

NBA and WNBA players strike to demand justice for Jacob Blake

written by Steven Ceci
September 4, 2020



WNBA's Washington Mystics took a knee wearing T-shirts with seven bullet holes on the back to protest the police shooting of Jacob Blake. Then they walked off the court, refusing to play.

Strike spreads throughout sports world, demonstrates real solidarity

On Aug. 26, National Basketball Association and Women's National Basketball Association players went on strike in an act of solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement, after a 29-year-old Black man, Jacob Blake, was shot seven times in the back at point-blank range by a white police officer in Kenosha, Wis.

Kenosha is 40 miles south of Milwaukee, Wisconsin's largest city and home of the Milwaukee Bucks NBA team.

Video showed the unarmed Jacob Blake shot as he attempted to enter his car. Three of his children were in the back seat and witnessed the shooting in horror. Blake's father reported that his son, now paralyzed from the waist down, is still fighting for his life.

The outrageous racist shooting of Blake by a white cop visibly disturbed Milwaukee Bucks guard George Hill at his [post-game press conference](#) in Orlando, Fla., on Aug. 24, after the Bucks won game four of the NBA Playoffs and took a three-games-to-one lead over the Orlando Magic.

Instead of celebrating his team's victory, Hill said, "I don't think we should be talking about basketball today. We should talk about the Blake family and what's going on. It's devastating and basketball shouldn't even be on our mind right now. We're thankful for the win, but none of this really matters.

"First of all, we shouldn't even have come to this damn place to be honest," Hill said.

“Coming here just took all the focal points off what the issues are. But we’re here. It is what it is. We can’t do anything from right here. But definitely when it’s all settled, some things need to be done. This world has to change. Our police department has to change. We as a society have to change. Right now, we’re not seeing any of that. Lives are being taken as we speak, day in and day out. There’s no consequence or accountability for it. That’s what has to change.”

Then, on Aug. 25, 17-year-old self-professed Blue Lives Matter fanatic Kyle Rittenhouse shot three anti-racists who were protesting in Kenosha, killing two of them. Rittenhouse was only taken into custody the next day — across the state line in Illinois, alive and unharmed. Rittenhouse reportedly attended a pro-Trump rally in Des Moines, Iowa, in January.

This was the straw that broke the camel’s back and jump-started the wildcat strike of professional basketball players.

The decision by Milwaukee Bucks players to strike quickly spread to all the NBA teams in the playoffs.

WNBA players had already decided to [walk off the courts](#). “Wednesday night, before joining the Milwaukee Bucks in strike of their scheduled games, the WNBA’s Washington Mystics arrived on the court wearing shirts that together spelled the name of Jacob Blake. ... On the reverse side of the shirts were drawn seven bullet holes, lined in dark red.”

The actions by both WNBA and NBA players quickly spread to other professional sports athletes across the country, who walked off courts, stadiums and fields, stopping over a dozen professional games in basketball, baseball, tennis and soccer.

Tennis star Naomi Osaka, of Haitian and Japanese descent, went on strike during the semifinals of the Western & Southern Open in New York, causing the tournament to

be delayed.

“Before I am an athlete, I am a Black woman,” [Osaka wrote](#) in a Twitter post. “And as a Black woman I feel as though there are much more important matters at hand that need immediate attention, rather than watching me play tennis. I don’t expect anything drastic to happen with me not playing, but if I can get a conversation started in a majority white sport I consider that a step in the right direction.”

These solidarity strikes are one more expression of the widespread and growing anger towards police terror and systemic racism that has driven the movement in the streets and now is motivating labor actions.

In the spirit of Kaepernick

The solidarity labor action by professional athletes for Black lives came four years to the day after football star Colin Kaepernick of the San Francisco 49ers first took a knee in protest of structural racism, inequality and the state-sanctioned murder of Black people at the hands of police.

For over a month, NBA athletes have been living and playing in the “bubble” at Disney World in Orlando — a protected complex to house players and prevent the spread of COVID-19 during the basketball season.

This was part of an effort, under pressure from wealthy team owners, but initially supported by many players, to restart the sports season in the midst of the pandemic.

However, since the release of the video of Jacob Blake’s shooting, tensions have been mounting inside the bubble among players outraged at the continued violence inflicted on Black people by the police and the racial injustices entrenched in U.S. society.

There have been many discussions about whether the season should continue and what actions players could take to protest this latest act of police terror. On Aug. 26, these tensions reached a boiling point when the Bucks refused to take the court.

[In a statement](#) released by the team, players explained their reasons for boycotting the game: “Over the last few days in our home state of Wisconsin, we’ve seen the horrendous video of Jacob Blake being shot in the back seven times by a police officer in Kenosha, and the additional shooting of protesters. ... We are calling for justice for Jacob Blake and demand the officers be held accountable.”

Four minutes before the start of the game, players on the Orlando Magic followed suit, leaving the court and boycotting the game in solidarity with their fellow players from the Bucks.

According to ESPN, soon after they announced their refusal to play, the Bucks [were on the phone](#) from their locker room with Wisconsin Attorney General Josh Kaul and Lt. Gov. Mandela Barnes to present their demands.

The players may be subject to retaliation from both management and the NBA for refusing to play, because their actions violate a clause in their contract against striking. Though the team is calling the action a “boycott,” they risk a five-million-dollar fine for not showing up to the game.

The strike by the NBA and WNBA has reverberated around the sports world and will continue to reverberate throughout society as a whole. Let’s not forget that we are in the middle of a pandemic and all the rules we are accustomed to no longer apply.

