Workers of the Court, Unite!

The case for college athlete unionization

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This isn’t just some low-stakes extracurricular

• “On average, Pac-12 athletes are spending 50 hours a week on athletics during season.” – 2015 Pac-12 study

• College sports is big business.
  • The NCAA alone now brings in over 1 billion dollars a year.
  • CU Boulder reported $85,084,427 revenue for FY2018.
    • 38 NCAA schools brought in over $100million.
  • CU Boulder’s new football coach signed a 5-year, nearly $15million contract.
    • Plus there are 8 assistant football coaches making $225,000+/year.
  • Outback Bowl’s head exec makes over $1million for one game a year.
College athletes’ rights are being trampled

• Denied the right to even attempt to bargain for compensation.
• Lack of adequate long-term health care for injuries that come from their labor on the court.
• Lack of robust protections against retaliation for submitting grievances or otherwise trying to change their working conditions.
• Denied the right to have a real say in their working conditions.
  • Denied the right to leave for a new employer (school) without current employer’s consent.
  • Little power to fit their sporting activities with their other (academic) needs.
Solution: Unionization

• Recognize the wins made by professional sports unions.
  • College and pro athletes are the core of their multi-billion dollar industries.
  • Both risk their long-term bodily integrity for the entertainment of others.
  • They’re known far beyond their own circles, often across the the country.

• Learn strategies and recognize hurdles from graduate worker unions.
  • Continuity is hard; both groups spend only ~4-5 years on campus.
  • Both groups are necessary for their departments to function.
  • Asking for rights has failed; “Power concedes nothing without a demand.”
Pro athlete unions protect athletes’ rights

• Free agency in MLB came from Curt Flood and the MLBPA struggling against MLB orthodoxy.

• Significant changes in NFL practice rules happened in 2011 thanks to NFLPA fighting for player safety.

• NBAPA won strong pension plans for retired players.

• WNBPA fought against unjust fines for protesting racist violence by police officers, defending athlete’s rights to have a voice.

• All professional unions give athletes opportunity to be fairly compensated for their labor.
Graduate workers’ strategies

• Negative media attention – illustrates school’s misguided priorities.
• Public shows of strength – builds solidarity and worker-consciousness.
• Work stoppages – demonstrates the critical role of the workers.

• And ironically, evidence suggests schools with unionized graduate workers have better relationships with their advisors! There must be some significant source of resistance to worker$ uniting...
College athletes path forward?

• Recognize themselves as workers as well as students.
• Publicly share struggles/injustices to build wider support.
• Build worker consciousness with public demonstrations.

Our path forward?

• Recognize that inaction is a choice to support the status quo.
• Publicly support your school’s athletes, and college athletes generally.
• When the time comes, walk that picket line.

We can’t lead this fight – the fight must be led by the athletes – but we can’t ignore our place in it. We must ask ourselves if it’s just to support a multi-billion dollar industry that is unwilling to pay its most vital workers. The answer is clearly no. What will you do?
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