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The Star Garden Strip Club Strike Is Part of the History of Sex Worker Organizing

No Class is an op-ed column by writer and radical organizer Kim Kelly that connects worker struggles and the current state of the American labor movement with its storied — and sometimes bloodied — past.

BY KIM KELLY

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When dancers at the Star Garden strip club in the North Hollywood section of Los Angeles first went on strike over three months ago, they weren't planning to form a union. Initially, they say, they were just trying to call attention to what they maintain are pervasive safety issues in their workplace, and to get the club's owners to make a few changes to protect them on the job. Prompted by what they claim are threats to their security from patrons, several of the dancers spoke up — and [said they were fired shortly thereafter](#). On March 18, a group of workers delivered a petition to management demanding that the fired workers, Reagan and Selena, be reinstated, and calling for increased safety measures to be implemented.

But instead of meeting with them to address the dancers' concerns, they say, their bosses locked the doors. "We were told we could not work, and we were locked out from that point forward," Velveeta, a Star Garden dancer who is currently on strike, tells *Teen Vogue*. "Since then, we've been picketing and protesting."

Not only have the Star Garden dancers been holding the line since April, they've been doing it in style. Rather than run a continuous picket, the workers made a tactical decision to focus their efforts on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday evenings (the club's "money days," as Velveeta explains), and they've been punching up the picket line with costumes, theme nights, dance parties, and karaoke. The dancers even found time to lead a successful campaign to fix the broken streetlights on the block.

Each week, the dancers collectively decide on the themes (which have ranged from wizards to the French Revolution), announce their picks on TikTok and Instagram, and encourage the community to come show its support. "With the [wrecking ball in labor over the last 25 years](#), and the collective, eviscerating loss over the pandemic that has happened, bringing joy and fun and performance to this picket line has been just life-giving," Antonia Crane, founder of Strippers United (SU), a labor organization that helps dancers unionize, says in an interview with *Teen Vogue*.

Crane explains that these picket-line parties are partly inspired by the theatrical flair that the activist group ACT UP, of which she was a member, instilled in its activism during the AIDS crisis.

The Star Garden dancers are part of a storied history of sex workers who have organized to protect themselves and their communities. In 1917, when Reggie Gamble and Maude

Spencer **organized the first known sex workers' rights protest** in U.S. history, they were fighting an order to close down the San Francisco red-light district, where they and hundreds of other sex workers lived and worked. In 1973, when Margo St. James **founded Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics** — COYOTE — the first sex workers' rights organization in U.S. history, she and co-organizers like Gloria Lockett sought to provide legal support to sex workers targeted by gendered solicitation laws and to fight the multiple layers of oppression that Black sex workers faced.

In 1996, when the Lusty Lady became the first U.S. strip club to **successfully unionize** as the Exotic Dancers Alliance (SEIU Local 790), the worker-organizers had to deal with disrespect and stigma at the bargaining table — from their so-called union brothers. “Our rep, Stephanie Bailey, was supportive, but we faced a lot of sexism from the men in the union who didn’t take us seriously,” Siobhan Brooks, PhD, a former Lusty Lady worker who helped kick-start the union drive and was involved in contract negotiations, tells me when I interview her for **my book**. “[They] would sometimes even laugh while we were speaking about our situation at meetings.”

The Star Garden dancers have **publicly declared** their intention to unionize, organizing around issues that workers at the Lusty Lady tackled during their historic union drive: claims about lack of security and racial discrimination. Back then, the Lusty Lady dancers had to deal with customers behind one-way mirrors trying to videotape their performances; now, workers at Star Garden say they are forced to contend with nonconsensual filming via smartphones.

Teen Vogue has repeatedly tried to contact Star Garden management for comment on the claims detailed in this story.

As Selena, a striking Star Garden dancer, tells me, racial discrimination and colorism remain rampant within the industry, and one of their union goals is to put a stop to it. “As a Mexican woman that is finally able to use her voice, I refuse for us to go under further discriminations on top of the ones we already do, as well as Black folks,” she explains.

Dr. Brooks got the ball rolling back in 1996. As she explains in her **account of unionizing the club**, she accused Lusty Lady bosses of discriminating against Black dancers and filed a complaint with the Department of Fair Employment and Housing to pressure the club

to hire more women of color, which she says, after an investigation, they did. Now, Selena and her coworkers are fighting to change what they see as similar (if unspoken) tendencies in their workplace. “The vast majority of the roster is white,” Velveeta says. “Our aim is to write into our contracts a strong anti-discrimination policy to try to correct that. Diversity is very important to all of us.”

The Star Garden dancers say they haven’t heard a peep from management in response to their petition to form a union, and the dancers are still holding the line outside the club. But they have the benefit of a not-so-secret weapon in Crane: The Strippers United founder is a former member-organizer of the Lusty Lady’s Local 790 and brings her decades of experience as an organizer, stripper, and sex worker to the fight. In 2018, Crane founded Soldiers of Pole (the name was recently changed to Strippers United) with the goal of unionizing the strip club industry. “There was no place just for strippers and our stripper labor rights,” she recalls, so she started building one.

But when the pandemic hit and strippers saw their livelihoods evaporate almost overnight, SU had to pull back on its organizing plans and pivot toward fundraising, mutual aid, know-your-rights trainings, and survival. As Crane says, the push to unionize “kind of fizzled” during that period because “people became more desperate, and they were only self-interested in getting their jobs back. I totally understand that, but it was heartbreaking.”

By March of this year, though, the Star Garden dancers were ready to make a move — and they knew exactly who to call. They connected with SU and began strategizing. “We are changing the mold,” says Tess, another striking Star Garden dancer. “We’re changing the culture that exists in the strip club. Instead of being competitive and every dancer for themselves, we are talking to each other, we are moving together as a group. Because we are greater in numbers, we have decided to turn this [bad] situation into something better — or maybe impossibly great, if we succeed.”

Among the number of reasons the workers decided to unionize, their experience on the picket line has been a big motivating factor. “We’ve seen a lot of disrespect,” says Velveeta. “We really need to return to work with the full protections that a union provides.”

Tess outlines their struggle in more existential terms: “I’d like people to know that this is a fight for the working class. This is a fight for feminism. This is a fight against whore-phobia. We are people just like you, and we are just trying to work.”

Jordan Palmer, a staff attorney at Unite Here Local 11 who serves as the head of Strippers United’s legal department in her free time, points out that organized labor in the U.S. has long excluded or outright persecuted some of the most marginalized and vulnerable workers in our society. That’s why, she says, now is the perfect moment for the movement to throw its weight behind the Star Garden dancers and SU: “Supporting sex workers in their fight for justice is an opportunity for our movement to right the wrongs of the past and show that the labor movement is a modern movement by and for the people, centering marginalized and oppressed workers.”

Velveeta hopes that her and her coworkers’ public fight for a union will help eradicate the stigma that still exists for them and their profession. And through the power of solidarity and collective action, the Star Garden dancers are poised to make history together. Crane hopes they will inspire other dancers across the country to join the movement. “Courage is contagious,” she says. “All you have to do is light a match.”

Correction: This piece originally referred to Antonia Crane as the president of Strippers United. She is actually the founder.

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Kim Kelly is a freelance journalist and organizer based in Philadelphia. Her work on labor, class, politics, and culture has appeared in the *New Republic*, the *Washington Post*, the *Baffler*, and *Esquire*, among other publications, and she is the author of *FIGHT LIKE HELL*, a forthcoming book of intersectional labor ... [Read More](#)

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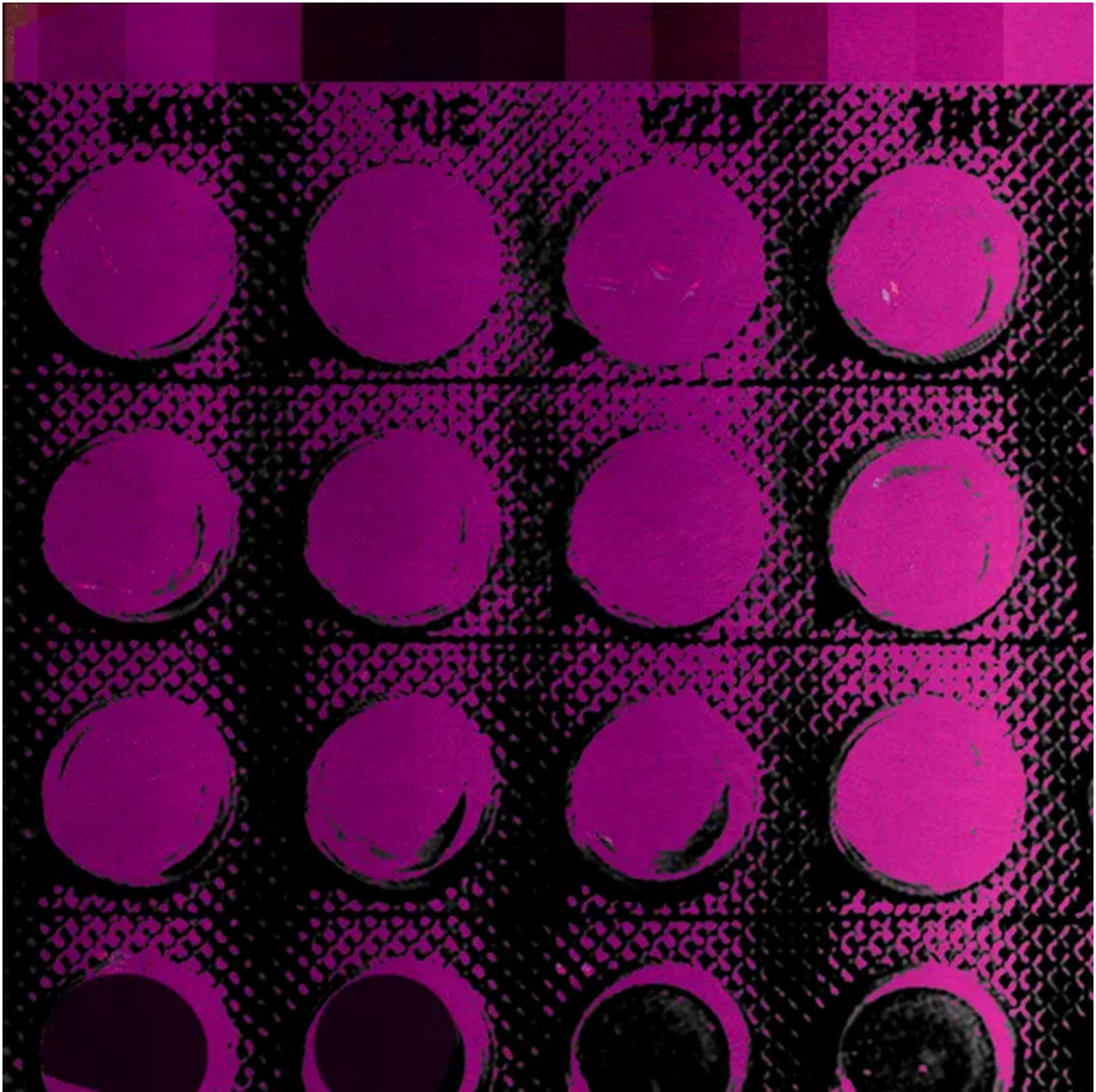


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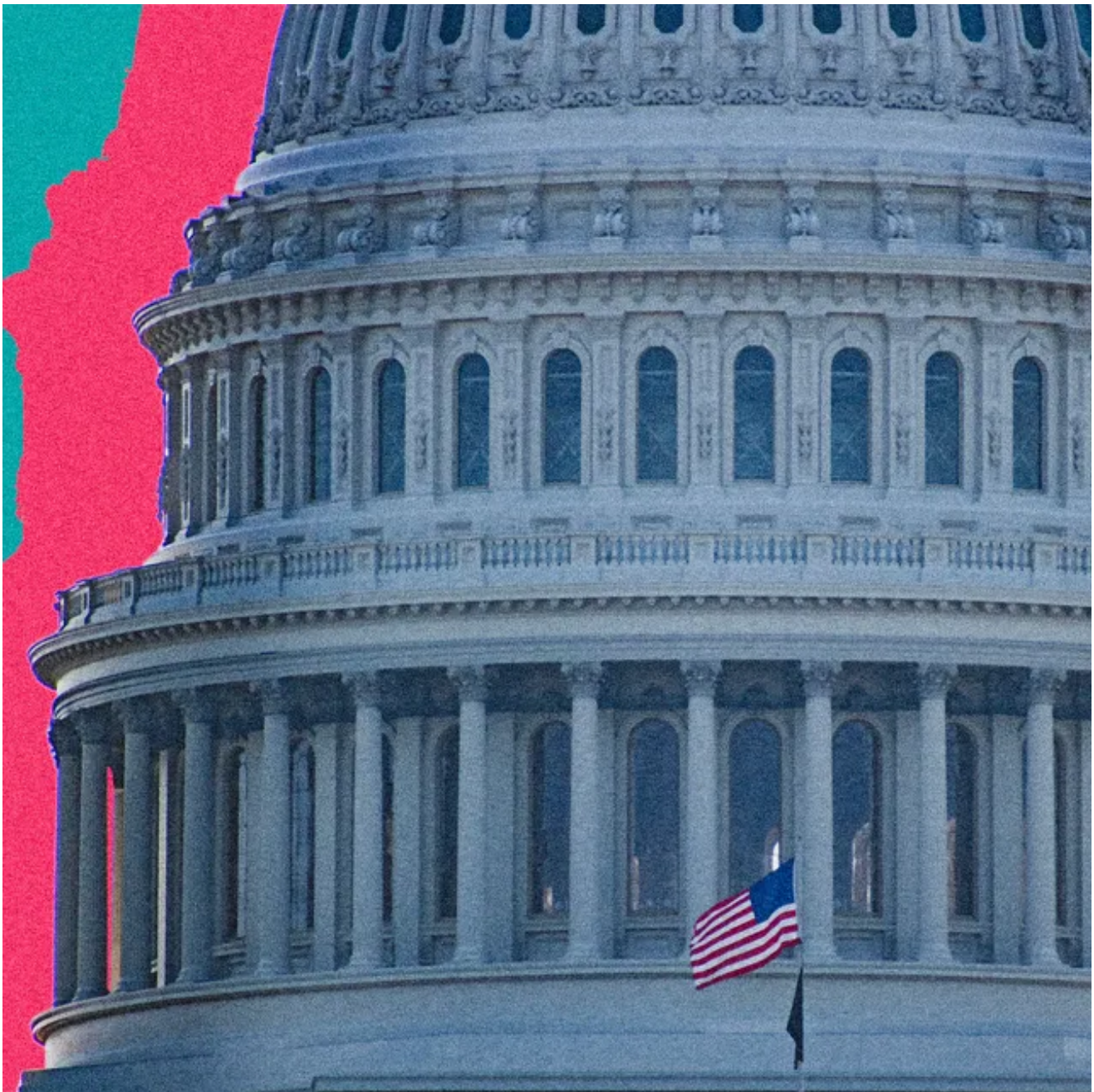


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