

Capitalism's vampires: How WNBA and MLB owners exploit player labor

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Minnesota Lynx star Napheesa Collier highlights her pregame All-Star game shirt

that reads, “Pay Us What You Owe Us.”

As the summer has worn on, tensions between player unions and team ownership in the world of professional athletics have risen higher and higher – and for good reason.

Both the Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA) and Major League Baseball (MLB) are facing potential work stoppages due to continued ownership greed. The fundamental issue at the core of struggles between the players’ unions and league ownership is how the revenues of the WNBA and the MLB are distributed.

Marx’s vampire metaphor and sports capitalism

In 1867, Karl Marx wrote about the capitalist system: “Capital is dead labor, that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labor, and lives the more, the more labor it sucks.”

This may seem a strange quote for the opening of an article about professional athletics in the United States. However, at its most fundamental, all professional sports leagues in capitalist society, no matter their relative size or wealth, manifest a relationship between labor and capital.

To this point, the WNBA and MLB ownership play the role of vampires in Marx’s metaphor. The respective league ownership is fanatically committed to sucking all the profits they can from the players’ blood, sweat, and tears while paying those players as little as possible.

Now, in both leagues – but particularly the MLB – the players’ union is often criticized for what is perceived as “millionaires fighting billionaires.” However, in both cases, the players should not be analyzed as being of the same class as the owners. While many professional athletes are paid well, some even earning

hundreds of millions of dollars, they are ultimately still workers. Even for the players paid in the millions, their salaries pale in comparison to the profits raked in by billionaire team ownership — the players' labor produces super profits.

The vast majority of professional athletes don't remotely become millionaires. This is especially true for a league like the WNBA that is younger, subsidized by the men's National Basketball Association, and already faces a base [gender pay gap](#), as do all women workers in the United States.

WNBA growth vs. stagnant player compensation

Recent years have shown a huge growth in the popularity and financial value of the WNBA. However, player salaries have remained [woefully low](#).

While attendance, team value, and media profits have all skyrocketed, player pay has remained stagnant. Even now, the average WNBA player salary is just over \$100,000 a year. For comparison, the average value of a WNBA team is \$269 million. The total value of the league is over \$3.5 billion.

Beyond salaries, there is also the issue of revenue-sharing payments. In the NBA, players receive 49% of all revenue, above and beyond their income. These payments are based on the level of profits made by each team. [In the WNBA, players receive only 9% of the league's revenue](#). That's right, a measly stinking disgraceful 9%.

Adding insult to injury, the WNBA just signed a \$2.2 billion media deal with ESPN, a deal that will inject \$200 million a year into the league. Yet, as [contract negotiations](#) between the WNBA Players' Association began, suddenly these billionaires pleaded poverty.

No game without the players - 'pay us what you owe us'

It is for that reason that star players like Kelsey Plum, Napheesa Collier, and Caitlin

Clark donned ["Pay Us What You Owe Us"](#) t-shirts at the recent All-Star game.

Union President Nneka Ogwumike spoke out on the issue: "The business is booming – media rights, ratings, revenue, team valuations, expansion fees, attendance, and ticket sales – are all up in historic fashion. But short-changing the working women who make this business possible stalls growth."

Without these players and many others, there is no WNBA. This same formula can be applied to any industry. Without the workers who actually create the product that gives the industry or enterprise value – there is no industry or enterprise.

This reality has not stopped the billionaires from waging war on the entirety of the working class, including relatively well-paid professional athletes.

MLB's looming salary cap battle

Major League Baseball is no exception. The collective bargaining agreement between the MLB players' union (MLBPA) and the MLB is due to expire in 2026. The players expect that in the new contract negotiations, the League will attempt to impose a salary cap, or a limit on the total amount each team can dedicate to payroll.

Salary caps are an old tool, currently in use by the NFL, the NBA, and the NHL. By limiting the dollar amount each team can pay its players, league ownership guarantees a certain level of profits and escalates the already exploitative conditions.

The imposition of a salary cap would be no less than catastrophic for all MLB players. Capping payroll will lead to an overall lower average salary for players and severely limit earning potential for star and non-star players alike.

Historical stakes

It is for this reason that Phillies superstar Bryce Harper told MLB commissioner Rob Manfred to “[get the f*** out](#) of [the Phillies’] clubhouse when Manfred attempted to meet with the players in their locker room about contract negotiations.

For baseball to adopt a salary cap would not only be a slap in the face to the current players, but it would all but destroy the legacy of players like [Curt Flood](#). In the 1970s, Flood took on the entire MLB establishment over the reserve clause, which bound players to their teams for the entirety of the players’ careers. The stand on behalf of the players essentially ended Flood’s career, but his fight directly led to the formation of the MLBPA and a significant increase in player wages.

A salary cap would undo that struggle in the same way continued pay inequity in the WNBA would undo the years and years that mostly Black women invested into the league to make it viable and culturally sustainable. This moment in the United States is a moment of escalated fascist attack across the front of society. This is no different in the field of professional athletics.

Players and their unions must be supported as they continue their respective fights. These fights expose a direct conflict between the contributions of labor and the fact that under capitalism, workers are paid far less than the value of the labor they contribute. As always, the wealth should be in the hands of the workers. In this case, the players are the workers, and we wish them the strongest of victories.

