



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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San Francisco strippers win right to form a union, 1996-1997

Time period notes: *The sources do not indicate when exactly the first and last nonviolent action in this campaign took place; in fact, they don't offer any specific dates at all. However, the sources do point out that the actions took place between the unionizing vote date (late August 1996) and the first contract date (early April 1997). The researcher, therefore, took great discretion in determining that the nonviolent actions happened between October 1996 and March 1997.*

October

1996

to: March

1997

Country: United States

Location City/State/Province: San Francisco, California

Location Description: San Francisco North Beach

Goals:

Demand the strip club management allow the dancers to form a union and thus negotiate to abolish discriminatory policies and create better working conditions, such as a pay rise, a guarantee for sick leaves, and a prohibition on one-way windows and cameras.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols › “Please don’t spend \$ here” and “Unfair 2 labor”
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 110. Slowdown strike › “No Pink” day – the dancers work with their legs crossed instead of exposing their genitals

Methods in 2nd segment:

Methods in 3rd segment:

Methods in 4th segment:

Methods in 5th segment:

Methods in 6th segment:

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols › “2, 4, 6, 8, don’t go in to masturbate!” and “No Justice, No Peace!”
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications › “Do Not Enter! Unfair to Labor!” and “Bad Girls Like Good Contracts!”
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books › Dancers handed out condoms and flyers to businessmen and lawyers to ask for their support
- 016. Picketing
- 038. Marches

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Economic Justice

Human Rights

Group characterization:

- Sex workers

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Dancers at The Lusty Lady Theater

Exotic Dancers Union (EDU) of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU)

Partners:

Local 790 division of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU)

Exotic Dancers Alliance (EDA)

Bay Area Sex Worker Advocacy Network (BAYSWAN)

External allies:

Members of the local community and public who sympathized with the dancers' cause

Involvement of social elites:

Not known

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Bay Area Sex Worker Advocacy Network (BAYSWAN)
- Exotic Dancers Alliance (EDA)
- Local 790 division of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU)

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: 1 month

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

The Lusty Lady Theater management

Campaigner violence:

No campaigner violence

Repressive Violence:

The club management locked out all dancers who voted yes for a union and fired the leading activists of this campaign.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

5 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

The reason why this campaign is given 5 out of 6 points of success is because the dancers didn't get all their specific demands met, but they managed to achieve most of the goals – including forming a union, abolishing discriminatory policies, and creating better working conditions.

The Lusty Lady was a strip club in San Francisco. Opened since 1976, this North Beach club featured exotic dancers “Lusties” in a peep show on a stage and in individual booths. While being one of the most popular spots for nightlife in the city, the Lusty Lady was infamous among the dancers for its random firings and pay cuts, racist and ambiguous shift policies, and no-sick-day rules. According to Antonia Crane, a former stripper at the Club, “[the Lusty Lady] is playing the notoriously exploitative game in the adult entertainment world.”

Isis, a former performer, recalled her time at the club and noted that the racist policy was deeply rooted in a complicated “system of favorites;” she said, “there was never more than one woman of color on stage at a time, and busty blonds always got more shifts.” Siobhan Brooks, an African American feminist and sociologist, also noticed the discrimination and filed a complaint while working at the Lusty Lady, but the club management ignored her objection.

Other workers also complained about the management playing favorites. According to Jane, a former dancer at the club and one of the leaders of the unionizing efforts, if favored strippers were late or absent for their shifts, nothing would happen, but other performers faced consequences, such as not receiving any pay for their shifts. Even when a performer was considered sexy by the customers, she could still be taken off her schedule without warning. Jane suggested that “The criteria for making one dancer their favorite was completely subjective” and that the management treated them as “children.”

Managers, however, insisted that customers grew tired of watching the same dancers performing, citing that “It’s the company’s philosophy that the customers want to see new performers - so many regulars want to see new performers.” Personnel manager Shannon went as far as defending the favorites game and said that “Some [dancers] are dynamite no matter how long they are here.”

The dancers did not only face problems such as having their shifts changed at random without notice, but they also could not take any sick leaves. Star, a former dancer, said that they often worked when they were sick because they couldn’t find any substitutes and because if they dropped a shift, they would lose half of their pay. One of her friends at the club even had to work

while recovering from a miscarriage. According to a “Lusty” who went by her stage name Vicki, the dancers were given a quota of \$150 to \$200 to meet in four hours; she recalled a lot of her colleagues would “run out to the cash machine [and withdraw money] just to meet the requirement.”

“Dancers aren’t treated like princesses. They’re treated like kitchen help,” said Jezibel Scott, a dancer, shedding light on the little sympathy the club management gave for their workers. Jane suggested that forming a union “was not about getting more money. It was about rights and protection and job security.”

The one-way glass installed in some of the peep show windows caused deep anger among the dancers. Customers hid cameras under their coats and filmed the dancers to make porn videos without the strippers’ consent, and gave them no compensation. Jane said that the club had a “no cameras” policy, but it was never enforced; she also suggested that the filming was “not only exploitative but a violation of privacy.”

Lusty Lady Theater

Photo Credit: By Nick Gripton [CC BY-SA 2.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0> [4])], via Wikimedia Commons

Though the dancer began organizing against the management and the club's policies as early as 1993, it was not until the summer of 1996, when two performers, Star and Jane, confronted the management about the unlawful filming and how it had affected them. However, the managers rejected their complaints and argued that there were no reasons for them to be uncomfortable, as "taking off clothes in a peep show is not real labor so much as an enjoyable part-time job." They also told the workers to go work somewhere else if they had any problems with the policies.

Determined to abolish customers' surreptitious cameras and the management's discriminative policies, dancers continued their efforts. Star started to ask workers to sign a petition to have the one-way glass removed and delivered it to the management, but the managers refused the request citing the large revenue the booth generated. At the same time, in an attempt to silence the workers, the management made a rule that if they caught any dancer talking and making plans to form a union, they would fire her. Yet, the campaign continued, despite working at the club during that time was "panic-inducing."

The main obstacle that stood in the way of the dancers' unionizing drive was that the dancers had to show to the existing workers' unions that they were considered employees, not independent contractors. This was a challenge, as strippers in the U.S. were usually classified as independent contractors. Not only did such classification deny the sex workers employee benefits and job security, but it also prevented them from forming a union under the National Labor Relation Act of 1935. Though the dancers at the Lusty Lady were, at the time, legal employees, the unions initially assumed that they were independent contractors and thus ignored their requests. Moreover, the unions stigmatized the dancers because they were part of the sex industry that was stereotypically associated with drugs and other illegal activities.

To overcome such barriers, Jane, as the leader of the unionizing efforts, contacted the Exotic Dancers Alliance (EDA), an advocacy group for sex workers, for help. The EDA then referred her to the Local 790 division of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). Sanda Steinbauer, a representative of the union, recalled her initial doubts about representing the dancers, but she quickly realized their determination, citing that she "gave [the dancers] a set of criteria to meet, and [the dancers] met every single one." Steinbauer also said that "the [sex] industry is ripe for organizing" and that "the dancers deserve the same protections and benefits as other working people."

Upon learning of the unionizing efforts, the management quickly removed the one-way windows, hoping to change the dancers' minds. However, it was far too late. Velvet, a dancer, said that the workers "had spent a lot of time educating ourselves on labor law and history, and we all agreed we had a right to organize." When the managers failed to address problems, such as playing favoritism, applying ambiguous policy, and firing dancers for no legitimate reasons, the dancers worked together with the SEIU Local 790 organizers and held a National Labor Relations Board union election in the summer of 1996.

As the workers prepared for the ballot, the management ran an anti-union propaganda campaign in an attempt to thwart their unionization effort. The campaign highlighted a message – the union could not be trusted; it had different interests from workers and its members; it was an "unaccountable third-party." The managers held mandatory meetings to discuss how dancers would lose pay because of union dues (a regular payment made by members of a union to maintain their memberships), while they issued an ultimatum to the leading activists, threatening to fire them. The management also insisted that the Lusty Lady was a great place to work, as the dancers were never forced to engage in sexual intercourses with customers, and the club regularly provided free hot chocolate to the dancers.

Despite the management's threats, harassment of leading activists, and "scripted, tearful" pleas to give the club a "second chance," on 29 August 1996, the Lusty Lady workers, including dancers, janitors, and machine operators, voted yes to unionize, 57 to 15. Of the 15 dancers who voted no, four were applying for management position at the time. This success at the election officially formed the Exotic Dancers Union (EDU) of the SEIU, the only sex-work organization of its kind.

When the managers learned of this result, their reaction was harsh. The management started holding meetings and "cried and told [the public]" that the dancers had betrayed them. June Cade, the club's general manager, said that she felt "hurt," because

she “had more [feelings] for [female exotic dancers] than anyone on the West Coast.” Cade also expressed that the Lusty Lady was “a very good place to work” and that she thought the dancers were upset because they had been mistreated at other clubs.

However, when the drive for a contract persisted and the managers’ tactics to look like “victims” were proven unsuccessful, the conflict deepened. With the union formed, the dancers brought the management legally to the negotiation table and started negotiating a contract that would address all of the workers’ grievances with the help of a contract negotiator from the SEIU Local 790. The negotiation process was slow, as the management intentionally tried to stall the negotiations with the hope that the dancers would abandon their effort in long run. The management also tried to block any efforts to change the language about sick pay and job security, citing that it must be able to fire older dancers who had been with the club for more than a year and a half. However, according to Miss Mary Ann, a former dancer, since stripping is an industry that prizes youth, the language was especially threatening to older dancers. Moreover, the management accused the performers of “sexually harassing themselves” – as they used the word “pussy” in the workplace – in an attempt to stall the negotiations.

Frustrated with the slow process and the management’s unwillingness to cooperate, the dancers staged several nonviolent actions to get public attentions and thus force the management to push forward with the negotiations. One of the most effective and creative actions was a “No Pink” day, when the dancers worked with their legs crossed instead of exposing their genitals – essentially a slowdown strike in a sex worker context. The dancers wrote slogans on their hands and bodies, such as “Please don’t spend \$ here” and “Unfair 2 labor,” and showed them through the windows, gaining much attention from the customers.

As a result, the managers “really cracked down,” according to Jane. On one day, the club management locked out all the dancers who voted yes in the union election. Dancers like Jane, who were involved in the unionizing process, received dismissal warnings and were fired.

However, the management’s intimidation tactics did not impede the dancers’ drive for contract and better working conditions. In response to the firing, the dancers picketed in the neighborhood, handed out condoms and flyers to businessmen and lawyers to ask for their support, and informed them of their cause and struggle. Joined by members of the community and the SEIU, the dancers staged a two-day picket outside the club, chanting “2, 4, 6, 8, don’t go in to masturbate!” and “No Justice, No Peace!” The protesters rallied on the doorsteps of the Lusty Lady and held up signs that read “Do Not Enter! Unfair to Labor!” and “Bad Girls Like Good Contracts!” This demonstration gathered much support from the broader community. After hearing about the horrible working conditions of the dancers, customers expressed their disgust with management and refused to enter the club, while members of the public, in passing, honked their horns in solidarity with the dancers. At the same time, the dancers filed a lawsuit under the Unfair Labor Practices Act with the National Labor Relations Board, which prohibited firings and suspensions with no legitimate reasons.

The sex workers also partnered with the Bay Area Sex Worker Advocacy Network (BAYSWAN), who provided website support for their unionization effort and helped garner support not only from the public but also from other sex workers throughout the country. A representative of the BAYSWAN recalled that the dancers were “so organized and so passionate. They want [a contract] so badly.”

In April 1997, following several months of negotiations, the EDU ratified a contract with the Lusty Lady club management. Though the contract did not meet all of the dancers’ demands – for example, there was no clause regarding an “agency shop” (a requirement that all newly hired employees need to join the union), the dancers received a pay rise, a guarantee for sick leaves, a prohibition on one-way windows and cameras, and were allowed to switch shifts with any other dancer, as opposed to only another dancer that “looked like them”—a particularly harsh rule for women of color, since there were only a few of them. Jezibel Scott, a former star at the club, said after this victory that “It shows we aren’t a bunch of giggling girls or hopeless drug addicts. We are intelligent women who are doing a very hard job, and know how to fight for our rights.” The union ratified a second contract in April 1998. The Lusty Lady became the first and only successfully unionized sex business in the United States, and it remained a unique place in the history of the fight for sex workers’ rights in the Bay Area today.

Research Notes

Influences:

This campaign was influenced by the unionization efforts at a San Diego strip club, Pacer's, in the early 1990s. (1)

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Additional Notes:

This campaign used innovative organizational forms, for example, No Pink day – when the dancers worked with their legs crossed instead of exposing their genitals (essentially a slowdown strike but with a sexual twist).

The reasons why this campaign is categorized under human rights cluster in addition to economic justice are due to several articles in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – a common standard of fundamental human rights of all peoples proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly in Paris on 10 December 1948 (General Assembly resolution 217A) – specifically, with reference to Article 23:

- (1) Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work
- (2) Everyone, without any discrimination, has the right to equal pay for equal work.
- (4) Everyone has the right to form and to join trade unions for the protection of his interests.

This campaign makes an interesting case study not only because of the nonviolent actions and how creative they were, but also the contexts. A case about organizing nonviolent actions in the sex industry is uncommon. By putting us in the dancers' shoes, it allows us to experience the challenges the dancers faced and the stigmas the activists had to overcome while organizing this campaign. More importantly, this case provokes us to see organizing nonviolent campaigns from an unorthodox and often marginalized point of view.

More on this specific unionizing drive at the Lusty Lady, please watch "Live Nude Girls Unite!" – a 2000 documentary film made by former dancer Julia Query and director Vicky Funari.

More on sex workers unionizing, please see Gregor Gall's works cited in the sources section.

Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:

Yin Xiao, 30 March 2017

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