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Stripped by the boss

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CUSTOMERS in strip clubs must keep their hands off the dancers. And the clubs' owners and managers must keep their hands off the dancers' tips. Suffolk Superior Court Judge Frances McIntyre reinforced the latter point in her recent ruling entitling about 70 strippers to recover damages in a class-action lawsuit against King Arthur's Lounge in Chelsea.

The club thought it could elude paying wages, peel off a portion of dancers' tips, and even charge the strippers \$35 to perform by classifying them as "independent contractors." The judge wouldn't have it, pointing out that managers could hire and fire the dancers and create their schedules.

Massachusetts boasts among the best and toughest laws around for protecting workers in disputes over wages, hours, tips, and independent contractor status. Still, some businesses insist on testing the law by making raids on tips and shared tip pools through questionable administrative charges or by trying to pass off managers as lower-ranking employees. Usually they lose because their attempts are so murky and the laws protecting workers are so clear.

Attorney Shannon Liss-Riordan, a labor law specialist, can now add strippers to the list of skycaps, baristas, wait staff, and other workers who sought her counsel and received justice. It's tough enough for these workers to live shift to shift without having to fend off grasping employers. ■