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Knights, queens and strippers are helping fuel the spike in US unionizing efforts

By [Natasha Chen](#), CNN Business
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out in ~~CNN~~ dish costumes holds signs urging customers to ~~stay away~~ from the Star Garden topless bar. ✕

More than a dozen of the club's dancers say they've been locked out for four-plus months because they petitioned the owners to reinstate two of their fired colleagues, improve security and safety measures, and recognize their right to form a union.

US strippers haven't successfully unionized since the effort at San Francisco's Lusty Lady in the 1990s, but the Star Garden workers are trying anyway — and they're doing so in an environment where more American workers are leveraging their own power.



Dancers protesting in front of Star Garden topless bar in North Hollywood. (CNN has blurred a portion of this image to obscure expletives.) Courtesy Velveeta

That's in large part because of successful unionization efforts at behemoths like Starbucks (SBUX), Amazon (AMZN) and Apple (AAPL), which grabbed headlines and inspired others to launch their own — including grocery workers at a Massachusetts Trader Joe's and a group of production workers on "The Simpsons."

And employees of video-game company Activision Blizzard (ATVI), where workers voted to unionize in May, even joined the Star Garden dancers during their early picketing sessions in a show of solidarity.

The offices of the National Labor Relations Board have been flooded with union petitions: 1,892, to be exact, from last October through the end of June 2022. That's an increase of 58% compared to the same period the previous year. Unfair labor practice charges have risen 16% in that same time period, the NLRB said.

The agency is having trouble keeping pace with the deluge, NLRB director and press secretary Kayla Blado told CNN, adding that the group's number of field staff has been cut by 50% in the last two decades.

CNN Meanwhile, petitions have increased dramatically, catalyzed in large part by Covid-19. **RELATED**



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“Post-pandemic, people just have a very different view of what their time is worth and what their working conditions should be,” said Erin Zapcic, who is among the cast members trying to unionize at a Medieval Times dinner show in Buena Park, Calif.

Currently Zapcic plays the queen at Medieval Times LLC’s only California location. She had previously worked at the company’s Lyndhurst, New Jersey, castle where employees had attempted — and failed — to organize in 2006.



Monica Garza and fellow Medieval Times workers after a union vote succeeded in Lyndhurst, NJ, on July 15. Courtesy Monica Garza

But on July 15 this year, a union vote succeeded in Lyndhurst: About 40 performers including knights, squires, trumpeters and a falconer are now members of the American Guild of Variety Artists.

“We’re not just 9-to-5 workers,” said Monica Garza, who plays the role of the queen at the Lyndhurst location.

“The disrespect from management made it feel more like a schoolyard rather than a professional establishment.”

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Garza said the show's cast consists of professional actors, and in the case of some of the knights, trained stuntmen. Yet after the initial pandemic shutdown, she said the Lyndhurst castle reopened in May 2021 with such paltry staffing that they were also asked to clean the facility and work in wardrobe and lighting.

Beyond having more job responsibilities while earning the same wages, Garza said unruly audience behavior has gone unchecked and created safety issues.

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One night a woman jumped on stage, grabbed Garza and tried to take the microphone attached to her head, Garza said. Other times, audience members have defied safety announcements by banging silverware and plates, scaring the horses and putting performers at risk, she added. CNN reached out to the Lyndhurst location for comment but did not hear back.

After unsuccessful efforts to force management to address these problems, Garza said, the cast members researched the prior failed attempt to unionize — and realized this time, they had social media on their side.

"We got enough people in our ranks that were like, 'This may not be impossible anymore. And it may be incredibly necessary.' Because in years prior, I think people could hang onto the fact that things were bad, but not bad enough," Garza said. "It wasn't until after Covid — when we went in with less people, being overworked, underpaid, inflation out of control."

After the successful union vote in Lyndhurst, the CEO of Medieval Times LLC, Perico Montaner, sent a letter to employees at the company's other venues. The letter, shared with CNN by an employee, read in part: "Collective bargaining is an uncertain process. Half of all new unions never reach a first contract. There is no time limit on negotiations."





Erin Zapcic in Lyndhurst, NJ, in 2018. Courtesy Erin Zapcic

Montaner ended the letter by telling employees. “Ask yourselves, can you really know what the Lyndhurst, New Jersey employees ‘won’ until you see their contract?”

Medieval Times LLC and Montaner did not respond to CNN’s requests for comment.

Lyndhurst’s effort opened the door for the Buena Park employees, Zapcic said. The California show features 50 cast members, who had already been discussing safety problems due to being overworked, she said, and had gathered signatures for a union petition by late July. The Buena Park location did not respond to CNN’s request for comment.

They filed a petition with the NLRB on July 22, and a date for a vote has not been set.

‘Starting drama’

In June, employees of the Lyndhurst castle went to a labor conference in Chicago, which was also attended by some of the dancers from North Hollywood’s Star Garden club.

One of the dancers, who goes by the stage name Velveeta, said she is among 18 workers who have been locked out of Star Garden since March. She asked CNN to identify her only by her professional name, for fear of being blacklisted or stalked.

Velveeta said she had witnessed a dancer being pulled by her shoe across the stage by a customer, another being slapped and others being inappropriately touched by customers.

Multiple attorneys told CNN it is illegal in Los Angeles for customers to touch dancers in strip clubs. Yet Velveeta said the owners ran the establishment assuming the customer was always right, with one of them frequently dismissing dancers’ complaints as merely “starting drama.”





A group of dancers protesting in front of Star Garden topless bar in North Hollywood. Courtesy Velveeta

And when a few dancers tried to get a patron to delete a video he took of their colleague on stage — which is against club rules — one of the workers who complained was fired, she added.

One day after submitting the petition asking for their colleagues to be reinstated, along with enforcement of the no-photography policy, the dancers were locked out, Velveeta said.

“All of us came that night — it was Saturday night — ready to work. And we were stopped at the door by the security guard and told that there was a new thing, you know, now, because we had signed this petition,” Velveeta said.

The new policy, she said, was that dancers experiencing a problem needed to find a manager first, even though managers were not always on site. Velveeta said that even if they could get a hold of a manager by phone, they would have to wait until the manager screened the security footage to determine if any action should be taken against the customer.



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“Our own autonomy, bodily autonomy ... needs to be respected,” she said. “And we need to have a say about what happens to this customer. And be believed.”

CNN’s calls and emails to the owners of Star Garden, as well as their attorney, have not been returned.

Velveeta and her colleagues have yet to file a union petition with the NLRB, but the agency is investigating several charges made by the dancers and will be deciding whether they are employees instead of contractors in order to be eligible to form a union.

Even though their path to organizing is more legally challenging, Velveeta said the dancers have been buoyed by the success of other union efforts.

“We’ve just been just surrounded by the power of the labor movement and the energy around that since the beginning ... and really inspired by the Amazon labor union victory,” she said.

The pandemic intensified an existing trend

“In a way, the pandemic intensified something that was already happening, which was widespread discontent with growing social inequality,” said Cedric de Leon, a professor of sociology and labor studies at the University of

that growing social inequality," said Cecile de Leon, a professor of sociology and labor studies at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. "What does surprise me is the ~~places~~ ^{places} where this uprising has taken place." ✕

De Leon points to massive strikes among educators and auto workers in the years before the pandemic. Then, with the "Great Resignation" of workers leaving jobs in late 2021, along came a wave of organizing at smaller businesses — with an emphasis on employees' health, safety and security.



Medieval Times performers in May 2021. Courtesy Monica Garza

"The workers at Medieval Times and at Star Garden are not organizing in a vacuum. They're organizing in a very rich kind of social context in which people talk to each other," de Leon said. "People hear about other efforts on the part of workers to organize themselves, to defend themselves and to fight for a better life."

Christian Sweeney, deputy director at the AFL-CIO, says it's notable that more white-collar professions — like the museum curators and video-game developers — are forming unions. And the Starbucks and Amazon efforts show employees aren't just organizing at workplaces that pay the least, but also at leading companies.

"What a union does is give people an opportunity ... to come together, to negotiate with management, to have some say over wages, benefits, working conditions," Sweeney said. "There's really nothing that can replace that."

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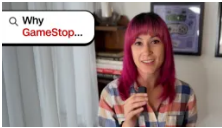
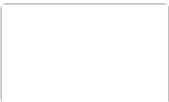


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