

An exchange on the NBA lockout

4 December 1998

Hello there, I hope you don't mind me saying this but I don't see the need for the NBA to be striking. They are millionaires. I'm a bagger and I work hard in a supermarket and I'm a Socialist and I don't see the need for working class people to be feeling sorry for people that are rich. They would not feel sorry for us if we were on strike. Kroger, the Supermarket in Atlanta, GA, they just went out on strike. I bet you these guys that are in the NBA would be laughing if they saw a real struggle.

J

5 November 1998

Dear J,

Thank you for your letter. Your sentiments against the NBA players are understandable, and I might add popular, even among those who do not consider themselves socialists. However they are misplaced.

While we do not agree with many of the views of NBA players, we recognize that there is a difference between the players and the owners. Also, the players are not on strike. They have been locked out by the NBA owners after the owners reopened the existing contract ratified in 1995. The owners collectively are doing what many companies do every day. They have decided to take a hard stand on salaries for the explicit purpose of boosting their profits. The owners are demanding a cap on salaries and nearly double the time before rookie players can become free agents.

It may be difficult for you to feel sympathy for those who are making 150 times the wage you are making, in some cases \$100 million salaries; the truth is the owners pay the incredible rates because they make a great deal more from the box office appeal of the players they hire. And while this dispute is not the same as one involving workers like yourself, most of the players come from the same background and have family members who face similar problems.

The high salaries are the product of owners who want the best players and are prepared to pay large sums to attract the big name stars, irrespective of the team

salary cap. With the advent of stars like Michael Jordan the NBA has undergone a tremendous change, increasing its revenue more than ten-fold during the past 10 years.

If you review the article carefully you will see that it was not an endorsement of the views of NBA players. Unlike professional athletes in the past, as a product of the high salaries most players today generally look upon themselves as businessmen encouraged by parasitical agents who seek to milk the sports system for all that they can get. It is a system that is vastly corrupted, promoting extremes in inequality between the players. (The *Sporting News*, June 29, 1998, reported that the 37 highest paid players--9 percent of the union--collected one-third of all of the salaries.) It is not surprising that the environment encourages greed and backwardness, views that uncritically reflect the sports business.

However, just as the owners have created the big star names, mainly as a way to boost their own profits, they are now trying to tear them down, or at least hold them in check. It appears that the owners are concerned about indications that the market for sports has been oversaturated with the emergence of several 24-hour sports stations, longer seasons for hockey, football, basketball and baseball, winter sports, and international sports championships--altogether leading to a drop in viewers. Several reports have stated NBA owners are anxious about the post-Michael Jordan era when they expect ratings to fall further.

You say near the end of your note that workers at Kroger supermarket just went on strike and that the players would feel no sympathy for you or other low-paid workers: 'I bet you these guys that are in the NBA would be laughing if they saw a real struggle.'

If there were a genuine struggle taking place in the working class against the destruction of jobs, cutting of wages, and cuts in social programs by the government, there would be a great deal of interest not only by NBA

players but by all of society.

There have been many examples of professional athletes placing their careers on the line in the fight for principles. The issue of support for struggles of workers is mainly determined by those in the leadership of the working class. Presently the working class has a leadership in the trade unions that is pro-business. During the past 20 years workers have suffered one defeat after another because the unions refuse to carry out a serious struggle. To win better conditions today requires a struggle not only against a single employer, but the government as well--a struggle that would require the mobilization of the mass of working people. Such a struggle would require a break from both the Democrats and Republicans and the building of a socialist movement of the working class.

The issue you have raised points to one of the greatest crises facing the working class and why it has continued to suffer defeats: its political orientation, perspective and leadership.

The present political orientation of the working class is the reform of capitalism. There are many indications that workers are looking for a new way to fight against the cuts in wages and living conditions, and are looking for alternatives to the present leadership. We believe that the alternative is the building of the Socialist Equality Party.

A strong leadership by the working class will win support from all classes, including many NBA players. They are affected by the struggles of society, and when big struggles take place in the working class divisions will develop within these layers.

Sincerely yours,

Larry Roberts, on behalf of the *World Socialist Web Site*

30 November 1998

See Also:

Owners cancel first month of NBA basketball
[31 October 1998]



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