

Interview

# Striking for Racial Justice - On the US antiracist sports strike

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***Spectre* Managing Editor Ashley Smith interviews sports writer and socialist Dave Zirin about the dramatic NBA players' strike that shut down the league's playoffs and quickly spread throughout the rest of professional sports and even into collegiate athletics. Zirin talks about what led to the strike, where it can go from here, and its implications for the Black Lives Matter and labor movements.**

Dave Zirin is the sports editor of the Nation. He is also the author of ten books on the politics of sports.

**Ashley Smith: We've just seen something historic—a political strike led by Black basketball players that triggered strikes in many other sports. Why did they call it a boycott and not a strike? What led to the strike, where do things stand now, and what impact has it had on the sports industry and more broadly?**

Dave Zirin: Let me start with the second part. What led to the strike? Two things—the continuing plague of racist police violence and the fact that NBA players felt increasingly foolish playing on a court that read Black Lives Matter while doing little to protest police violence. That contradiction was clearly weighing on a lot of players after the shooting of Jacob Blake.

Many commented that they felt like frauds for having these slogans on the back of their uniforms, while they just played games as usual. All of them have been in this COVID bubble in Orlando, hermetically sealed off from everything for a couple of months while the struggle swept the country. That bubble is a very important part of the story.

The NBA players are in this bubble together with the WNBA players, who we have to recognize have always led the way in highlighting social issues. They are all in a dorm-like atmosphere. They're trapped inside, enduring a lot of boredom during long downtimes. They aren't going home to their families.

The tension has been very high because players are getting homesick. They're tired of eating crap, hotel food. But, at the same time, they're undergoing deep politicization. The players are having conversations that maybe they otherwise wouldn't have.

All of this was building up even before the police shot Jacob Blake in the back seven times in Kenosha. That act of police brutality triggered the players to strike, but in a surprise to many it cascaded throughout the sports industry. The NBA and WNBA led the way because they're leagues dominated by the Black athletes who hold a great deal of power in terms of their profile, politics and ability to communicate to a wide audience.

But what's amazing is to see a button-down sport like baseball go on strike and then hockey players, yes hockey players, join in. And it's not just players. Referees staged a march in the Orlando bubble marching. Coaches came out as well. All of this is heartening and it's a thrilling blow to racism and police violence. It also resets the power dynamics in these sports.

Now the genie is out of the bottle. Players are now making demands of their billionaire bosses to say something and take action and they are getting the bosses to acquiesce. All of this is revealing how much power the players as workers have in the NBA. The WNBA players have also known this for some time and have exercised their power. But for athletes in other sports, this is an absolute revelation.

Now, why was it called a boycott? This term first came out of some members in the sports media. Players did not use it; they just said, "we're staying in our locker room. We're not playing." The sports media attached the label "boycott" to what the players did because the media has no roots in the labor movement and has no understanding of the differences between a boycott and a strike.

A boycott is when a consumer withholds their buying power as a political statement. That's not what's happening in the sports industry. This is a withdrawal of labor, and that's why "strike" is not only the appropriate term, it's also politically important to label it correctly. It places what the players did and are doing within the context of labor struggle.

**The strike is a qualitative advance compared to the dynamic when Colin Kaepernick began taking a knee. When he started his protest, only a few players sided with him. And, on top of his relative isolation, he was vilified by much of the establishment and has been blackballed from the NFL ever since. What has changed within sports, among its leading radicals and their networks, and more broadly in society that gave the players the courage and determination to strike?**

It's interesting to compare Colin Kaepernick to Muhammad Ali. They both stepped out when few others did. Initially, they were both vilified. Kaepernick was viewed as a cautionary tale of the price you pay if you take a stand—they'll take away your job.

Now that more have joined the struggle, he's seen as a hero, as a prophetic trailblazer. And not just by the players. Now even the NFL's upper management including Roger Goodell have to admit that they were wrong in what they did to Colin Kaepernick.

Remember, Kaepernick first did this in August 2016, a time when the idea of Donald Trump being president was still seen as a long shot. Four years of Trump has exposed that this country does have a problem with systemic racism and therefore that Kaepernick was right to act and that what he did was heroic sacrifice. This has been cemented in the minds of players, especially younger ones who've come up in the sports industry under Trump's rule.

The shift in consciousness is dramatic. I heard a radio interview with Brandon Marshall. He confessed that he now felt shame for not taking a knee with Colin Kaepernick. Now you've got LeBron James reading Malcolm X, Jaylen Brown quoting Angela Davis in interviews, and WNBA player Layshia Clarendon drawing on what she learned in her American Studies Program at Berkeley to guide her activism and answers the media's questions.

The Trump years have politicized a new generation of athletes. They're engaged in struggles, reading radical books, having conversations like never before, and taking action as workers. Colin Kaepernick was ahead of the curve, but now people are catching up and, with their strike, dramatically advancing the struggle for racial justice.

**Has all of this led to the formation of new organizations inside and outside of the player's unions? What role are they playing in advancing the struggle?**

Yes, most definitely, there are informal networks. They're not the kind of organizations people on the left are all that familiar with—ones where people meet together face to face, talk, figure out strategies like building a rank and file group.

They are less formal and more horizontal. There are group chats and conference calls where people exchange thoughts and ideas for action. And there are organizations like Athletes for Impact. They hold webinars for athletes where they talk about Black freedom studies and civil rights politics. These have been very popular particularly during the pandemic. So, there's a thirst for learning.

These webinars have triggered conversations among players and helped them begin to develop a common framework and, in the case of the NBA and WNBA, they have begun to bring that into the broader union.

**Could you talk a little more the pivotal role played by the WNBA players? It doesn't get the same airtime as the men because their league has a lower profile. But they have been at the forefront of the struggle like Black women have been in the whole Black Lives Matter movement. What role have the women played?**

First and foremost, let's remember that the first athlete to bring the Black Lives Matter movement to protest the national anthem in sports was two years before Colin Kaepernick. It was Ariyana Smith, a basketball player at Knox College. And before Kaepernick took that knee, the WNBA players started wearing black tee shirts on the court when Alton Sterling and Philando Castile were killed.

They have continued protesting ever since. They started linking arms during the anthem. And they made an agreement that they would only talk to the media about Black liberation and the problems with the so-called criminal justice system no matter what reporters asked them about.

During the restart of this season in the Orlando bubble, the relationships between NBA and WNBA players has gotten much closer than ever before. They use the same courts, hang out in the common spaces, and do promotional events together. The WNBA players have played an important role in radicalizing the male athletes. So, it's not an accident that the men have demanded justice for Breonna Taylor.

It's important to understand that the WNBA players have gone through a very different experience in comparison to the men. The WNBA players tend to finish all four years in college and when they graduate even if they play in the WNBA, they all play in other countries' professional leagues during their "off season" to earn enough money to live on.

That's completely different than the NBA players. Their experience is professionalized from youth leagues on. They are in a basketball factory. If they're successful, and most aren't, they go to college for one or two years and then they're in NBA. Throughout, the coaches and agents put blinders on the athletes, keep them focused on making it, and caution against taking any kind of stand.

So, in many ways, the WNBA players tend to have a bigger world view. They have been organizing for a while to advance struggles for social justice from abortion rights to LGBTQ equality and Black Lives Matter. They've also taken on this hideous Republican Senator Kelly Loeffler, who owns the Atlanta Dream and who is, just an absolute right wing Trumpite. They told her you don't belong in our league. All their activism has had a catalytic effect on the NBA players.

**One of the things that was particularly noticeable has been the participation of white**

**athletes in the struggle. Kareem Abdul-Jabbar called attention to this in his article in The Guardian. Talk about the significance of the multiracial solidarity in the strike, even in sports where there are very few athletes of color like hockey and soccer. What does it mean for anti-racist organizing and players unions?**

I think it's a striking reflection of what we've seen in the streets since the murder of George Floyd. There were demonstrations in all 50 states including overwhelmingly white ones like Idaho, Wyoming, and Vermont. I read one story about a demonstration in one town where there was literally one black resident, but there were dozens of white people out in the streets.

Just today I drove by a corner where about 20 white people were protesting with signs that said things like "white silence is violence." One of my favorites was one that said, "if my feminism isn't intersectional, then my feminism is bullshit." I had to slow down my car to read that one!

The Black Lives Matter movement has changed people, including white athletes. One example is the Milwaukee Brewer's Josh Hader. He's an all-star pitcher. He was almost run out of the league in 2018 when old racist tweets he wrote in 2011 got unearthed. After that he did an apology tour, which many didn't think was all that sincere.

After the cops shot Jacob Blake in Kenosha, which is only 45 minutes from Milwaukee, Hader was the one front and center saying, "we're not going to play." He was the first person on the Brewers to hit the microphone and lead the team to strike. His transformation shows that struggle changes people.

The other sport made up of almost all white athletes that's worth talking about is hockey. It has a history of racism. So, when the NBA and everyone else struck, hockey coaches and executives were asked, "why aren't you guys joining the action?"

They responded, "well, I don't even know what's happening in Kenosha. I don't even care. What does that have to do with our world?" But the players reacted to this with so much anger that the league was forced to cancel games in the Stanley Cup playoffs.

**How has the strike impacted international sports? One thing that stands out since the murder of George Floyd is the international nature of the protest; people have marched in mass numbers throughout the world. Have there been similar developments in the wide world of sports?**

Yes, most definitely. Players have taken a knee and worn t-shirts in soccer and rugby. I'm not sure about cricket! So, it's spread throughout the world just like in the broader movement. I'm not aware at this point of any strikes that have taken place.

It's interesting to think about the question of the international character of the struggle against racism in sports and in general. I was interviewing the great NBA player and activist from the eighties and nineties, Craig Hodges. He's been around the Milwaukee Bucks and he's been impressed by the leadership of Giannis Antetokounmpo, who grew up in Greece.

Hodges pointed out how international the question of racism is. Giannis Antetokounmpo and his family had to deal with the fascist right in Greece. Many athletes of color deal with such threats and racism throughout the world, especially in European soccer. So, this is not just about solidarity; players in other countries have a stake in this struggle.

**Turning back to the US. I think this is the first political strike yet for racial justice since the murder of George Floyd. Certainly, it is the highest profile political strike yet. But it**

**has occurred among the best paid and irreplaceable workers in the sports industry. What potential does it have to spread to unpaid workers in collegiate and high school athletics?**

First and foremost, we have to remember that, the year before Colin Kaepernick took a knee in 2015, athletes at University of Missouri went on strike, withholding their labor over racism. They struck demanding that the president of the school should be fired. And they won, when Tim Wolfe resigned. So, there's a precedent for labor action among unpaid workers.

But I think it's important to recognize the contradiction these athletes find themselves in. College players in the revenue producing sports are the most powerful and at the same time most powerless of all workers. They're powerless because they have no union and therefore no means to collectively bargain over the terms of their exploitation. But they're also powerful because so much of the modern neoliberal campus depends on the revenues that flow from their labor.

That's why the University of Missouri's president could be forced out so quickly. The football team's strike was going to cost the school over \$1 million a week. With stakes that high, the team was able to boot the president overnight, when weeks of protest had achieved very little. This shows the power of striking.

It's difficult to judge where things are headed this fall because COVID has cancelled college sports for several of the big leagues. But, in perhaps a sign of things to come, Black college athletes in the Big 10 and PAC 12 organized this summer after the murder of George Floyd. They put forward their own demands, which drew the connections between COVID and police racism, two forces putting their lives at risk.

But now their leagues are shut down, so we won't see them strike this fall. But in other conferences, we have begun to see action. For example, Boston College—one of the more conservative schools in the country—announced that they were cancelling their football practice as part of the protest movement.

**What about the NFL? Many of the NFL bosses are aligned with Trump and banned Colin Kaepernick from the league. Already they were beginning to squirm in the wake of the uprising after the police murder of George Floyd. You had the “owner who must not be named” of the Dallas Cowboys issuing utterly confusing statements. Now the league is scheduled to start playing. What's going to happen in the NFL?**

Well, that “owner who must not be named” just did a press conference, talking about how he and his team want to be part of the solution to racism. You said the NFL bosses were squirming; it was more of a full-on wiggle. While they're aligned with Trump, they also are dependent on indispensable Black labor. And those Black workers, which comprises 70 percent of the players, are pissed off.

The NFL bosses are desperate to figure out how to manage that contradiction. So, the Baltimore Ravens put out a remarkable statement that came out of a four hour meeting that the players had with management. The Ravens' statement on the team's letterhead declared that this country was built on slavery and has been plagued with institutional racism.

Let me be clear, this is not from the players, not from the union, but from the Baltimore Ravens corporation. They went on to call for the arrest of the officers in the Breonna Taylor and the Jacob Blake case cases and demand that Senate President Mitch McConnell bring the George Floyd Police Reform Act up for a vote in the Senate. And, just like the NBA teams are doing, the Ravens will be opening up their stadium as a location where people can vote in an open space with more room for social distancing.

I think you're going to see more statements from more teams like this one from the Ravens. They'll do everything they can to head off a strike in the NFL. Who knows what's going to happen? Already when the Seahawks' Russell Wilson—who's not exactly a fire breathing radical—was asked if he had a game this Sunday would he play. He scrunched up his face and said, "absolutely not. Of course, I would not play with what's happening."

But it's not at all clear if the NFL bosses will be able to appease the players. Why? Because the question for them is the same one for everyone in the movement, what's going to happen with the police? They show no signs of stopping their reign of terror. If they don't stop their brutality and racist killing spree, it is not beyond the realm of possibility that the NFL players would strike.

**One other question about sports before asking you about the broader meaning of the NBA strike for the labor movement. I have been stunned by the shift in sports media over the last decade from basically low-frequency racism to now nonstop discussions and debates about racism in American society. That culminated in one of the most stunning things I've ever seen on live TV—Kenny Smith putting down the mic and walking off the set in the midst of a live broadcast in solidarity with a player's political strike against racism. What impact is the NBA strike having through the media on broader consciousness?**

Well, the media like our society is polarized. Unlike ten years ago when it was just, as you put it, low-frequency racism, a lot of jock talk, a lot of what I would call empty calories, it's now polarized. There is now a hard right wing sports media that's infected with racism.

Our side of the media polarization is undergoing a rapid left wing politicization. It is discussing real questions about racism, the strike, and whether this can spread to other industries. They're asking fundamental questions about how do you transform society and what role can athletes play in that struggle? A lot of people in the sports media have become politicized just by following the movement among players.

Sports media, especially radio, is by its nature oppositional, whether they're talking about which players should or should not start this week or whether a team's coaches should be fired or not. So, they are forced by the nature of what they do to take a position for or against the strike. The question then becomes which side are you on?

They can't just go on the radio and give some sort of cloudy, soft, hazy overview of what's taken place. They actually have to have an opinion about it. That's forcing a lot of them to take sides. Some of it's very ugly and some of it is, I mean, beautiful, absolutely beautiful.

Kenny Smith is one example. But I initially thought "oh no! Don't leave Kenny!" Why? Because he so good politically. But he's on the set with Charles Barkley, who's said incredibly rightwing things about Black Lives Matter, and Shaquille O'Neil, who is actually a volunteer sheriff. So, there was a part of me that was saying, "Kenny stay on the set so that Charles and Shaq don't dominate the discussion."

At the same time, I think Kenny walking off was a powerful act that will stand the test of time. It was amazing. But I think the most important thing on the media was by Chris Webber. He spoke with tears in his voice and said, "you can't just say vote, vote, vote to marginalized communities, if you're not also taking on systemic racism and police impunity."

I thought that was really powerful because so much of the struggle and even the strike itself is being redirected into voting for candidates who don't take on those systemic problems. Chris Webber was speaking for people who are part of the 50 percent that don't vote in this country because they don't

see it as a means to change much of anything.

He was speaking for those people who don't have a microphone to speak for themselves. He was the true voice for the voiceless when he talked about the emptiness of calling for people to vote if you're not dealing with poverty, if you're not dealing with racism.

**What you just said is so important. I think that this uprising has done more to change consciousness and awareness of the structures of racial and class inequality in our society than anything in recent memory. And I think sometimes in all the discussion of electoral politics, the role of struggle gets left out. How do you think this new wave of struggle has changed politics in our society?**

It's changed consciousness in fundamental ways. We've had demonstrations in all 50 states—the biggest number of protests in history and the largest numbers of people on protests in history. But we have not seen fundamental changes at all. So, when these demonstrations also don't bear nearly the fruit relative to the sacrifice, particularly in the context of COVID that people are taking to the streets, it breeds not only a deep, deep frustration and anger, but also people looking for answers.

I know a lot of people thought, when several of the cities went up in flames, maybe this will be the answer. But that's not wresting reforms out of the system. Even worse, it's triggering a violent reaction from cops and the fascist militias. So, people are recognizing the need for a better strategy.

I think that by striking the players are showing what the alternative strategy would be. We must realize, as Craig Hodges said to me, "we're never going to out militarize the most militarized culture in the world." But what we can do is withhold our labor, and bring the system to a halt, just like these athletes have brought their leagues to a halt.

**In that context, it's impossible not to compare this revolt of Black athletes to the last one back in the 1960s. What similarities and differences stand out in your mind?**

The greatest difference between the two revolts is that the great rebel athletes of the late sixties tended to be in individual sports like Muhammad Ali in boxing, John Carlos and Tommie Smith in track and field, and Arthur Ashe and Billie Jean King in tennis. That generation of athletes were not in team sports for the most part and those that were did not organize their teams to take action.

Today it's very different. We have undergone a massive expansion of team sports, and radicalized athletes in those team sports are now playing the leading role and they are organizing their teams to take action. They are pulling along players who maybe aren't so radical. They put pressure on people on the margins who really feel like they are out of step with reality and need to get their shit together. They start saying to themselves "you know, I can't be the racist guy in the room here."

Another difference is the power of social media. Back in the 1960s, radical athletes faced a real problem of how to get their messages out. They had no one to text. They had no Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram. I mean, how many phone calls could they make?

On top of that, most of the sports journalists were not sympathetic, so they would distort everything you said and demonize you. There were only a handful of left wing sports journalists. Imagine if Ali didn't have Howard Cosell! And there was only one Howard Cosell and he couldn't be there for everybody.

Today, players can use social media to get around the sports media filter and get their message out quickly. They can spread their story at the touch of a button to their teammates, different sports, and the public.

Finally, this generation of Black athletes are ready to upset the sports industry in a way that not even athletes in the late sixties were. They are done with being adored when they're on the field and treated like nothing when they're off of it. We've finally reached a generation of athletes who are no longer willing to put up with that contradiction and they're willing to strike to overcome it.

**The amazing thing is how much popular support there is for this new militancy. A YouGov Poll found that 57 percent of Americans supported the Milwaukee Bucks' strike. In many ways, Black athletes are leading the labor movement to take on racism. What does their strike mean for the broader labor movement? Will other unions and union federations move into action now?**

I'm wary to make predictions about anything right now. There is clearly a massive push to coopt these struggles. Organizations want to head off strikes so they are putting out statements like the one we discussed before from the Baltimore Ravens. President Obama intervened in the NBA players' situation when they were debating sitting out the season and advised them to go back to work and shift the focus into electoralism and start a social justice committee.

So, the powers of cooptation see how dangerous this is to the established order of things and are rushing to intervene, to make it more moderate in a time when moderation is not going to do the trick. That said, if anyone told me a couple of weeks ago that the hockey and baseball teams were going out on strike against racism, I would have told them they were crazy.

I mean, just a week ago, baseball commentators were arguing that someone shouldn't hit a grand slam in the ninth inning because it's against the way we do things in the sport. And then baseball players struck! So, who knows what's going to happen?

I do think that players going on strike is like an electric prod to many parts of the labor movement. I received a flurry of phone calls from people in the labor movement that night when it happened asking if I knew how to get through to Chris Paul or Andre Iguodala.

Some of them are talking about proposals like organizing a general strike against racism that before seemed completely out to lunch. Now, none of this may happen, because of the union leaderships' conservatism and the lack of rank and file organization. But that people are talking about it is significant.

It poses a different kind of solution to a problem that we are all recognizing—that workers striking has the potential to fix a society that is fundamentally broken. That's a new development of revolutionary significance. Because, truth be told, the labor movement in a broad sense has not been a force against Trumpism and has not been a force in the Black Lives Matter movement. Of course, there are exceptions, but labor in general has been dormant at this critical moment in our history.

What the players are saying to rank and file workers and union officials is "it does not have to be this way." From my anecdotal experience, it sent a shock through a lot of people in the labor movement. I'm talking about people from teachers to postal workers, and nurses.

There have been struggles and strikes in the context of COVID, but they've been strikes for survival. But the players strike was different; it was a strike for somebody else's survival—a family member or member of your union. It raised the idea that unions could use their power to transform all of society.



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## **P.S.**

- Spectre. August 31, 2020:

<https://spectrejournal.com/striking-for-racial-justice/>

- Ashley Smith is a socialist writer and activist in Burlington, Vermont. He has written in numerous publications including Truthout, The International Socialist Review, Socialist Worker, ZNet, Jacobin, New Politics, Harpers, and many other online and print publications. He is currently working on a book for Haymarket Books entitled Socialism and Anti-Imperialism.

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