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NATIONAL

How strippers hoping to unionize in LA adds to the history of organizing in the U.S.

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HEARD ON ALL THINGS CONSIDERED

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7-Minute Listen

PLAYLIST

TRANSCRIPT

NPR's Juana Summers speaks with professor Siobhan Brooks of California State University – Fullerton about the issues strippers face and their history of organizing and unionizing in the U.S.

Sponsor Message

ARI SHAPIRO, HOST:

For the past six months, strippers have been striking outside the Star Garden Topless Dive Bar in Los Angeles on weekends. They say they've faced assault and

harassment from patrons and other unsafe working conditions. They hope to unionize. And if successful, they will be the second strip club in the U.S. to do so.

JUANA SUMMERS, BYLINE: The first was the Lusty Lady back in 1996. Siobhan Brooks was there. She is now a professor at Cal State Fullerton. But in the '90s, she worked at the Lusty Lady and pushed for unionization. She said she and her colleagues were able to because they were classified as employees rather than independent contractors. And racial discrimination at the Lusty was one of the factors that motivated the strippers to organize.

SIOBHAN BROOKS: The main issues were racism, which I focused a lot on in my organizing efforts in terms of the club not hiring Black women, and then if they did hire Black women, we were segregated within the clubs and, as a result, made less money than other dancers. And then the other issue was one of one-way windows, which is similar to what we see at Star Garden, where customers were videotaping dancers without their consent. At the Lusty Lady, you could be fired for very vague reasons. If you were late too many times, you were fired, but then that rule wasn't extended equally to everyone, so there was favoritism. Those were the main issues that launched the unionization for us.

SUMMERS: And can you talk a bit about the reception? Were there groups of people who disagreed with dancers there unionizing?

BROOKS: Yes. And I'll be clear because I don't want to romanticize this period. The opposition came from both within the union, actually, and outside of the union. So there were people who felt that, you know, we weren't real workers - that, if anything, we were making the labor movement look bad. And then - so that was outside of the union. And then in the union, even though we did have support, I remember in the very beginning attending union meetings and such, and people would make fun of us - mainly the men - and they would snicker when we would speak. And so it was very difficult to get people to see that exotic dancers were not these - we're not, like, a freak show, but actual workers.

And again, it was also very different culturally. I mean, now, there's - even though it's still problematic the way most strippers show up in mainstream culture - but there's more, I guess, representation. I mean, back then, in the '90s, being a sex worker in general and specifically an exotic dancer felt very much like the early gay and lesbian movement, where people were frightened to come out. There were severe consequences. You could lose your children. You could lose your apartment. So that was a time where we weren't having a lot of representation of women feeling comfortable outing themselves as exotic dancers.

SUMMERS: You mentioned earlier that at the time, back in 1996, there were not a lot of Black women at the Lusty Lady. Did the unionization push change things for

the Black women who worked there or even help bring more Black women into the club?

BROOKS: It did. So when I was working there, I was one of three Black women. We had a total of 70 dancers. Most were white. There were a couple of Asian mixed race dancers, and then in terms of Black dancers, two were fair-skinned and one was dark-skinned, and that was it for years. That was all they allowed.

And so when the union happened, what we saw was an increase in Black women working in what was called the Private Pleasures booth. You know, all of the encounters with customers were separated by glass, but you could pay, you know, like \$5 for three minutes, so men would put a lot of money to try to at least get, like, an hour or so with their favorite dancer. And Black dancers were told that we could not work there. And when I asked why, our show director, who was actually a Black woman, said that Black women made the club lose money. And so we were not allowed to work there. I felt that there was no evidence of this. And so after the union, there were more Black women who were rotated now in the Private Pleasures booth, and then there were also more Black women who were hired.

I started wearing my dreadlocks when I had dreadlocks on stage. That was very radical because most Black women wore wigs. And I was like, you know what? My hair was getting longer. I was like, you know what? I want to represent that I'm actually Black. So then when Black women came after me and the other two women, they were hired with natural hair. They didn't have to have a perm. They didn't have to have a weave. They could actually have, you know, like a 'fro (ph) or something. And so that was pretty radical for that time period.

SUMMERS: As you think about this, as someone who's worked in this industry and focused on it as a researcher, is there one thing you think that clubs in this country could do to do better by their workers?

BROOKS: Workers need protection. I think that there needs to be transparency. I think that there needs to be livable wages, insurance, you know, laws that protect them from discrimination. And again, I think in the sex industry, again, even with the union, that can be fuzzy because I know, you know - we know unions don't necessarily get rid of racial discrimination completely. I know that there are some Black dancers who are critical of the switch from independent contractor status to employee status because they feel like now they're going to make less money or now they're going to be more marginalized because the clubs won't hire as many women of color if now they have to pay insurance and, you know, figure out, OK, well, who are we going to hire? So it's - you know, so in all transparency, I think

this is a complicated issue. But definitely, I think unionization is very promising, particularly for the club in North Hollywood.

SUMMERS: We talked earlier about what clubs can do to do better by their workers, but I want to ask the question in a different way. What can dancers who aren't able to unionize - what can they do to make situation better for themselves?

BROOKS: I think that's a great question, and I think that dancers can protect themselves as much as possible. I think there are a lot of sort of, like, care work and resource sharing that dancers prior to unionization - particularly dancers of color - have always done. And I think that that continues. And I appreciate that question because, as much as I am for unionization, obviously, I think it's important to also look at women who can't or they don't want to. And what kind of resources do they have and they share with one another in lieu of having things like a union?

SUMMERS: When you think back to the 1990s, when Lusty Lady was unionized, and you think about the state of the industry then, and then we fast-forward to today and think about the state of the industry now and this push for unionization, do you feel like there is a shift happening in the way that sex workers are viewed as a part of the bigger labor movement in this country?

BROOKS: Yes, I think it's a slow push and shift, but it's happening, and strippers are beginning to slowly be seen as workers. And it's great that different unions are looking at how they can assist exotic dancers in terms of representation. So I think that it is changing, and that's good.

SUMMERS: That was professor Siobhan Brooks. Thank you so much for being here.

BROOKS: Thank you for having me.

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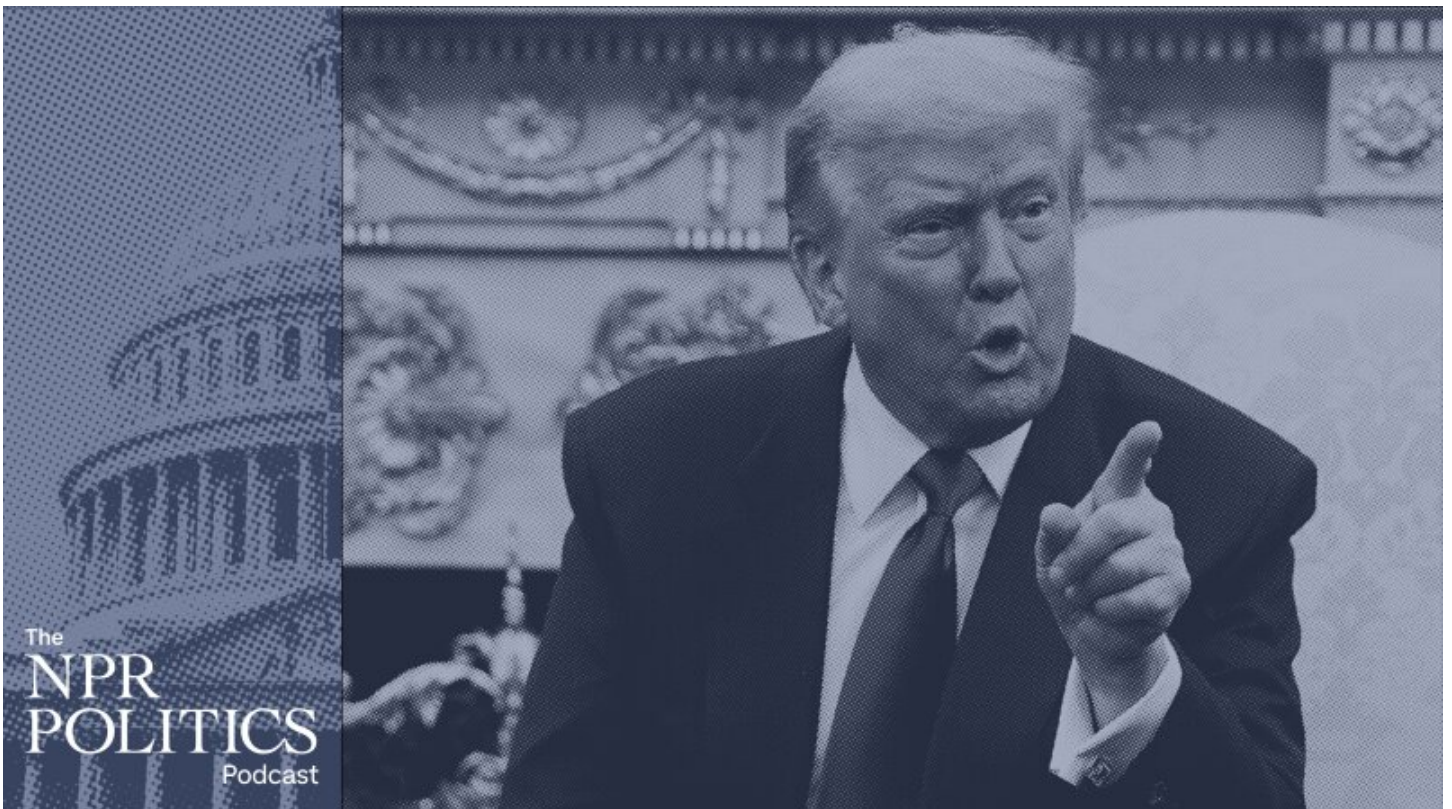
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