many strip clubs adopted new measures they said were necessary to pay for benefits associated with employee status. For example, some extracted larger fees and exerted more control over workers' schedules. Other companies ignored classification rules, adopted more selective hiring practices, laid off workers or shut down clubs altogether.

Taken together, the changes disproportionately affected Black and other marginalized strippers, many of whom were pushed out of the industry, dancers and researchers say.

Star Garden's pay model serves as one example of AB 5's effect. Dancers said in interviews and in affidavits that the club at times offered them the option of formal employment or work as a contractor. Dancers offered that choice said they typically chose the latter, describing higher take-home pay for contractors.

Star Garden's employee option, according to the affidavits, offered strippers minimum wage — about \$16 an hour. Additional earnings would come from tips and selling lap dances. The club would deduct the first \$200 of strippers' lap dance earnings, as well as 50% of any lap dance money earned after that.

Contracted strippers were required to forfeit 50% of their earnings from lap dances to Star Garden. Management said they would not be charged the \$200 house fee but also would not receive any hourly pay, according to affidavits.

Star Garden charges \$30 for a lap dance and \$100 for a 15-minute "VIP" dance in a semi-secluded area, dancers said.

Ilana Turner, who researches strippers' working conditions in California, questions whether the rigid employee-independent contractor model makes sense for these kinds of jobs. As policymakers focus more on "informal, unregulated, racialized and gendered work," such as in the sex and domestic care industries, it can be hard to figure out which rules help workers and which ones hurt them.

Despite voicing misgivings about AB 5, Star Garden dancers and Strippers United [view AB 5 as a useful tool](#) to win workplace protections.

Although AB 5 was meant to help workers, Reagan said clubs' reaction to the law has worsened conditions and "been a total nightmare."

Still, the best option, she said, is to take advantage of legal powers and protections available to them, and combine them with the power of a union.

"We're just trying to make a life raft out of the like utter chaos and debris that it has created," she said.

Times staff writer Wendy Lee and researcher Scott Wilson contributed to this report.

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Suhauna Hussain

Suhauna Hussain is a reporter who covers labor and all things workers in the California economy for the Los Angeles Times.