



“Bad Girls Like Good Contracts”

The Fight for Unionization at the Lusty Lady Theater in San Francisco, 1992-1998

by Sophie Edelhart

Barnard College, Columbia University

Department of History

Faculty Advisor, Thai Jones

Spring 2019

Table of Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	1
INTRODUCTION	2
CHAPTER ONE: “The Sex Business Was Our Bread and Butter”	12
CHAPTER TWO: “Sex Workers of the World Unite!”	25
CHAPTER THREE: “Wide Open Town”	38
CONCLUSION: “The Lusty Lady Closes Her Legs For Good!” ..	51
BIBLIOGRAPHY	57

Acknowledgements

I owe my thanks to many friends, family members, classmates, and strangers.

Firstly, to my wonderful friends who have consistently supported and encouraged me. Thank you for pushing me and also knowing when to tell me I needed to take a break. In particular, I'd like to thank my roommates, Meena Ardebili, Maya Garfinkel, Gemma Sahwell, and Hanna Graybill who have seen me at my best and worst throughout this whole process.

To my girlfriend Shayle, who endured countless hours of my complaining and still likes me! I love you and I couldn't have done this without your support.

To my thesis seminar classmates, you are all such brilliant thinkers and writers. It was an honor to get to go through this year with you and I can't wait to see what you do in the future.

To my thesis advisor Thai Jones, who believed in my project from the beginning and who consistently saw potential in this work, even when I didn't. Your guidance has been invaluable and I truly can't thank you enough.

To my family, my sibling Freddy for constantly texting me asking if I needed snacks, to my Dad, for his unwavering belief in me. Most of all, to my Mom, who not only encouraged me and scolded me on my grammar but also acted as my research assistant, taking hundreds of photos at the Lusty Lady archive in San Francisco while I was across the country.

Finally, to the unbelievable women who made this story possible. To Stephanie Batey, Carol Leigh, and Johanna Breyer for agreeing to be interviewed for this project. To the women of the Lusty Lady, all the women that came before them, and all women working in the sex industry today, you are my heroes.

Introduction

Shouts of “OURS MUFFS ARE MIFFED GIVE US MORE SHIFTS!” and “2-4-6-8 DON’T COME HERE TO MASTURBATE” wafted from outside the Lusty Lady Theater through San Francisco’s North Beach neighborhood on January 26th, 1997.¹ This group of women shouting outside a strip club could have easily come off as a group of anti-porn Christian zealots and in fact, wouldn’t have been all that unusual in North Beach. But to the contrary, the yelling was part of a picket demonstration led by the burgeoning Exotic Dancers Union at the Lusty Lady Theater. Most of the participants were dancers at the club accompanied by a few SEIU Local 790 labor organizers, and allies from other labor and progressive organizations. They were protesting the recent firing of Summer, one of the dancers at the club and a single mother, who had been punitively dismissed for participating in a union organized work slowdown the previous week.

The work slow down had been in response to the slow pace of contract negotiations and the stalling tactics of the Lusty Lady management’s labor lawyers. The action was called “No Pink Day” in which all the women at the theater refused to show their vulvas to customers, instead dancing with their legs closed. Although it was a small change in the work, the “pussy show” was the club’s signature attraction.² Management was totally taken aback and posted a warning flyer to the dancers that when they came to work they had to “perform all of the job

¹ Chant sheet. 1997. Box 1, Folder 4, Lusty Lady Collection, larc.ms.0365. Labor Archives and Research Center, San Francisco State University.

² “No Justice, No Piece!” Pg. 8. Box 1, Folder 8. Lusty Lady Collection, larc.ms.0365. Labor Archives and Research Center, San Francisco State University.

duties.”³ They also fired Summer, an active union member, for “disrupting employees” only to be met with a picket line outside the club in the following days. Summer was re-hired within the week.⁴

Background

The Lusty Lady employees had started the unionization campaign in response to what was seen as negligence on the part of the managers and an unstable work environment. Beginning in the 1980s, there was a decline of working conditions in San Francisco’s North Beach strip clubs and sex work businesses. This was a consequence of increased competition in an expanding sexual marketplace as well as an industry wide trend of dancers being relegated to independent contractor status. Being designated as independent contractors (instead of employees) left dancers with fewer means of recourse against club owners and limited capacity to organize for better working conditions. This opened up many women in the sex industry to various kinds of exploitation by club owners, including unsafe working conditions, theft of wages and tips, and sexual coercion.⁵ In addition to the conditions themselves, sex workers were seeing less and less money for their work. The “stage fee” system, which placed the onus on dancers to “lease” stage time, was pioneered by the Mitchell Brother’s club in North Beach but soon became industry standard. What started as a \$10 stage fee dancers would have to pay to the club became \$25, and in a few years would become upwards of \$150, meaning often times a

³ Notice to Employees. 1997. Box 1, Folder 5. Lusty Lady Collection, larc.ms.0365. Labor Archives and Research Center, San Francisco State University.

⁴ “Welcome Back Summer” Union flyer. 1997. Box 1, Folder 5. Lusty Lady Collection, larc.ms.0365. Labor Archives and Research Center, San Francisco State University.

⁵ Live Nude Girls Unite! Brooklyn, NY: First Run/Icarus Films, 2001.

dancer would lose money or just break even working a shift.⁶

The Lusty Lady was one of the only clubs in San Francisco to maintain employee status for its workers. The Lusty was a peepshow style club, with a stage encased in a mirrored room with thirteen booths attached where customers would pay a quarter to get a 25-second peep



through a window at women dancing and gyrating in various states of undress. It was owned-and-operated by women which gave the peep show a more homey work atmosphere than the male owned clubs in the neighborhood. Because of this, it

attracted young, white, highly educated dancers, many of whom were students at San Francisco State. As a result, conditions at the Lusty were higher than at other surrounding sex work businesses. Dancers at the Lusty Lady could expect a standard hourly wage and reduced competition between dancers. Additionally, the support staff was respectful and dancers weren't expected to have any physical contact with customers. But despite the fact that "Lusty Lady dancers had it good," by the early 1990s, there was an increasing rift growing between the dancers and management at the club.⁷

The biggest issues arose in 1993. In the theater, there were three one-way mirror booths

⁶ Siobhan Brooks, "Exxxotic Power: The Sex Industry and Political Activism," *Hues* (Mar,1999), 7

⁷ "Letter to New Dancers." June, 1996. Box 1, Folder 2. Lusty Lady Theater Collection (1996-1998), Labor Archive and Research Center, San Francisco State University.

designed to protect patrons with security concerns or “shy” customers. The person in the booth would be able to see the dancer but the dancer would only be able to see herself. In spite of a no-camera policy, some patrons began using the anonymity of the booth to secretly and illegally film dancers. This posed a safety risk for dancers who didn’t want their image publicized and for those that didn’t care, they still felt it wrong that they shouldn’t be able to make money off their own likeness.⁸ Dancers brought the problem of the one-way mirror booths to Lusty Lady general manager June Cade, but when confronted, she responded that they “‘should expect to be videotaped,’ and if they didn’t like it, they ‘should get another job.’”⁹ Cade shot down every suggestion dancers gave to rectify the situation including bag checks and confiscation of cameras by support staff.¹⁰ When, again, a dancer was videotaped, one of the support staff confiscated the camera and was reprimanded by Cade. Infuriated by the lack of response and support, dancers and support staff gathered to author a letter and petition to take out the one-way mirrors.

Siobhan Brooks had signed the petition but she had been annoyed at dancer’s lack of sensitivity to other problems happening in the club, most importantly, the issue of race. So, she posted her own petition addressed to June about racism at the club. Brooks had started dancing at the Lusty Lady when she was a student at San Francisco State University. She was attracted to it for many of the same reasons as other dancers: good pay, feminist reputation, security. But overtime, she became increasingly aware of the progressive veneer of the club. Firstly, she was

⁸ Sorcia, “Go Union: Lusty Lady Dancer Sorcia Tell All” *Spectator Magazine* (San Francisco, CA), December, 1997, 25. Box 1, Folder 5. Lusty Lady Theater Collection (1996-1998), Labor Archive and Research Center, San Francisco State University.

⁹ “Letter to New Dancers.”

¹⁰ Sorcia, “Go Union,” 25.

one of only ten women of color, out of the seventy regular employees, who danced there.¹¹ For the few women of color who were there, they experienced great difficulty scheduling shifts because they had to be replaced with a dancer of their same racial background and the show directors would usually only permit one woman of color to dance per shift. On top of that, women of color were almost never scheduled to perform in the “Private Pleasure Booth” (a one-on-one booth where dancers received higher commission than on the main stage). According to management, this was because women of color would make less money for the club than white women.¹²

After posting her petition, Brooks was called into a meeting with June, Josephine (the only black show director) and the other four black dancers at the club. They criticized Brooks for wrongly accusing June of being racist and insisted that if she just asked, she would have been able to perform in booth. Brooks, Josephine, June, and the other dancers came to the agreement that they would rotate black dancers in the booth once a week. But, as Siobhan said, “in retaliation for this concession, management called a general meeting about the ‘misunderstandings’ of my petition and prohibited posting of any political literature in the dressing room.”¹³ The authoritarian response taken by June spurred the dancers to seek outside help on how they could respond.

Lusty Lady dancers contacted the Exotic Dancers Alliance (EDA), a support group and social services network for exotic dancers in San Francisco. The EDA connected the dancers to

¹¹ Siobhan Brooks, “Exotic Dancing and Unionizing” in *Feminism and Antiracism: International Struggles for Justice*, ed. Kathleen M. Blee (New York: New York University Press, 2001,) 60.

¹² Ibid., 61.

¹³ Ibid., 62.

SEIU Local 790 (Service Employees International Union). SEIU was a labor union representing mostly health care workers and attempts by the EDA to organize with them had failed miserably in the past. One club had “sacked the dancers who joined the SEIU in 1995 while at [another] club in 1997 an attempt to unionize was met by closure after the dancers joined the SEIU.”¹⁴ Despite this, the EDA invited the Lusty Lady dancers to a meeting at the SEIU offices in San Francisco. Up until this point, Lusty Lady organizers hadn’t really been thinking about unionization but once they were made aware of how few rights they had without collective bargaining, they pushed for a union drive and affiliated with SEIU Local 790.¹⁵

In August of 1996, the Lusty Lady dancers voted to unionize with 80% of the staff signing union cards.¹⁶ They expanded their demands beyond the permanent removal of one-way mirrors to include “sick leave coverage, concrete schedule of raises, and guaranteed shifts.”¹⁷ When June Cade found out about the vote she responded in kind and removed the one-way windows that had sparked the initial ire of the dancers. The newly minted union responded in a letter to new dancers: “needless to say, token gestures like these are disingenuous and patronizing.”¹⁸ June held a meeting with the dancers to discuss their concerns, claiming she had no idea why they wanted to unionize and cried several times at the meeting, begging their forgiveness.¹⁹ But once the dancers had realized a significant majority wanted a union, it seemed

¹⁴ Brooks, “Exotic Dancing and Unionizing,” 30.

¹⁵ Sorcia, “Go Union,” 25.

¹⁶ “Letter to New Dancers.”

¹⁷ Exotic Dancers Union Flyer. Box 1, Folder 1. Lusty Lady Theater Collection (1996-1998), Labor Archive and Research Center, San Francisco State University.

¹⁸ “Letter to New Dancers.”

¹⁹ Sorcia, “Go Union,” 25.

they couldn't give into management concessions without a proper bargaining table.

In 1997, after months of negotiations, a lawsuit, a strike, and a lockout, The Lusty Lady would become the first unionized sex business in the United States. The contract won by the employees was not only significant because it was the first of its kind in the industry, but it also marked a larger cultural shift taking place in San Francisco at the time. The conditions of the city in the early 1990s: a progressive political class, a strong sex worker feminist history, and an expanding service sector and changing labor movement provided the perfect staging ground for the Lusty Lady dancers to unionize. Ultimately, the campaign ended up representing a new era not only for sex workers but for the feminist movement, the labor movement, and for the city itself.

Literature Review

In most literature about feminist history and labor history in the United States, sex workers are often sidelined or left out of the narrative completely. The mainstream feminist and labor movement at various times fought fiercely to distance themselves from sex workers and sex worker organizing and consequently, the histories of those movements rarely include sex workers. Additionally, societal stigma surrounding sex work means that many sex worker's experiences are often kept under wraps and away from the public, which makes it even easier to make invisible the lives and activism of sex workers. Many of the dancers involved in organizing at the Lusty Lady do not have their real names printed in the press or in union materials. However, the Lusty Lady campaign is unique because it was a rare occurrence of public sex-worker organizing with popular support from activists, unions, and politicians, among others. I hope to disrupt narratives of feminist and labor history that leave out sex workers and offer a

look into how the Lusty Lady dancers placed themselves staunchly at the intersection of feminism and labor, and how they used the language of those movements to understand their own struggles and experiences.

Those scholars who have addressed sex workers and the Lusty Lady are often writing in the field of gender studies and sociology. In *Temporarily Yours: Intimacy, Authenticity, and the Commerce of Sex*, Elizabeth Bernstein explores how neoliberalism and the internet changed the sex industry in San Francisco over the course of the 1990s and early 2000s. While her work provides necessary background and context on the economy and how economic shifts impacted sex work, it touches only briefly on the Lusty Lady campaign and dedicates more time to broader social changes than the specifics of the Lusty Lady.²⁰ Gregor Gall in *Sex Worker Unionization: Global Developments, Challenges and Possibilities*, examines trends of sex worker unionization in a global context, looking at several different countries. While he dedicates a significant portion of his section on North America to the Lusty Lady, he analyzes their campaign primarily through a Marxist lens, looking at how capital and collective action impacted their organizing campaign.²¹

In most of the literature, the Lusty Lady is used as a sociological case study to compare to other case studies, in Bernstein's case, other sex industries in San Francisco and in Gall's, to other global sex worker unionization campaigns. While both of these scholarly works provide important insights into the Lusty Lady campaign, they lack the specificity to truly understand how and why the Lusty Lady campaign occurred and the impact it had. What I hope to provide in

²⁰ Elizabeth Bernstein, *Temporarily Yours : Intimacy, Authenticity, and the Commerce of Sex* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 73.

²¹ Gregor Gall. *Sex Worker Unionization : Global Developments, Challenges and Possibilities*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 36.

this thesis is a historical perspective which considers the conditions and context of San Francisco in the 1990s and what made this campaign even possible in the first place. Despite attempts to expand sex worker unionization to other clubs in San Francisco and other cities in the United States, the Lusty Lady remained the only sex work business to ever achieve a contract. I seek to explore why that is through three different lenses: the labor movement, feminism (in particular sex worker feminism), and local politics in San Francisco.

Chapter One delves into the Lusty Lady union's relationship to the labor movement in San Francisco. Firstly, it lays out the history and trends of labor unionization in San Francisco and how progressive unions like SEIU made it possible for sex workers to organize at this time. It also demonstrates how Lusty Lady union members employed language of the labor movement to win over the labor community in the city and win their contract. This chapter builds on key primary sources such as union flyers and press reportage as well an interview conducted with Lusty Lady union representative, Stephanie Batey.

Chapter Two analyzes the history of sex worker activism in San Francisco beginning in the 1970s and how these practices of feminist sex work organizing informed the Lusty Lady dancers during their campaign. In particular, it will analyze how embodiment/body politics and female dominance were employed during contract negotiations and how the Lusty Lady dancers enacted sex worker feminism at the bargaining table. In order to analyze these events, this chapter will build off first person writing and interviews from the anthology "Whores and Other Feminists" as well as union flyers.

Chapter Three will engage with the city, focusing on how local politics impacted the Lusty Lady unionization campaign and how the Lusty Lady dancers employed their networks in

city government and city activist groups to come to their aid during their union drive. Ultimately, the Lusty Lady's broad network of support helped sway the campaign in their favor and forced the general manager, June Cade, to the bargaining table. This chapter builds on endorsement letters and press reports as well as an interview with Johanna Breyer, one of the founders of the Exotic Dancers Alliance.

Chapter One: “The Sex Business Was Our Bread and Butter”

Building Solidarity with the Labor Movement

Introduction

After months of negotiations, a work slow down, a strike, and a lockout in the Spring of 1997, the Lusty Lady union won a contract. It didn’t codify many of the things they had wanted. It lacked health care and was vague about hiring and firing criteria. However, as they noted in a union flyer released after they finalized the contract, the Lusty Lady dancers had made history:

“Considering that fewer than half of all union election victories result in a first contract *at all*, and efforts to organize totally unorganized industries are even less successful... considering [management] hired one of the most notorious and sophisticated union busting law firms in the country...considering it took workers in other industries decades to accomplish what we have in less than a year; considering all this, we’ve got an excellent contract and we’ve broken new ground, we’ve made history. Not only is this the only existing union contract in our industry, but this contract includes worker rights that are unheard of in any other contract in *any* industry.”²²

The Lusty Lady dancers acknowledged that their efforts were a success not just for them, but for the entire labor movement. Throughout their campaign, Lusty Lady dancers framed their organizing in the context of labor rights and used strategies of labor organizing such a pickets and work slow downs that were considered old school by the 1990s. The Lusty Lady dancers, as a group of women in a workforce which had been historically ignored by the labor movement, were able to look at labor practice with fresh eyes. The success of their organizing would revitalize an otherwise declining organized labor community. By using the language and tactics of the labor movement, the Lusty Lady dancers didn’t only win the support of the old

²² “We Have A Contract” Box 1, Folder 5. Lusty Lady Theater Collection (1996-1998), Labor Archive and Research Center, San Francisco State University.

establishment trade unions but would also come to be considered the vanguard of labor organizing in San Francisco.

This chapter analyzes the history and trends of labor unionization in San Francisco and how progressive unions like SEIU made it possible for sex workers to organize there at this time. Later, it will also demonstrate how the Lusty Lady union members employed language of the labor movement to win their contract. In order to analyze these events, this chapter will build off of union flyers, organizing guides, and press articles from the Lusty Lady archive as well as the first person accounts of S.E.I.U organizer Stephanie Batey. In addition, this chapter will build off the scholarly work of Elizabeth Bernstein, Paul Johnston, and Richard Edward deLeon.

Labor Town

San Francisco for a long time, had had a reputation for being a “labor town.” Dating back to the 1860s San Francisco laborers had been a volatile bunch, with many strikes, pickets, and marches dotting the history of the late 19th and early 20th century. However, by the latter half of the 20th century, organized labor had been severely weakened in the city. The 1970s and 80s saw a rapid national decline in union density due to the export of industrial job overseas, increasing automation, and the rise of anti-union conservative political power, typified by Ronald Reagan and the 1980 PATCO Strike. By the 1990s, although San Francisco boasted a higher percentage of unionized labor than the Bay Area average,²³ it was not immune to the national trends and saw dwindling union membership due to “changes in the local economy, the loss of blue-collar jobs, and the rapid growth of a new class of service workers.”²⁴ The labor force in San Francisco, once

²³ In 1987, 34.5% of the San Francisco workforce was unionized, in comparison to the Bay Area average of 19.9%.

²⁴ Richard Edward DeLeon, *Left Coast City : Progressive Politics in San Francisco, 1975-1991* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1992), 26.

dominated by the longshoremen in the shipyards on the coast and unionized trades was giving way to a workforce that was increasingly transient, non-union, service workers.

This shift in the labor market splintered the labor community and changed it from “a unified, politicized force for social change into a fragmented, depoliticized aggregate of unions, each minding their own interests.”²⁵ It was in this context that SEIU Local 400 (later SEIU Local 790) rose to become a prominent voice in the labor community and progressive wing of San Francisco politics. SEIU Local 790 was the first union to embrace organizing “miscellaneous” workers who were now making up the backbone of the San Francisco economy: service workers as well as a plethora of public sector workers: nurses, clerical workers, professionals, technicians, etc.²⁶ This array of industries led Local 790 to become one of the most geographically and racially diverse unions in the city.

This diversity also firmly cemented the union in the progressive milieu of San Francisco politics. The “day-to-day interests” of union members concerned not just labor rights but racism, access to health care, immigrant rights, anti-gay policing, amongst a slew of other social and political concerns.²⁷ Therefore, the membership of SEIU was also more heavily involved in movements and political causes outside of just the labor movement. This created a strong solidarity network for SEIU, whose members garnered a reputation for always showing up to protests and picket in the city.²⁸ This broad and varied membership made the make up of SEIU

²⁵ DeLeon, 26.

²⁶ Paul Johnston, *Success While Others Fail : Social Movement Unionism and the Public Workplace* (Ithaca, N.Y.: ILR Press, 1994), 186.

²⁷ Ibid., 188.

²⁸ Stephanie Batey, interviewed by Sophie Edelhart. January 21st, 2019.

Local 790 look a lot more like the majority of the economic base of San Francisco circa 1993: racially diverse, young, and predominantly female.²⁹ This was “a perfect description, except perhaps the low paid part, of the Lusty Lady workers.”³⁰ The burgeoning service economy was changing the sex industry as well.

According to Elizabeth Bernstein, in the post industrial economy of San Francisco, “compared to men with similar forms of educational capital and class provenance, middle-class women...[were] much more likely to find themselves working in the lowest paid quarters of the temporary help industry, in the service and hospitality sectors, or in other poorly remunerated part time jobs.”³¹ Work in the legal sex industry, as strippers, phone sex operators, porn models, etc. paid significantly better compared to jobs in these sectors and so were attractive to many middle-class women, many with college degrees.

In September of 1996, Carol Queen, a sociologist and former Lusty Lady dancer, was invited to be on Michael Krasny’s talk radio show on KQED, San Francisco’s public radio station, to participate in a debate about the Lusty Lady unionization drive. During the debate, she pointed out this shift in the demographics of the sex industry:

“We need to view this organizing drive not only in the context of the changing face of labor...we need to look at it also in the terms of the adult/exotic industry’s huge growth during the past several years; this is now a more substantial slice of the workforce than it used to be, and more and more women are drawn to it during tough economic times. Also relevant is the growing sophistication of its labor force. Dancers are still marginalized,

²⁹ Stephanie Batey, interviewed by Sophie Edelhart. January 21st, 2019.

³⁰ Carol Queen, “Union Maids.” *Spectator*. September 6th, 1996. Box 1, Folder 5. Lusty Lady Collection, larc.ms. 0365. Labor Archives and Research Center, San Francisco State University.

³¹ Elizabeth Bernstein, *Temporarily Yours : Intimacy, Authenticity, and the Commerce of Sex* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 80.

but today's exotic performer has the support of sex-positive feminists, and others, and she is likely to be increasingly savvy about her place in the labor market."³²

The make up of the sex industry was beginning to mirror the make up of the service economy and so, as SEIU Local 790 continued to manage the odds and ends of the service industry, it was only natural that once sex workers started looking to organize, SEIU would be the union to call. Johanna Breyer, founder of the Exotic Dancers Alliance, was represented by SEIU Local 790 at her job at the AIDS Foundation, so when the Lusty Lady reached out looking for a labor contact, she put them in touch.³³

SEIU Local 790

"So, the union had an existential crisis at that point," said Stephanie Batey, who would later become the SEIU representative for the Lusty Lady Exotic Dancers Union, "because these were women who worked at a peepshow...and the international union was really not happy about that at all."³⁴ Local 790, as the radical progressive, always picketing, gay-rights supporting local was already considered the black sheep of SEIU International. So, when they were approached by the Lusty Lady dancers to represent a group of strippers, the stakes felt very high. On the one hand, this would be a revolutionary campaign if it was successful. On the other, it wasn't an industry any union had taken on before and was extremely taboo. The SEIU Local 790 union director told the dancers to come back with 75% of employees signed up on cards indicating they wanted a union. The Lusty Lady organizers came back a few weeks later with

³² Queen, "Union Maids."

³³ Johanna Breyer, interviewed by Sophie Edelhart. January 24th, 2019.

³⁴ Stephanie Batey, interviewed by Sophie Edelhart. January 21st, 2019.

99%.³⁵ Later, Steinbauer would say to the press, “We gave them a set of criteria to meet and they met every one. After that, we couldn’t refuse them—they were just too determined to organize.”³⁶

Stephanie Batey was assigned to be their union representative. Batey had been a student at U.C. Berkeley during the height of the student movement in the 1960’s. She was a member of one of the first feminist consciousness raising groups and an active member of the New Left and anti-war movement. In the late 60’s, she left college for Detroit to seek out industrial work because, according to her, students were seeking industrial jobs in order bring about revolution. She had experienced the ins and outs of workplace discrimination and misogyny herself in the string of jobs she had had in Detroit: first as a teacher, then a U.P.S. driver, then a forklift operator for Chrysler. So when she started organizing with the Lusty Lady dancers in 1996, she knew the challenges they were going to be up against. Not only were they women trying to organize a predominantly female industry, they were sex workers, which inspired additional ire in the majority old white male block that made up the labor establishment in San Francisco.

“United We Stand, Divided We Fall”

The Lusty Lady dancers were keenly aware of these obstacles. In an organizing guide the Lusty Lady dancers put together after their union drive, they wrote: “Unfortunately, the Labor Movement is tainted by the bigoted prejudices that plague society at large: strippers aren’t ‘real’ workers, and don’t make an ‘honest’ living, therefore do not deserve fair working conditions.”³⁷

³⁵ Stephanie Batey, interviewed by Sophie Edelhart. January 21st, 2019.

³⁶ Glen Martin, “North Beach Strippers Unite.” *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 14th, 1996. Box 1, Folder 5. Lusty Lady Collection, larc.ms.0365. Labor Archives and Research Center, San Francisco State University.

³⁷ “No Justice, No Piece!” 10.

However, they were determined to make their campaign as important to the organized labor community as it was for the sex worker community. For them, it wasn't a far stretch. The Exotic Dancers Union repeatedly used the language of labor to understand their own position as workers



and in this, saw shared interests with the labor movement (insofar as the labor movement could also recognize their work *as* work). As Jane, one of the Lusty Lady dancers, wrote later in the organizing guide, “everyone whose labor is exploited for profit is a whore; being a sex worker doesn’t make you more of one...why is it

any less honorable to sell your body in a strip joint than it is to sell your soul in a factory?”³⁸

This group of women harbored no shame for their profession, and rationalized it in their communications, strategies, and tactics through the language of labor rights.

The Lusty Lady dancers voted 57-15 to formally unionize on August 30th, 1996.

Immediately, June Cade, general manager of the Lusty Lady, took up with one of the most infamous union busting law firms in San Francisco: Littler, Mendelson, and Co. For months, the Lusty Lady bargaining team, Batey, and an external labor lawyer would trek to the downtown offices of Littler Mendelson to argue, for hours, about what workplace rights the Lusty Lady dancers deserved. According to Batey, “the lawyers were *all* men and they just could not get over that across from them were these women, all young women, bargaining with them who were not intimidated, to the contrary, they really knew how to psyche out those lawyers. Because they said

³⁸ “No Justice, No Piece!” 11.

to me, ‘Well, Stephanie, some of them are clients...’”³⁹ The bargaining committee, in their negotiations with lawyers and in communications they put out during and after the drive, constantly played up these charged sexual dynamics.

As Jane wrote in the organizing guide: “A skilled stripper is an asset to any bargaining committee. If you can get men to pay money for something they believe is rightfully theirs, you’re probably already an accomplished negotiator. You already know how to address a customer, exploit his weaknesses and insecurities, and manipulate any exchange with him to your advantage...the survival skills you’ve learned in the sex industry will probably be more valuable to you here than a law degree could ever be.”⁴⁰ Sex was their trade and used this to their advantage in their campaign. During one of the bargaining sessions, the women showed up to the table wearing only trench coats with nothing on underneath. The lawyers were so distracted practically nothing was discussed that day.⁴¹

After months of negotiations, much of the enthusiasm had been sucked from the campaign. Cade’s lawyers and the union had sent proposals back and forth with no negotiations or compromises reached. In January 1997, the dancers decided to inject the campaign with a new rush of adrenaline by participating in a work slowdown and picket. Negotiations had continued for four months with little progress, the media cycle had come and gone and there was little to show for all the months of arguing. On January 26th, 1997, the union led a picket outside the theater in response to the firing of a union member for participating in a work slowdown they had done the previous Tuesday. They carried signs reading “SINGLE MOTHER FIRED FOR

³⁹ Stephanie Batey, interviewed by Sophie Edelhart. January 21st, 2019.

⁴⁰ “No Justice, No Piece!” 51.

⁴¹ Stephanie Batey, interviewed by Sophie Edelhart. January 21st, 2019.

UNION ACTIVITY” and chanted invectives against management.⁴² The picket was a first of its kind for several reasons. It was a rare occasion that women in the sex industry were addressing workplace violations in such a public way but it was also a revitalization of a kind of labor organizing which had by the mid-1990s had fallen out of fashion. As Jane, one of the dancers at the Lusty Lady later recalled, “After we did [the picket], people in the union were saying, ‘No one’s done that in ten years. You guys are so militant.’ Which was kind of funny to us because we thought, ‘That’s what you do, right?’”⁴³

The Exotic Dancers Union was running a campaign that reflected their belief in the labor movement and its tactics while also breaking new ground about how to talk about working conditions in a sector which until then, had been taken for granted as an industry riddled with abuses. Stephanie Batey emphasized how new these discussions and actions really were: “We had these great discussions about working conditions which meant you were discussing how much cum was in the peep booth and why the owners wouldn’t provide



more custodial time to clean the booth...there were issues about the poles and being cleaned in between the dancers...We were talking about it because we were writing language to put in the

⁴² Live Nude Girls Unite!

⁴³ Christine Beatty, “At The Exotic Dancers Alliance Fundraiser,” *Spectator*, July, 1997. Box 1, Folder 5. Lusty Lady Collection, larc.ms.0365. Labor Archives and Research Center, San Francisco State University.

contract about these things. Well who had ever had discussions about that? Nobody. Especially all these lawyers.”⁴⁴

The creativity of their tactics and the continued innovations of their campaign, as well as their insistence on the interests of sex worker unionization to the labor community eventually began to have impact. During the beginning of their campaign, Lusty Lady dancers would regularly show up to San Francisco Central Labor Council meetings to garner support and provide updates on their campaign, as well as to all the other local nurse, clerical, service, and public sector unions that SEIU represented. At some of the first CLC meetings, they endured snide comments and catcalls from men in the trade unions. The women in the CLC also did not welcome them with open arms because many of the women active in labor organizing, themselves trailblazers in their professions, had a hard time seeing stripping as anything but degrading, and certainly not aligned with their own feminist principles.

Despite these challenges, Lusty Lady dancers were so effective in their campaign and garnered so much local support and press coverage, that they “got grudging respect from the guys even when they couldn’t let go of their own misogyny.”⁴⁵ It remained a live conversation amongst the rank and file but as Stephanie Batey put it, “you couldn’t fight with success.”⁴⁶ They managed to not only make people excited about organized labor but actually won a good contract in which they established a set wage scale, received sick leave, got paid for time prepping to go on stage, and the permanent removal of one-way mirror booths.⁴⁷ The success of the Lusty Lady

⁴⁴ Stephanie Batey, interviewed by Sophie Edelhart. January 21st, 2019.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ “California’s Unionized Nude Dancers Ratify Contract.” April 10th, 1997. *Yahoo News*. Box 1, Folder 5. Lusty Lady Collection, larc.ms.0365. Labor Archives and Research Center, San Francisco State University.

organizers revitalized labor organizing in San Francisco and ultimately much of the labor establishment came around to seeing sex workers as not only deserving of worker protections but as the frontier of a new generation of union organizing.

During the campaign, the Exotic Dancers Union garnered endorsements from a broad spectrum of the labor community. On August 17th, 1996, the San Francisco I.W.W. or “Wobblies” authored a resolution indicating their support for the Lusty Lady. The I.W.W. was one of the oldest and most militant labor organizations around known for their staunchly leftist political bent. I.W.W. International had been supporting sex workers unionization since 1990 but had done little to implement it themselves, especially in the United States. In the resolution authored by the San Francisco branch, they recognized the historical oversight, “[sex] workers... are among the most economically exploited, socially stigmatized and marginalized toilers in society, and have been historically neglected by the union movement and thus remain almost universally unorganized.”⁴⁸ When the San Francisco branch had the opportunity to do good on their commitment to changing this, they pledged to stand “shoulder to shoulder in solidarity” with the Exotic Dancers Union and show up on their picket line.⁴⁹

On the other end, Art Pulaski, the executive secretary treasurer of the California AFL-CIO, one of the largest and most mainstream unions in the country, gave a modest endorsement: “This contract is small in the context of the whole organizing drive labor is undertaking across the country but it is consistent with our focus on the underpaid and neglected.”⁵⁰ A broad swath

⁴⁸ “IWW Resolution.” August 17th, 1996. Box 1, Folder 5. Lusty Lady Collection, larc.ms.0365. Labor Archives and Research Center, San Francisco State University.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ “The naked truth,” *The Economist*, May 3rd, 1997. Box 1, Folder 5. Lusty Lady Collection, larc.ms.0365. Labor Archives and Research Center, San Francisco State University.

of the labor community, from the small local shops of SEIU to the California AFL-CIO were looking to the sex industry and beginning to understand what the Lusty Lady dancers had been articulating for a long time: that they were workers and as workers deserved the same basic labor protections as any other industry. Early in the campaign, Sandra Steinbauer, a SEIU Local 790 representative, had said to the San Francisco Chronicle: “The sex industry is ripe for organizing...there’s growing recognition among sex workers that they deserve the same protections and benefits as other working people. There’s a new spirit taking hold in this city.”⁵¹

Conclusion

This new spirit was shared amongst the women of the Lusty Lady, the sex worker community, and organized labor in San Francisco. For each, the Lusty Lady unionization drive represented a hopeful future in the next millennium. As the San Francisco Chronicle said very plainly, “At a time when union protections and rank-and-file numbers are receding nationally, it is refreshing to see a labor revival.”⁵² For the severely weakened and fractured labor movement in San Francisco, the Lusty Lady union posed a new opportunity for revitalization. Apart from presenting the labor movement with a workforce that was untapped and hungry for unionization, they also represented the broader economic shift from industrial to service labor that until then, the labor community had been want to ignore.

For the women of the Lusty Lady and the broader sex workers community, beyond improving their day to day working conditions, the campaign also became a way to actualize, for the first time, that sex work *was* work and sex workers deserving of the same dignity as others.

⁵¹ Martin, “North Beach Strippers Unite.”

⁵² “Lucky Ladies- Local 790 Wins First U.S. Contract.” *SEIU Local 790 Newspaper*. April-May 1997. Ephemera Collection. Labor Archives and Research Center, San Francisco State University.

To have language about how much cum should be in a peep booth before it gets cleaned in a union contract seemed somehow revolutionary. Julia Query, one of the lead organizers, reflecting on the campaign later would say: “We have nothing to fear from organizing...There’s no reason not to build unity among sex workers and not to fight for improved working conditions. We have everything to gain by doing so.”⁵³

⁵³ Beatty, “At The Exotic Dancers Alliance Fundraiser”

Chapter Two: Sex Workers of the World Unite! *Sex Worker Feminism and the Lusty Lady*

Introduction

Gina Gold moved out to San Francisco on a whim after a visit to a friend became an indefinite stay. She started working in telemarketing, later transitioning to a phone sex line where a coworker suggested she look into stripping at the Lusty Lady. Dancing was better money than phone sex but Gold felt hesitant about making the leap from phone sex to stripping, she felt as though she didn't have the right body or attitude, but the Lusty Lady had a reputation as a feminist club so she decided to go and audition anyway. "I went down..and auditioned and was hired. I asked the show director how she could define herself as a feminist and still dance. She told me that there was nothing wrong with being a sex worker, and that it was possible for sex workers to actually be feminist. I had just never combined the two before."⁵⁴ When she started at the Lusty Lady, she still felt a certain degree of shame. Shame about her body, shame about the men sitting in the booth watching her, shame about the fact that she was stripping in the first place.

Over the course of her time at the Lusty, the shyness and insecurity she started out with would develop into a sense of empowerment. Spending so much time with her body and learning to take control on the stage turned into a learning experience. As she said, "It's true that women lose a sense of power even before they come into the sex industry, just because our society is sexist--but women can also gain something powerful from being in the sex industry. When you dance you're hustling, telling customers, 'You need to do this. You need to give me this amount

⁵⁴ Siobhan Brooks "Solid Gold Dancer: An Interview with Gina Gold," *Bitch*; *San Francisco*, May 31, 2000.

of money.’ That’s a skill most women aren’t taught to have.”⁵⁵ This framework of sex work, as a positive force capable of enacting feminist values was a fundamental tenant of sex worker feminism and would also be a linchpin of Lusty Lady dancer’s understanding of themselves and the work they did.

Gold’s articulation of how sex work served as a form of female empowerment would become a common rhetorical tactic used by the Lusty Lady dancers during their unionization campaign. Bodily autonomy and control of men informed not only how they approached their work in the sex industry but also how they approached their organizing. They inherited a theoretical understanding of their sexual labor as a feminist value from a generation of sex worker organizers that came before them and during their campaign they were able to enact these feminist principles in a new way. Throughout the unionization drive, Lusty Lady dancers placed themselves in a feminist context and used the language of sex work and sex worker feminism to reaffirm their power and agency.

This chapter analyzes the history of sex worker activism in San Francisco beginning in the 1970s, as well as the theoretical foundations of sex work, and how these practices of feminist sex work informed the Lusty Lady dancers during their campaign. In order to analyze these events, this chapter will build off of union publicity materials and endorsement letters from the Lusty Lady archive. In addition, this chapter will build off the scholarly work of Melinda Chateauvert, Josh Sides, Robert Self, as well first person accounts by sex workers such as Carol Leigh, Gina Gold, and Tawnya Dudash. These sources display how sex worker feminism was a

⁵⁵ Brooks, “Solid Gold Dancer.”

necessary precursor to sex worker unionization and how the language of sex work impacted the Lusty Lady campaign.

Background

For most of the 20th century, obscenity laws had restricted explicit material from being sold or viewed in public. In the 1960s and 1970s, a series of court cases rolled back these laws and declared pornographic content as protected free speech.⁵⁶ This proliferation of pornographic material concerned many feminists who saw it as mainstreaming objectification and over-sexualization of women. Women Against Violence in Pornography and Media (WAVPM) was founded in San Francisco in 1976 after the release of the pornography film *Snuff*, which pantomimed the live murder and evisceration of a woman. Though the organization originally targeted its message only at pornography that depicted women being “bound, raped tortured or murdered for sexual stimulation” its message eventually expanded to include all pornographic content. On November 18, 1978, the San Francisco chapter of WAVPM staged a Take Back the Night action which saw some 5,000 women marching on North Beach in protest of the objectification of women, the neon signs of strip joints Big Al’s and The Condor Club looming above them.⁵⁷

WAVPM’s intellectual leaders, Andrew Dvorkin and Catherine McKinnon popularized an anti-sex, anti-porn feminism which rested on the idea that in a patriarchal society, women couldn’t enjoy sex because all sexual acts (and by extension sexual content) were merely another way for men to assert their dominance over women. In centering one particular kind of sexual

⁵⁶ Robert O. Self, “Sex in the City: The Politics of Sexual Liberalism in Los Angeles, 1963–79,” *Gender & History* 20, no. 2 (August 2008), 298.

⁵⁷ Josh Sides, “Excavating the Postwar Sex District in San Francisco,” *Journal of Urban History* 32, no. 3 (March 2006), 370.

experience and endorsing censorship over reform, WAVMP erased many women from their analysis. This spurred women to publicly discuss and defend their sexual desires including women who enjoyed BDSM, watching porn, and women who chose to work in the sex industry. Anti-porn feminists made pornography and sexuality a central issue of feminist discourse, and in doing so, spurred sex workers to consider their profession in a feminist context.

When WAVPM announced their first conference in San Francisco in 1978, Carol Leigh, a prostitute and activist, decided to attend as a kind of sex industry ambassador in order to educate other feminists about the lived realities of prostitution. When she arrived, she saw that the panel on prostitution was titled the “Sex Use Industry.” “The words stuck out and embarrassed me. How could I sit amid other women as a political equal when I was being objectified like that, described only as something used, obscuring my role as an actor and agent in this transaction?”⁵⁸ At the beginning of the workshop, she stood up and instead suggested that the workshop be called “Sex Work Industry” because it actually described what women *did* in the sex industry.

Carol Leigh had been working as a prostitute for several years when she attended the conference. Before beginning in the sex industry, Leigh would have been indistinguishable from many of the women there. She had been part of the lesbian separatist and feminist consciousness raising movements in Boston throughout the 1970’s and had absorbed that the sex industry was a tool of violence against women, although in secret she had harbored sexual fantasies of being a prostitute. In the late 1970s, she moved to San Francisco, inspired by the Scott Mackenzie song: “If you’re going to San Francisco/ Be sure to wear some flowers in your hair.” When she arrived, she was in need of money, and began working as a prostitute in a massage parlor, making \$35 for

⁵⁸ Carol Leigh, “Inventing Sex Work” in *Whores and Other Feminists*, ed. Jill Nagle (New York: Routledge, 1997), 230.

every blowjob. The reality of her life in the sex industry was hugely different from how it had been discussed in feminist circles she had been a part of on the East Coast.⁵⁹

The term “sex work” would come to have great significance amongst activists in the sex industry in the following decades. It was a “feminist contribution to the language” as it not only united women in the industry under one banner but also defined the industry by what the *women* in it were doing and not just what they were selling. Leigh herself declared the coining of the term “sex work” as “the beginning of a movement.”⁶⁰ San Francisco, the birthplace of both anti-porn feminism and sex worker feminism, was the staging ground for this shift to acknowledging sex work as work.

COYOTE (Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics)

At the forefront of this shift was COYOTE (Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics), an organization of which Leigh was a part. Founded by Margo St. James in 1973, COYOTE began as a social services organization for prostitutes in San Francisco, later developing into an advocacy organization which sought to decriminalize prostitution nationwide.⁶¹ St. James was inspired to start the organization after hosting a series of support groups for sex workers where she began to notice patterns of legal and institutional discrimination and marginalization.

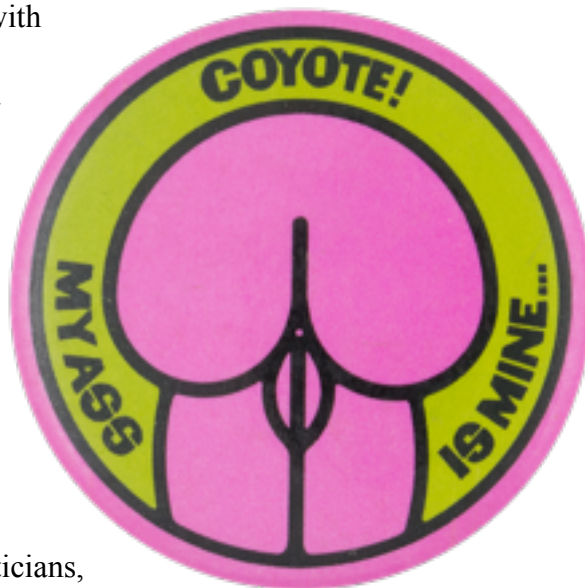
COYOTE offered a radically different notion of sex worker activism than had existed previously. It ran by a policy of “hookers helping hookers” and approached the issue of sex work without moralizing or demoralizing the women involved in it. COYOTE’s advocacy resulted in

⁵⁹ Carol Leigh, interviewed by Sophie Edelhart. March 3rd, 2019.

⁶⁰ Leigh, “Inventing Sex Work,” 230.

⁶¹ Melinda Chateauvert, *Sex Workers Unite! : A History of the Movement from Stonewall to Slutwalk* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 2013), 61.

the end of mandatory quarantine for arrested prostitutes as well as a slew of other legal and political shifts in addressing prostitution in San Francisco. St. James maintained the success of COYOTE through bridging political and legal savvy with sexuality and humor. Through the connections she had made as a temp for a bail bondsman, she had connections to the legal community and certain government agencies who she recruited to help advocate on behalf of COYOTE. She fundraised through events like the Hooker's Ball, an annual party which drew drag queens, prostitutes, artists, local politicians, and once even, the San Francisco police chief. She brought the sexual underground of San Francisco into the halls of power and vice versa and in doing so managed to shift public perceptions of prostitution and sex work.⁶²



Through COYOTE, St. James pioneered a new kind of feminist practice which showed that sex work was not just a last resort or something to be ashamed of for women, but something that should be respected and even celebrated. St. James, Leigh, and other early COYOTE members had their roots in the feminist movement and articulated their role as sex workers as being one of bodily autonomy and agency, not exploitation.⁶³ This is shown in their messaging that regularly included the slogan “MY ASS IS MINE.” The precedent set by organizations like COYOTE paved the way for Lusty Lady dancers to employ this feminist understanding of sex

⁶² Samantha Majic, *Sex Work Politics: From Protest to Service Provision* (Philadelphia, United States: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 3.

⁶³ Chateaufort, *Sex Workers Unite!*, 61.

work. Throughout their campaign, ownership of their bodies and bodily choices as well as the use of sexuality as a tool of power were regular rhetorical strategies.

The Lusty Lady

The culture of the Lusty Lady rested on its feminist reputation. It was female owned-and-operated which attracted many highly educated feminist college students, an aspect that was very noticeable to Gina Gold upon her arrival: “I had to get used to women studying nude in the dressing room. I didn’t have the stereotype that strippers were stupid or that they didn’t go to school, but there was still something strange about seeing women coming from class, undressing, and getting ready for work. After a while women walking around nude with books became natural for me.”⁶⁴ As explained in the previous chapter, in the 1990s the expansion of the service economy led to an increase in participation in the sex work industry as well as a shift in the demographic population of sex workers: increasingly more white, middle class, college educated women were entering the workforce.⁶⁵

Many of the women who danced at the Lusty Lady were students at San Francisco State University and many were also women’s studies majors. Siobhan Brooks, who would go on to be one of the union shop stewards explained how she got turned on to the Lusty through her college classmates: “I was familiar with the Lusty Lady because many of the students in my women’s studies classes (most of whom were White) were working there; it was known as a feminist strip club because women managed it and the president of the company that owned it was a

⁶⁴ Brooks, “Solid Gold Dancer.”

⁶⁵ Bernstein, 81.

woman.”⁶⁶ Thus, the environment at the Lusty Lady had a different tone from many of the other male owned sex businesses in San Francisco.



Body Politics

Lusty Lady dancers saw their work as being an enactment of their feminism and sex work as a means of resisting patriarchy, not submitting to it. When performing a show at the Lusty Lady, women would be staring at their own nude reflections and those of their fellow dancers for hours at a time. This experience brought women closer to their own bodies and the bodies of their fellow dancers. This was also aided by the fact that as employees and not independent contractors, the women weren't made to compete with one another for customer attention. Tawnya Dudash described a time at the Lusty when one dancer explained how she had never been able to locate her own urethra despite staring at vaginas for much of her work day. The other dancers all gathered around and pointed out their own urethra's for her and helped her to find her own. Dudash said, "In some respects, these interactions resemble a 1990s version of now-defunct consciousness-raising groups of the 1970s."⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Siobhan Brooks, *Unequal Desires: Race and Erotic Capital in the Stripping Industry* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 1.

⁶⁷ Tawnya Dudash, "Peepshow Feminism" in *Whores and Other Feminists*, ed. Jill Nagle (New York: Routledge, 1997), 106.

Gina Gold echoed something similar about how dancing at the Lusty Lady led her to feel less alienated from her body. “Yes, I felt very separated from [my vagina], but at the same time I think that's why I chose to be an exotic dancer--because I felt so separate from that area of my body. So I felt that by doing this I had control over how I was going to use it. I felt that doing sex work was the only way I had control over my body.”⁶⁸ This kind of openness about female sexuality and the female body brought some employees of the Lusty Lady closer to their bodies.

This body politic would come to play an important role during the work slowdown and walk out the dancers would organize in January 1997. After months of stalled contract negotiations, the Lusty Lady dancers had decided to participate in an action which they dubbed “No Pink Day!” During No Pink Day, the dancers refused to show their vulvas, and although this was not a requirement of the job, the “pussy show” was one of the Lusty Lady’s main draws.⁶⁹ The act of withholding their vulvas from the view of customers was an assertion not only of the control the dancers had over their bodies but also the control they had over the theater. They were able to slow down the club just by organizing to not show a body part. The job action was considered a success by the union, as it sent a clear message to management that the dancers were frustrated with the pace of negotiations.⁷⁰ The women showed a clear understanding of the power that their bodies had in spaces such as the Lusty Lady and were able to use them strategically and effectively.

⁶⁸ Brooks, “Solid Gold Dancer.”

⁶⁹ “No Justice, No Piece!,” 8.

⁷⁰ “Tuesday’s Job Action Was A Success!” Box 1, Folder 5, Lusty Lady Collection, larc.ms.0365. Labor Archives and Research Center, San Francisco State University.

Dealing with Men

In addition to the bonding experience of dancing with other women, dancer's ability to maintain control over their male clients also served as a form of empowerment. The peepshow structure, which put women behind glass rather than in customer's laps allowed them some authority over their environment and their customers. In fact, in most interactions, the dancers were the ones who had control. As one dancer, Dita, described:

“I had a guy try to shoo me away...because he wanted to look at a different dancer. I just said, ‘You can’t tell me what to do’...And I stuck my butt in the window and wouldn’t let him see anything, and I was like ‘You want to see ugly? I’ll put my asshole up against the glass, you know, for the next twenty minutes. I’ll give you ugly.’”⁷¹

Other dancers also describe using their platform (literally and figuratively) as a way to educate their male clients on how they should treat women. As another dancer, Rosetta, described, “I feel like the men that come in [who] want to take my power, or want to be in power, I see retraining them as part of my job...I almost make it political work to do that.”⁷² Gina Gold said that the opportunity to control men and reprimand them also became an important lesson in speaking up for herself, a lesson that she took into her everyday life.⁷³ This understanding of sex work as a political tool against patriarchy was enacted through their work in the club as well as through their unionization effort.

The camaraderie forged between women at the club as well as a playful power they held over men would become part of the messaging and strategy of the Lusty Lady union. During

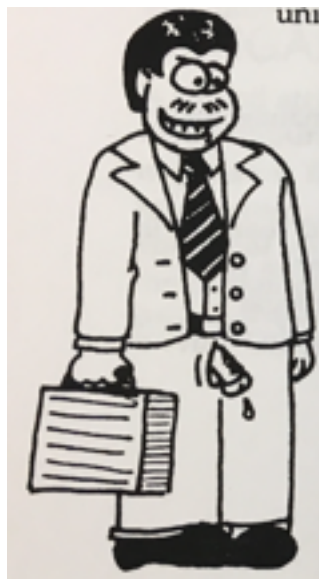
⁷¹ Dudash, “Peepshow Feminism,” 102.

⁷² Ibid. 103.

⁷³ Brooks, “Solid Gold Dancer.”

bargaining, the women used the gender dynamics of the room to their advantage: them, a group of young women, facing off against a table full of male union-busting lawyers. As discussed in the previous chapter, the Lusty Lady shop stewards often used their sexuality during negotiations as a bargaining tactic but in addition, they also sexualized their opposition, consistently comparing them to whores as well as their own customers.

At a bargaining session on November 11th, a Littler Mendelsson lawyer (who was referred to as Mr. Burns by the dancers) threatened to end negotiations if the union continued to



release reports of each bargaining session. In the next union flyer they released, the Lusty Lady dancers wrote: “If Mr. Byrnes had spent this long **jerking off** in the booth, instead of at the negotiating table, it would have cost him at least 100 bucks, but most of us charge a lot more to play the **submissive** or wear a **gag**.”⁷⁴ Reference to lawyers as the potential customers appeared in other forums as well. In an article published in *Danzine*, a resource zine for sex workers, Jane Noe wrote that “the lawyers were like customers from hell: like the

egotists who want something for nothing, they were constantly trying to control the show. Their female submission fantasies didn’t go over well at a bargaining table full of tops and pro-doms.”⁷⁵ In writing about the lawyers this way, the dancers were asserting their sexual dominance over these men and reaffirming that just because they were sitting across a bargaining table and not in a booth, it didn’t make them any less in control.

⁷⁴ Union flyer. November, 1997. Box 1, Folder 5. Lusty Lady Collection, larc.ms.0365. Labor Archives and Research Center, San Francisco State University.

⁷⁵ “No Justice No Piece!” December 12th, 1997. *Danzine*. Box 1, Folder 5. Lusty Lady Collection, larc.ms.0365. Labor Archives and Research Center, San Francisco State University.

Aside from using highly sexualized language to refer to the lawyers and their sexual fantasies about the dancers, the union also compared the lawyers tactics to those of sex workers themselves. In the same union flyer from the November 11th meeting, the dancers encouraged other union members to show up as observers, writing: “Mr.Byrnes’ show is highly recommended by all in attendance, a real five-star mindfuck.”⁷⁶ Reference to bargaining as a “performance” would appear again in the union-authored labor organizing guide for sex workers:

“Instead of working out an agreement with us, company lawyers spent most of the bargaining sessions engaged in performance art that easily rivaled our own in caliber and affectation. Like a stripper who waits until the end of the song to wiggle out of her panties, the lawyers kept their client paying by teasing us with lengthy diatribes...the lawyers turned out to be far better whores than we could ever aspire to be.”⁷⁷

Using this rhetorical strategy not only undermined the lawyer’s intimidating and stalling tactics but also pointed out the hypocrisy in criticizing sex work as not honest work. All professions, whether as a lawyer or exotic dancer meant putting on a show, one just involved taking your clothes off. Through their organizing and communications, Lusty Lady dancers were flipping the gender stereotypes of their profession on its head, making sex work a site and symbol of female solidarity, power, and humor instead of repression.

Conclusion

The Lusty Lady’s unionization effort in the 1990s was not the beginning of sex worker feminism but the result of a lineage of activism and network building that had already occurred. COYOTE pioneered the idea of sex work as work, legitimized the issues of sex workers in the

⁷⁶ Union flyer. November, 1997. Box 1, Folder 5. Lusty Lady Collection, larc.ms.0365. Labor Archives and Research Center, San Francisco State University.

⁷⁷ “No Justice, No Piece!” 7.

eyes of the courts, politicians, and social workers, and made sex work a central and intersectional issues for other activists and feminist groups in the Bay Area. By the time the Lusty Lady launched their union, they received the endorsement of the Mills College Alumni Association,⁷⁸ the Exotic Dancer's Alliance, Theater for Incarcerated Women, ACT UP, and Margo St. James herself, representing COYOTE.⁷⁹ Sex worker's labor rights was not marginal by this time, and the Lusty Lady dancers were able to actualize, through a union contract, what activists had been advocating for for decades.

In the union organizing guide for exotic dancers that the Lusty Lady union published after they won their contract in 1997, the back page features a raised fist with long lacquered nails and the words "This revolution cannot be won alone. Workers in every peep show, nudie bar, brothel, adult bookstore, massage parlor porn studio, phone sex bank, dungeon, and bedroom must rise up! Sex workers of the world unite!"⁸⁰ The dancers as well as their allies believed that the contrary to previous feminist waves, viewed sex work as the frontlines of the feminist movement, not contrary to it. They saw their unionization as not just a fight for labor rights but a fight for women's rights and women's autonomy over her body and her work.

⁷⁸ Mills College is a historically women's college in Oakland, California.

⁷⁹ Endorsement Letter; Rhodessa Jones to June Cade. August 20th, 1996. Box 1, Folder 5. Lusty Lady Collection, larc.ms.0365. Labor Archives and Research Center, San Francisco State University.

⁸⁰ "No Justice, No Piece!"

Chapter Three: “Wide Open Town”

Building a Political Community in San Francisco

Ahead of the unionization vote in August of 1996, the Lusty Lady dancers were seeking out endorsements from prominent political figures and community leaders. They wrote a form letter, outlining how the letter writer was appalled at June Cade’s union busting tactics, and sent it off, receiving signed letters from many different local politicians, activist groups, and artists. One amongst them, Rhodessa Jones, Artistic Director of the Theater for Incarcerated Women, decided to write a letter in her own words. She wrote, “As an activist in the women’s community I feel that sex workers should be treated as workers with equality in the city of San Francisco. It is in the best interest of our 'City' to treat the Lusty Lady workers fairly. In our city of international scope, they do contribute to the cultural elan of San Francisco.”⁸¹ Jones emphasized not only how important it was that the Lusty Lady workers got a fair union election but also how important these women were to the culture of the city.

Strategically, the Lusty Lady employees knew that it would be challenging to win a unionizing campaign on the merits alone. So they created connections and garnered endorsements from all walks of San Francisco life and in doing so made their unionization relevant and significant to communities far beyond the reaches of the club. The organizers used this broad coalition to pressure June Cade, manager of the Lusty Lady, to recognize the union. The Lusty Lady dancers positioned themselves as a community that could engage in the political process and build solidarity with other groups, movements, and politicians to achieve their goals.

⁸¹ Rhodessa Jones to June Cade. August 20th, 1996. Box 1, Folder 5. Lusty Lady Collection, larc.ms.0365. Labor Archives and Research Center, San Francisco State University.

This chapter analyzes the role of the city in the Lusty Lady campaign, focusing on the role of local politics. In particular, it will look at how a left-leaning political culture in the city allowed for political partnerships to be made between sex workers, city agencies, and activist groups. It will then explore how broad-based political coalitions impacted the strategy of the Lusty Lady union. This chapter builds primarily on scholarship by Richard Edward DeLeon, endorsement letters and union meeting notes from the Lusty Lady archive, as well as an interview with Johanna Breyer, one of the founders of the Exotic Dancers Alliance.

Background

San Francisco is a frontier town in several ways. Geographically, it sits on the edge of the country. It is a peninsula surrounded by water, the Pacific Ocean to the West and the San Francisco Bay to the East. Culturally, San Francisco exists in the American zeitgeist as a “wide open town—a town where anything goes.”⁸² The city’s reputation was as much about the social outcasts that made community there as it was about the beautiful rolling hills and cable cars. This reputation was earned from a legacy of progressive politics and culture which was created through a couple of interlocking social factors: a decentralized political structure and a diverse and politically active population.

The decentralization of San Francisco politics is a result of its status as a consolidated city and county. This structure was implemented in 1932 as a way to “safeguard local government against power grabs by corrupt politicians.”⁸³ Therefore, instead of a top down system, executive power is spread across many city agencies, each of which has specific

⁸² Nan Alamilla Boyd, *Wide-Open Town : A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 2.

⁸³ DeLeon, 21.

authority over the issues they are tasked with addressing. This “hyperpluralistic” system means that no one person has ultimate power in politics. According to Richard deLeon, “‘Getting things done’ in San Francisco requires much more than a mayor’s formal powers, which are modest at best, and hinges instead on his or her skills as a political entrepreneur in building coalitions, assembling resources, negotiating deals, and harnessing the energies of government clerks.”⁸⁴ This makes the political machine of San Francisco not only more accessible to citizens but also creates a political culture built on broad coalitions, activism, and community input.

The citizenry of San Francisco is part and parcel of this political fabric. The 1960s countercultural movement deeply influenced San Francisco’s political culture. The ‘sixties generation’ learned how to organize at a very young age, and that political skill translated into advocacy around local issues.⁸⁵ According to Tony Kilroy’s *Directory of San Francisco’s Politically Active Groups from 1990*, there were 772 political organizations, 216 of which were classified as political “always.”⁸⁶ These organizations were a mix of identity-based advocacy organizations and larger issue-based tent organizations such as SEIU Local 790. This highly mobilized and politicized populace was important to the political ecosystem because of its reliance on networks and coalition building. Each community had a political organization attached to it, and through endorsements and lobbying they were able to claim a stake in city government.

⁸⁴ DeLeon, 22.

⁸⁵ Ben Goddard, “The Rise of Grass-Roots Populism: Quality of Life Issues Spur A Fast Growing Movement,” *Campaigns and Elections* 8 (January 1988), 83.

⁸⁶ DeLeon, 25.

This political scenery meant that San Francisco had the “history, culture, politics, people, and resources for sexual outlaws and social deviants to organize a movement for their liberation and rights.”⁸⁷ Beginning in the 1970s with COYOTE, sex workers began organizing themselves as a community that could participate in this city government with their own political advocacy organization. In the 1980s, declining working conditions in San Francisco’s strip clubs led to the formation of a splinter group from COYOTE focused specifically on workplace issues experienced by exotic dancers, lap dancers, and strippers.

The Exotic Dancers Alliance

Dawn Passar started stripping in 1982. She had just moved to San Francisco from Thailand, where she had also worked as a stripper and saw that it was an easy industry to break into in the city. Her first job was at the Mitchell Brothers’ O’Farrell Theater, a former XXX-movie theater turned lap dancing club, where she worked until 1987 until she was laid off to get “new faces” in the club. Just after she left Mitchell Brothers’, the theater instituted new rules for dancers that slashed their wages to \$0 in favor of a “stage fee” system where dancers had to pay for their time on stage and in exchange got to keep all of their tips. The club where she landed after, Market Street Cinema, soon began instituting the same rules. Whereas before, dancers could expect standard wages and tips, this new system meant that women were seeing less money for their work, sometimes just breaking even. The sex work industry in San Francisco saw an increase in these kinds of exploitative workplace practices in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In response to these increasingly challenging conditions, Dawn Passar and Johanna Breyer, another dancer at Market Street Cinema, hosted a meeting to discuss the potential of

⁸⁷ Chateaufort, 50.

legal recourse against the managers of the theater.⁸⁸ This led the dancers to establish the Exotic Dancers Alliance (E.D.A.) in May 1993.

From the beginning, the Exotic Dancers Alliance had several hurdles already laid before it. As Dawn Passar recalls, “At first it wasn’t easy because when we were looking for a consultant we called up the Labor Commission to find out our rights, and when we told the people that we were strippers, they hung up on us.”⁸⁹ The stigma attached to sex workers meant that many unions and labor organizations wouldn’t go near the E.D.A., and without employee status, the women couldn’t petition for a union either. Breyer and Passar sought out alternatives. According to Passar, “Johanna and I [were] constantly meeting to strategize on different ways to reach out to women and to build a network with other city and government agencies to advocate on our behalf, and take us seriously as workers.”⁹⁰ Without other means available to them, Breyer and Passar began filing complaints and lawsuits in every relevant city agency and commission.

In 1993, they filed first with the Labor Commission to have themselves recognized as employees, then with the Department of Fair Employment and Housing regarding working conditions.⁹¹ This was followed by calls to the fire department to investigate if clubs were meeting building standards, filing for sexual discrimination and sexual harassment with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, and filing complaints with the Labor Board for

⁸⁸ Siobhan Brooks, “Exxxotic Power: The Sex Industry and Political Activism,” *Hues* (Mar,1999), 7.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Kamala Kempadoo, “Exotic Dancers Alliance” in *Global Sex Workers: Rights, Resistance, and Redefinition*, ed. Kamala Kempadoo and Jo Doezema, (New York: Routledge, 1998), 187.

⁹¹ Johanna Breyer, interviewed by Sophie Edelhart. January 24th, 2019.



unfair labor practices.⁹² The E.D.A's first win came in 1994 when it submitted a complaint to CAL-OSHA, the state's occupational health and safety organization, about the lack of doors on two bathrooms in the Market Street Cinema. CAL-OSHA demanded the club puts doors on the bathrooms, and although it was only a small complaint, Passar says, "This was a victory for us, having someone order the owner to do something for us. It was a small victory but it was a victory."⁹³ The E.D.A would continue to

advocate for dancers in this way, making incremental changes through various government agencies and departments.

In creating this political network, the Exotic Dancer's Alliance built a community out of a workforce which up until then had been splintered. Passar said, "If we continue to work together as an organized group, we can achieve prosperity and protection as a unified community."⁹⁴ The political moment in San Francisco was such that Breyer and Passar could actively pursue other avenues of organizing and trust that local officials understood that they also had an interest in making conditions better for exotic dancers. As Breyer said:

⁹² Gall, 29.

⁹³ Brooks, "Exxxotic Power," 7.

⁹⁴ Kempadoo, "Exotic Dancers Alliance" in *Global Sex Workers: Rights, Resistance, and Redefinition*, 191.

“We were really able to sit down with the Mayor’s Office, sit down with the District Attorney’s office, go to city government and talk about what we were dealing with... Everybody sitting at the same table with a bunch of dancers, asking how can we do this? How can we move this forward? That was the climate 25 years ago. It did lend itself to allowing us to make those connections.”⁹⁵

As a consequence of the Exotic Dancers Alliance being locked out of traditional methods of workplace organizing, they ended up creating a broad network of dancers, social services organizations, and city agencies and increased the visibility of exotic dancers’ workplace grievances.

Lusty Lady

In their union organizing guide from 1998, the Lusty Lady dancers advised: “It’s difficult to win a union election with little or no outside support. When influential community groups, outspoken and respected political figures, and the customers you dance for say they’re behind you, that support can help pressure your employer to agree to a union demand.”⁹⁶ Throughout their campaign, Lusty Lady organizers garnered endorsements and support from various political groups, politicians, and activists. This support would become instrumental to their campaign and their strategy. By appealing to a broad base, the Lusty Lady organizers helped put themselves in a position of power and made their workplace struggle an intersectional issue.

LGBTQ+ Allies

The LGBTQ+ community had been close allies of the sex workers rights movement since the 1970s. Margo St. James, founder of COYOTE, was close friends with Harvey Milk, the first openly gay San Francisco district supervisor and prominent figure in the Castro St.

⁹⁵ Johanna Breyer, interviewed by Sophie Edelhart. January 24th, 2019.

⁹⁶ “No Justice, No Piece!” 26.

neighborhood. As respective leaders in their communities, they helped forge a partnership between LGBTQ+ people and sex workers and consistently showed up for each other's causes. In 1977, they co-hosted and judged an Anita Bryant look-alike drag contest to raise money for gay rights groups in Miami, and Milk was a regular guest at COYOTE's annual Hooker's Ball.⁹⁷ This partnership was deepened even further during the AIDS epidemic. Sex workers and gay men were two of the groups at highest risk for contracting HIV/AIDS. Both communities began to pioneer safe sex education and AIDS prevention, and they engaged in political activism for easier access to healthcare. Thus, sex workers and the LGBTQ+ community in San Francisco became united not just in solidarity, but also in common cause in the fight against AIDS.

By the 1990s, the gay community was one of the most powerful political blocs in San Francisco. LGBTQ+ people made up 16% of San Francisco's adult population and claimed "the highest level of electoral mobilization, representation, and political assimilation in the city's political system."⁹⁸ Political organizations such as the Harvey Milk LGBT Democratic Club were highly respected, and many open gays and lesbians occupied public offices in local government. Johanna Breyer and Dawn Passar were both on the political action committee of the Harvey Milk Club and in that space, Breyer said, "often times, we were having to explain the importance of the sex workers' rights initiatives and why sex workers should be aligned with certain communities."⁹⁹ Their organizing led the club to establish a sex worker caucus dedicated to advocating for the rights of sex workers and developing the intersection of the sex worker and gay community. By the time the EDA and Lusty Lady union were beginning to make inroads

⁹⁷ Chateuvert, 48.

⁹⁸ DeLeon, 30.

⁹⁹ Johanna Breyer, interviewed by Sophie Edelhart. January 24th, 2019.

into city politics in the early 1990s, the gay community was one of the first groups of people to assist them in their cause.

After the Lusty Lady dancers filed their petition to have a union election with the Labor Board in the Spring of 1996, June Cade began hiring abnormally high numbers of new dancers. Lusty Lady employees accused Cade of “sandbagging.” Sandbagging, otherwise known as unit packing, is when a manager hires a slew of new employees before a union vote in the hopes newer employees would be less likely to vote for unionization.¹⁰⁰ Management said the increase in hiring was due to regular dancer shortages over the summer. Still suspicious, the Lusty Lady union leaders decided to file an Unfair Labor Practice charge with the National Labor Relations Board against Cade for “Exuberant Hiring”.¹⁰¹ With Cade trying to sway the vote before it had even been officially announced, the Lusty Lady union leaders knew they needed to apply more pressure. In their union meeting notes from June 19, 1996 the dancers said they would draft a letter to be signed by supportive community groups and prominent political figures.¹⁰²

The letter they drafted was addressed to Cade and condemned the unfair labor practices she had been engaging in and encouraged her to “remain neutral” through the election process. By August, just ahead of the vote, many prominent gay and lesbian figures had sent letters of support. Tom Ammiano, the first openly gay teacher in San Francisco and member of the Board of Supervisors,¹⁰³ and Carole Midgen, California Assemblywoman and only lesbian state

¹⁰⁰ Union Meeting Notes. June 13th, 1996. Box 1, Folder 5. Lusty Lady Collection, larc.ms.0365. Labor Archives and Research Center, San Francisco State University.

¹⁰¹ A Message from Management. 1996. Box 1, Folder 5. Lusty Lady Collection, larc.ms.0365. Labor Archives and Research Center, San Francisco State University.

¹⁰² Union Meeting Notes. June 19th, 1996. Box 1, Folder 5. Lusty Lady Collection, larc.ms.0365. Labor Archives and Research Center, San Francisco State University.

¹⁰³ Tom Ammiano to June Cade. August 19th, 1996. Box 1, Folder 5. Lusty Lady Collection, larc.ms.0365. Labor Archives and Research Center, San Francisco State University.

legislator in Northern California, had signed letters to Cade.¹⁰⁴ The Lusty Lady dancers also had written endorsements from Jeff Sheehy¹⁰⁵, President of the Harvey Milk LGBT Democratic Club, as well as an endorsement letter from openly lesbian San Francisco supervisor Leslie Katz, who said “All workers have the right to decent working conditions...and I will continue to stand with you to ensure that this right becomes a reality.”¹⁰⁶ Additionally, ACT-UP SF, a radical activist group that focused on AIDS/HIV, sent a letter to the Lusty Lady dancers themselves ahead of their vote, saying “We all know just how exploited some workers are in the sex industry, which is why it is so important that we act in solidarity with the women and men at your theater.”¹⁰⁷ Prominent gay leaders were some of the first and strongest supporters of the Lusty Lady workers in their efforts.

Community Allies

In addition, the Lusty Lady’s affiliation with SEIU also garnered several important communal endorsements from the labor community. Although the labor movement's power had suffered in the preceding decades, SEIU Local 790, because it represented many city employees, still held significant political clout.¹⁰⁸ On July 30, 1996 SEIU Local 790 sent out a letter to supporters encouraging them to call or write to Cade to pressure her to let the union vote go

¹⁰⁴ Carole Midgen to June Cade. August 23rd, 1996. Box 1, Folder 5. Lusty Lady Collection, larc.ms.0365. Labor Archives and Research Center, San Francisco State University.

¹⁰⁵ Local 790 Endorsement Letter. July 11th, 1996. Box 1, Folder 5. Lusty Lady Collection, larc.ms.0365. Labor Archives and Research Center, San Francisco State University.

¹⁰⁶ Leslie Katz to Johanna Breyer. August 15th, 1996. Box 1, Folder 5. Lusty Lady Collection, larc.ms.0365. Labor Archives and Research Center, San Francisco State University.

¹⁰⁷ ACT-UP SF to Lusty Lady dancers. August 20th, 1996. Box 1, Folder 5. Lusty Lady Collection, larc.ms.0365. Labor Archives and Research Center, San Francisco State University.

¹⁰⁸ DeLeon, 27.

forward.¹⁰⁹ The President of the San Francisco Labor Council and Police Commissioner Pat Norman agreed to call Cade. Norman went so far as to “threaten to revoke the Lusty Lady’s police permit if June [didn’t] lay off.”¹¹⁰ Through SEIU, the organizers also received the signatures of several other prominent members of local politically active groups and unions, such as Local 29, The Gray Panthers, Californians for Justice, and the Institute for Community Health Outreach.¹¹¹

Another important strategic community were the customers of the Lusty Lady, those that enjoyed coming to the show and watching the dancers. However, the relationship between dancer and customer was complicated, and utilizing customers strategically had to be done delicately. In the union organizing guide, the Lusty Lady dancers encourage enlisting customers in the cause but point out that transgressing the boundary of dancer to worker was not a simple one. They wrote,

“Although you may encounter genuine customer support, altruism is generally not one of their strongest qualities. Because many customers actually believe that we pay attention to them because we ‘like’ them, rather than because they are paying us to, it can be a challenge for them to see us as actual workers rather than the objects of their delusional masturbatory fantasies. Don’t waste time trying to enlighten them; appeal to their self-interest instead.”¹¹²

The Lusty Lady dancers authored flyers specifically meant to target customers. In the spirit of appealing to their self-interest, these materials stressed how a union at the Lusty Lady would

¹⁰⁹ SEIU Local 790 to Supporters. July 30th, 1996. Box 1, Folder 5. Lusty Lady Collection, larc.ms.0365. Labor Archives and Research Center, San Francisco State University.

¹¹⁰ Union Meeting Notes. July 31st, 1996. Box 1, Folder 5. Lusty Lady Collection, larc.ms.0365. Labor Archives and Research Center, San Francisco State University.

¹¹¹ Local 790 Endorsements. Box 1, Folder 5. Lusty Lady Collection, larc.ms.0365. Labor Archives and Research Center, San Francisco State University.

¹¹² “No Justice, No Piece!,” 26.

ultimately benefit *them*. In one flyer, an image of a scantily clad woman takes up most of the page with the words “FAIR TREATMENT = HAPPY DANCERS; HAPPY DANCERS = HOTTER SHOWS” bordering her. At the bottom, it provides instructions on how the customer can let management know that they respect the union.¹¹³ Despite the challenges of dealing with customers, the flyering was relatively successful. It even led some customers to have their unions endorse the Lusty Lady campaign.¹¹⁴

A few months later when the Lusty Lady dancers picketed the theater, some customers even came to join them on the picket lines. One customer said “I would advise [the managers] that there are severe civil penalties for lock outs and for union busting, and I, as a very dedicated and loyal customer and patron of the Lusty Lady for years have become more enthusiastic about my patronage since the establishment of this union and if management continues in this vein, I will never step foot in here again.”¹¹⁵ Another said, “I’m sure they’re supporting themselves, their family, their kids, their significant other, supporting themselves through school.”¹¹⁶ Sympathy from customers was an important tool to wield, as were all the endorsements and words of support from various communities across San Francisco.

Conclusion

San Francisco had a certain political and social culture that allowed and openly encouraged sex worker’s participation in politics. 1996 was the same year that Margo St. James

¹¹³ Union flyer. Box 1, Folder 5. Lusty Lady Collection, larc.ms.0365. Labor Archives and Research Center, San Francisco State University.

¹¹⁴ Union Meeting Notes. July 31st, 1996. Box 1, Folder 5. Lusty Lady Collection, larc.ms.0365. Labor Archives and Research Center, San Francisco State University.

¹¹⁵ Live Nude Girls Unite!

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

ran for the San Francisco Board of Supervisors and two years after San Francisco had established the Task Force on Prostitution including such figures as Carol Leigh, Dawn Passar, and other prominent activists in the sex worker community. Johanna Breyer, reflecting on the political moment said, “There were other political organizations that allowed us to get in there and really convey our messages and get support from them and put [exotic dancers] on this other platform of workers' rights, labor issues, health and safety issues. All that work, I don’t know if it would have been able to happen in another city.”¹¹⁷ The Lusty Lady dancers harnessed this unique political situation to their advantage, establishing themselves as not merely a group of employees engaging in a labor dispute, but important contributors to the culture of San Francisco who were enacting the city's very deeply held values of freedom, dignity, and solidarity. When June Cade received those endorsement letters from state politicians and customers, she received a message that fighting the organizing campaign was not a battle against the union but a battle against the city, and that was going to be a much harder fight.

¹¹⁷ Johanna Breyer, interviewed by Sophie Edelhart. January 24th, 2019.



Conclusion

“The Lusty Lady Closes Her Legs for Good!”

The Lusty Lady Theater had its last call on September 2, 2013 at 3:00 am. The dancers had been evicted after the new owner of the building, Robert Forbes, refused to negotiate a new lease with the club. The dancers organized a New Orleans style funeral procession with a full brass band to honor the club and its closing. The fact that it was Labor Day made it all the more poignant. After the final shift, employees carried a pink coffin along with a banner reading “HO’S UP, PIMPS DOWN!” through the streets. Dancers at the club old and new, support staff, customers, neighborhood onlookers, and friends danced through North Beach until the wee hours of the morning, twerking in bar windows, grinding on historical landmarks of the Beat Generation, jumping on cars, and chanting, “LUST FOR LIFE!” For one more night, Lusty Lady workers again took over the streets of North Beach, the same ones they had taken over in 1997 when they had their first picket. After the crowds had dispersed, dancers exchanged hugs and farewells, took out the trash, and locked the doors for good.

The funeral procession was a raucous goodbye to the Lusty Lady and everything it had symbolized for the dancers who had come through it, but it was also eerily a farewell to the San Francisco that had helped make it possible, the San Francisco which “historically always found a way to support its freaks.”¹¹⁸ The gathering of weirdos and sex pots and drag queens that marched through the streets that night were a soon-to-be relic of an era that was being quickly swallowed by gentrification.

After finalizing their first contract in 1998, the Exotic Dancers Union of the Lusty Lady Theater immediately began seeking ways to bring their campaign to other clubs. Later that same year, they collectively authored an 80-page organizing guide for women in the exotic dancing industry, outlining unions to affiliate with, bargaining tactics, legal loopholes, etc. Everyone -- the dancers, the unions, the allies -- thought this campaign would be a touchstone that would spill out into other clubs in the city and across the country. Even June Cade was quoted as saying: “I think they plan to go to other clubs. This is probably just the beginning.”¹¹⁹

Though there were some attempts at unionization in other clubs in San Francisco, as well as Anchorage, Alaska, and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and other cities, they did not have the unique capacities that Lusty Lady dancers had had during their unionization fight. Regal Show World, another club in San Francisco, attempted to unionize with the help of Lusty Lady infiltrators. but ultimately the club filed for bankruptcy and switched management rather than deal with a unionization fight. In Philadelphia, dancers went so far as to schedule an election and begin a campaign, but the AFL-CIO and Teamsters union that had been helping them backed out

¹¹⁸ Lily Burana, “What It Was Like to Work at the Lusty Lady, a Unionized Strip Club,” *The Atlantic*, August 31, 2013, <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2013/08/what-it-was-like-to-work-at-the-lusty-lady-a-unionized-strip-club/279236/>.

¹¹⁹ Martin, *North Beach Strippers Unite*.

at the last minute. Lead organizers were sent death threats and fired, and eventually the constant attacks led to the demise of the campaign. In Anchorage, dancers at the Showboat attempted to affiliate with the Teamsters, only to be dropped by the union mid-way through their campaign. The club's ties to the Hell's Angels didn't help matters, and dancers experienced increased intimidation. Though they managed to win a financial settlement, no union was ever formed, and many dancers were scared of retribution if they attempted to do so.¹²⁰

As for the Lusty Lady itself, the workers there maintained their rabble-rouser reputation until the end. In 1998, they again had a strike for a new and improved contract. In 2003, when the owners wanted to close the business, the dancers came together and bought the club, making it the first, and only, worker-owned collective strip club in the country. The internet, and how it would change the sex industry and San Francisco, eventually became the death knell of the Lusty Lady.

Because of declining working conditions in sex businesses, more women were utilizing the internet to make their money. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, a new sexual marketplace arose on the internet. According to Elizabeth Bernstein, the internet made it "easier to work without third-party management, to conduct one's business with minimal interference from the criminal justice system, and to reap greater profits by honing one's sales pitch to a more... specialized audience."¹²¹ The increased autonomy offered by the online marketplace solved many of the problems of exploitative workplace environments. More and more women were leaving strip clubs and lap dancing joints to work online or do some hybrid of the two. Thus rose

¹²⁰ Gall, 43.

¹²¹ Bernstein, 93.

a new class of “online sexual entrepreneurs” who used the internet to market themselves and have interactions with clients. As these more private methods of sex work became more popular, the desire and need for brick and mortar sexual businesses declined.¹²²

Even in a changing sexual economy, the Lusty Lady still catered to a niche clientele. But as the city became increasingly expensive and dominated by the interests of new tech wealth, the niche was beginning to become non-existent. The tech boom led to a sharp increase in cash flow in San Francisco, and though at first this was a boon to San Francisco’s service sector, it eventually made the city so expensive that it was nearly impossible for working class people to afford to live there. The same went for small independent businesses like the Lusty Lady, which were closing down in droves in favor of corporate businesses catering to San Francisco’s nouveau riche. In 2001, Rob Forbes, a real estate magnate, bought the building that housed the Lusty Lady. Immediately, he increased the rent from \$5,500 to \$13,500 and continued to hike the price over the coming years. The Lusty Lady managed to get by until 2013, when Forbes refused to renew the lease and evicted them. Or in the words of one of the Lusty Lady employees, “Our landlord is a dildo and didn’t want to negotiate.”¹²³ His ties to Deja Vu Management, the management company which owned most of the other strip joints in San Francisco, led people to believe that Forbes was out to get the Lusty Lady to eliminate the last holdout against Deja Vu’s total monopoly.¹²⁴ For many, the demise of the Lusty Lady in favor of the corporate interests of a real estate mogul was a metaphor for the end of subversive San Francisco.

¹²² Bernstein, 74.

¹²³ Lauren Smiley, “Last Days at the Lusty Lady Strip Club,” *New Yorker*. August 23, 2013, <https://www.newyorker.com/business/currency/last-days-at-the-lusty-lady-strip-club>.

¹²⁴ “Lusty Lady and Sex Worker Power,” *FoundSF*. Accessed April 14, 2019, http://www.foundsf.org/index.php?title=Lusty_Lady_and_Sex_Worker_Power.

Today, it is difficult to say much has gotten better. The sex industry is as dangerous for women as it ever was. Almost exactly a year ago, the federal government passed SESTA/FOSTA, a law which prohibits sexual content from being published on the internet. The law was intended to cut down on online human trafficking but had the effect of depriving sex workers of the safety and security operating on the internet provided them. More websites and platforms are pushing sex workers off and leaving them with few other choices but returning to street walking, which has already resulted in a significant spike in violence towards sex workers and human trafficking.¹²⁵

In the strip clubs, the gains made by the Lusty Lady and the EDA in the 1990s were slowly done away with through a series of lawsuits and maneuvers by club owners. Now, nearly the entire industry is independently contracted and the conditions have not improved. According to Johanna Breyer, who now works in occupational health and safety for sex workers, it's the "same story, just a different day."¹²⁶ Despite this, the desire to organize strippers has not diminished. Still, there are strip clubs all over the country attempting to improve their working conditions, most recently in 2017 when a group of strippers in New York engaged in a strike to end racial discrimination and unfair pay policies.¹²⁷

For every campaign that has come since, people look to the Lusty Lady as an example. The Lusty Lady's impact was "a more general sense of showing what was possible rather than

¹²⁵ "New Laws Forced Sex Workers Back On SF Streets, Caused 170% Spike In Human Trafficking," CBS Local News. February 3, 2019, <https://sanfrancisco.cbslocal.com/2019/02/03/new-laws-forced-sex-workers-back-on-sf-streets-caused-170-spike-in-human-trafficking/>.

¹²⁶ Johanna Breyer, interviewed by Sophie Edelhart. January 24th, 2019.

¹²⁷ Rachel Anspach, "Enterprising Strippers Organize #NYCStripperStrike in Response to Pervasive and Racist Pay Disparities," *Jezebel*. Accessed April 14, 2019, <https://jezebel.com/enterprising-strippers-organize-nycstripperstrike-in-r-1820547897>.

probable, even if this was without regard to examining the portent of the peculiarities.”¹²⁸ What is striking about their unionization drive is those peculiarities and the unique situation the Lusty Lady dancers found themselves in when they began their campaign: a highly educated and feminist workforce, employee status, an established sex worker feminist community, a supportive union and labor movement, and prominent cosponsors and community allies. Without all of these, the campaign might not have been possible. The hope for a new age of labor organizing as a result of the Lusty Lady campaign remained exactly that, a hope. But it did, for a moment, unite the labor movement, sex worker community, and progressive political wing under the banner of working-class power and recapture the “wide open” spirit of San Francisco.

¹²⁸ Gall, 42.

Bibliography

Primary Sources:

Carol Leigh (Scarlot Harlot, sex worker activist) interviewed by Sophie Edelhart. March 3rd, 2019.

Dudash, Tawnya. "Peepshow Feminism" In *Whores and Other Feminists*, edited by Jill Nagle. New York: Routledge, 1997.

Johanna Breyer (founder of Exotic Dancers Alliance), interviewed by Sophie Edelhart. January 24th, 2019.

Leigh, Carol. "Inventing Sex Work." In *Whores and Other Feminists*, edited by Jill Nagle. New York: Routledge, 1997.

Live Nude Girls Unite! [Videorecording]. Brooklyn, NY: First Run/Icarus Films, 2001.

Lusty Lady Theater Collection (1996-1998), Labor Archive and Research Center, San Francisco State University.

Stephanie Batey (SEIU Local 790 union representative), interviewed by Sophie Edelhart. January 21st, 2019.

Secondary Sources:

Anspach, Rachel. "Enterprising Strippers Organize #NYCStripperStrike in Response to Pervasive and Racist Pay Disparities." *Jezebel*. Accessed April 14, 2019. <https://jezebel.com/enterprising-strippers-organize-nycstripperstrike-in-r-1820547897>.

Bernstein, Elizabeth. *Temporarily Yours : Intimacy, Authenticity, and the Commerce of Sex*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.

Boyd, Nan Alamilla. *Wide-Open Town : A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.

Brooks, Siobhan. "Exxxotic Power: The Sex Industry and Political Activism." *Hues*; Duluth, April 1999.

Brooks, Siobhan. *Feminism and Antiracism: International Struggles for Justice*. Edited by Kathleen M. Blee. New York: New York University Press, 2001.

- Brooks, Siobhan. "Solid Gold Dancer: An Interview with Gina Gold." *Bitch*; San Francisco, May 31, 2000.
- Brooks, Siobhan. *Unequal Desires : Race and Erotic Capital in the Stripping Industry*. Albany: State University of New York Press, c2010.
- Burana, Lily. "What It Was Like to Work at the Lusty Lady, a Unionized Strip Club." *The Atlantic*, August 31, 2013. <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2013/08/what-it-was-like-to-work-at-the-lusty-lady-a-unionized-strip-club/279236/>.
- Chateauvert, Melinda. *Sex Workers Unite! : A History of the Movement from Stonewall to Slutwalk*. Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 2013.
- DeLeon, Richard Edward. *Left Coast City : Progressive Politics in San Francisco, 1975-1991*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, c1992.
- Gall, Gregor. *Sex Worker Unionization : Global Developments, Challenges and Possibilities*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.
- Goddard, Ben. "The Rise of Grass-Roots Populism: Quality of Life Issues Spur A Fast Growing Movement," *Campaigns and Elections* 8; January 1988.
- Johnston, Paul. *Success While Others Fail : Social Movement Unionism and the Public Workplace* (Ithaca, N.Y.: ILR Press, 1994), 186.
- Kempadoo, Kamala, and Jo Doezema, eds. *Global Sex Workers: Rights, Resistance, and Redefinition*. New York: Routledge, 1998.
- "Lusty Lady and Sex Worker Power" *FoundSF*. Accessed April 14, 2019. http://www.foundsf.org/index.php?title=Lusty_Lady_and_Sex_Worker_Power.
- Majic, Samantha. *Sex Work Politics: From Protest to Service Provision*. Philadelphia, United States: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/columbia/detail.action?docID=3442312> .
- "New Laws Forced Sex Workers Back On SF Streets, Caused 170% Spike In Human Trafficking," *CBS*. February 3, 2019. <https://sanfrancisco.cbslocal.com/2019/02/03/new-laws-forced-sex-workers-back-on-sf-streets-caused-170-spike-in-human-trafficking/>.
- Self, Robert O. "Sex in the City: The Politics of Sexual Liberalism in Los Angeles, 1963–79." *Gender & History* 20, no. 2 (August 2008): 288–311. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0424.2008.00522.x>.

Sides, Josh. "Excavating the Postwar Sex District in San Francisco." *Journal of Urban History* 32, no. 3 (March 2006): 355.

Smiley, Lauren. "Last Days at the Lusty Lady Strip Club," *New Yorker*. August 23, 2013. <https://www.newyorker.com/business/currency/last-days-at-the-lusty-lady-strip-club>.