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STRIP DOWN, RISE UP



ON THE PICKET LINE WITH DANCERS IN NORTH HOLLYWOOD

BY [JEAN CHEN HO](#)

PHOTOS BY NICHELLE DAILEY

On a balmy Friday night in September, I left a friend's dumplings and mahjong party to report on the scene at Star Garden, a topless dive bar in North Hollywood. Star Garden's fed-up dancers had walked off the job last March over unsafe working conditions, and they'd been on strike ever since. Every weekend, they picketed in front the club. The dancers are pursuing unionization — if successful, their campaign will only be the second instance of sex workers winning union representation in the history of U.S. labor.

I found parking and walked toward the club, the only storefront open on the block. Chrome stanchions were set up at the entrance, where a baroque metal door with fleur-de-lis details was propped open. The stoic bouncer, in a black collared shirt and dark jeans, sat in a chair underneath the giant vertical sign on the side of the building advertising topless girls, Beer & Wine, Pool Table, ATM inside. Head down, he scrolled through the phone he held in his lap. It was just after 10 p.m., and there was no one waiting in line.

A replica of Botticelli's Venus attached to the club's stucco exterior peered down at the small crowd of protestors gathered on the sidewalk, just beyond the stanchions. Instead of velvet ropes, yellow caution tape was stretched taut across the poles. That night, the @stripperstrikenoho Instagram account (used by the dancers to share "\$trippier Action Updates!") invited their supporters to celebrate Mexican Independence Day on the picket line.

For six months, the dancers have organized lively and creative demonstrations in front of the half block of sidewalk space on Lankershim Boulevard in front of Star Garden. Campy costumes (Sailor Moon/anime night; Ren Faire: “Come All Thee Who Loveth the Juggs”) and tongue-in-cheek riffs on cult classics (Legally Blonde; Moulin Rouge) have been invoked as past picket line themes. Tonight’s mood was festive, but respectful (“please, leave the costume sombreros at home,” noted the IG caption), honoring the day in 1810 when Mexican revolutionaries took up arms to fight for freedom from Spanish colonial rule. The idea came from Selena, one of the Star Garden dancers, who wore a blue huipil embroidered with bright flowers, her hair plaited in two braids. She’d been fired without cause back in March, which led into conversations with other dancers about organizing.



SELENA AND HONEY

“I’m Mexican, so this day is a big celebration for me,” Selena said. “And the girls gave me this space, they asked me how they could incorporate it without appropriating [the culture.] I thought it was a good idea, and it really goes to show how much I love these girls, that we’re just so united.”

In March, the dancers delivered their safety demands to the club’s owners after a series of conflicts with customers (15 of the 23 women who worked there initially signed; more have since then joined the campaign). The very next evening, management locked everyone out of work. With the support of Strippers United, an advocacy organization for strippers’ rights, the former Star Garden dancers have held the picket line and found pro bono legal aid. In August, the women filed for an election with the National Labor Relations Board to formally join the Actors’ Equity Association, the arts labor union that has historically represented live theater performers. They’ll get the opportunity to vote on the union, via mail-in ballots, in October. *[Ed. note: They voted shortly before we went to press, and Star Garden is now challenging the eligibility of most of the dancers who voted.]*



VELVEETA

While the Star Garden cohort's lively demonstrations and media savvy has won them supporters across Los Angeles and beyond, not everyone in the industry agrees that unionization offers the best path forward. When California's Assembly Bill 5 took effect in January 2020, strippers and other "gig economy workers" were reclassified as employees across the state (similar legislation is under consideration in New York, New Jersey, and Washington). Although intended to strengthen worker protections like overtime pay and reimbursement for expenses, many dancers prefer the flexibility of being independent contractors, and some allege that the bill harms a disproportionate number of Black and Brown strippers, who are at risk of losing their jobs before their white co-workers, now that club owners must comply with AB5's new regulations. In this context, coalitions of dancers and sex workers have launched other stripper strikes, without unionization as a goal.

When potential customers approach the entrance to Star Garden, the dancers and their supporters — friends and partners, activists and union allies, and even former Star Garden regulars — do their best to deter them. Their tactics are effective: That night, I observed only one patron entering the club, indifferent to emphatic booing.

"I usually go for the Spanish speaking ones," Selena said. "I feel like, as soon as they see me and they're like, familiar, they kind of understand, 'Hey, I'm Mexican, too,' or 'I'm Latino.' It's kind of like a respect thing in our culture. I've been successful, turning them away."

Selena had never been part of a workplace union effort before. “This really opened up my eyes,” she said. Beyond Star Garden, there’s much more she wants to contribute. “I also want to really help my people, immigrant people. We’re always so scared. Capitalism is a big part of why everything’s so fucked,” she added. “They think that they can take advantage of us and we don’t know any better.” Selena said she’s been sharing information on labor laws with her friends and family. “They’re supportive. Really, really supportive,” she said, of her parents. “They always want me to update them.” She invited me to take a concha from the snack table set up on the sidewalk. “There’s jamaica, too.”



HONEY

“The community support is really great. We had somebody earlier that dropped off all these pizzas,” said Honey. She doesn’t work at Star Garden, but is a friend of the cause, representing Strippers United. Honey is here with another friend from Strippers United, who also goes by the name Selena (all the women I spoke with identified themselves by their performer aliases). The current president of the advocacy group, Selena concedes that labor organizing takes a physical and emotional toll.

“I mean, honestly, I never have a bad time on the line. Every time I’m here, I see people who I care about,” she said earnestly. Ultimately, Selena said, she wants to share what they’ve learned with other dancers and see more union efforts happen at strip clubs all over the country.



CHARLIE

Cars drove past and honked their horns in support, and those in the picket line cheered and waved back. They lifted their signs higher in the air: strippers on strike! bosses fuck off! At one point, Charlie crossed into the street to talk to a man through his passenger side window. “He showed me the money in his pocket and said that he was looking to go to a strip club tonight. So I explained why he shouldn’t go to this one,” she said. “He was very receptive. He thought it was great that we’re advocating for ourselves.”

Earlier this year, Charlie had been hesitant about joining the campaign, “mostly because I don’t know how much I need to be associated with my stripper identity.” She paused and smiled. “I had no idea that we might become a part of Actors’ Equity. I’m excited and proud, but I feel impostor syndrome. It’s validating that actors are recognizing that we’re also just actors, putting on a performance.”

I asked her to say more about how she feels now, compared to six months ago. “We just thought about making a fuss, and then we were going to get our jobs back,” Charlie said. “But we’re in a movement now, and there’s just a lot of growing that we have left to do, to understand what our place is in the sex worker labor movement.”



REAGAN

Reagan, along with Selena (who wore the blue huipil), was one of the women fired by the management for raising safety concerns. “I saw some red flags [with a customer]. That turned into an argument because the manager, who was the bartender that night, mocked me and just told me how I was going to be murdered, how the customer had mentioned that he wanted to take him to a gun range. ‘So he’s probably going to shoot you, that’s probably what’s gonna happen.’ Like, just making light of the situation that actually is really fucking serious, because women do die like that.”

“I feel super weird about it,” Reagan said about the prospect of going back to work at the club, facing her former employers again, if and when the dancers successfully unionize. “But I also feel like the most powerful thing that we can do is walk back in there and say, ‘Okay, this is our club. And we’re working here.’”



WICKED

“I feel very tired. It’s been a long journey,” Wicked said. She was an unassuming presence, dressed casually in a button-down shirt over a white tee and dark jeans, a navy-blue baseball cap. “But also, this was an unexpected but necessary step in the journey to making this strip club better for everyone. I feel uplifted. I feel vindicated.”

Wicked was the first dancer hired at Star Garden when the club reopened, after pandemic restrictions were lifted on bars and restaurants in Los Angeles. For weeks, she worked alone. “I was the only dancer in the building. And I did get to see everything that happened,” she said, alluding to the workplace abuses and unsafe environment. “And especially when they started hiring inexperienced dancers. The only reason bosses hire a bunch of inexperienced dancers instead of veterans is because they’re easy to take advantage of.” Along with Reagan, who she affectionately calls her “work wife,” Wicked took it upon herself to mentor the “baby strippers” rather than foster a culture of competitiveness in the club.

“I’ve never worked for a strip club boss that I would say treated me well. Not once. I’ve had club owners tell me to my face, ‘you’re not a priority.’ It’s hard to feel like you matter when you’re treated that way. And even harder to think you can stand up and say, ‘you can’t treat me this way,’ when they make you feel so small.” Wicked paused for a moment. “But here, with the support of your fellow dancers, and the strength of numbers, I finally felt great. I finally felt strong.”

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