

National Football League and referees reach tentative agreement

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The National Football League (NFL) and its referees reached a tentative contract agreement at midnight Thursday after two days of lengthy negotiations. The settlement, if approved by the 121 members of the NFL Referees Association (NFLRA), would end a lockout that began early in the summer and produced serious problems on the field in the first few weeks of the 2012 NFL season.

The terms of the eight-year deal reportedly include an increase in average wages for professional football officials from \$149,000 a year in 2011 to \$173,000 in 2013, reaching \$205,000 by 2019.

However, the contract also apparently includes concessions by the NFLRA on retirement benefits. The current defined benefit plan will remain in place for current officials through 2016, but will then be frozen. Beginning in 2017, a defined contribution plan will determine new-hires' retirement benefits—i.e., employers' contribution will be defined, but future retirees' benefits will fluctuate on the basis of investment earnings.

League officials were no doubt somewhat desperate to reach a settlement after the fiasco in a game between the Seattle Seahawks and the Green Bay Packers, broadcast on "Monday Night Football" earlier in the week.

Millions of viewers were outraged when scab referees ruled what should have been a game-ending interception by Green Bay a touchdown for Seattle, resulting in the Seahawks winning a game everyone else agrees they lost. The egregious call was the most glaring in a series that the "replacement" referees have made during the first three weeks of the NFL season.

Aaron Rogers, the quarterback of the victimized Packers, commented in a radio interview Tuesday: "I

just feel bad for the fans. They pay good money and the game is being tarnished by an NFL who obviously cares more about saving a little money than having the integrity of the game diminish a little bit.

"Our sport is generated, the multi-billion-dollar machine is generated, by people coming to watch us play.... And the product that is on the field is not being complemented by an appropriate set of officials. The games are getting out of control."

The referees were locked out by the NFL in June when their contract expired and negotiations broke down. Two weeks later, the NFL announced that it would begin hiring and training replacement officials. Because referees from major college football conferences refused to scab, the NFL was relegated to hiring high school and small college referees. Included in this group were a referee from the "Lingerie Football League," a professional poker player (NFL has prohibitions on gambling) and a referee who appears in New Orleans Saints attire on his Facebook page.

The results were not long in coming, as rules were misapplied or ignored in the first three weeks and players' safety was further jeopardized. During a game last Sunday, Oakland receiver Darrius Heyward-Bey suffered a concussion on an illegal hit that drew no penalty. Houston quarterback Matt Schaub had part of his ear ripped off during another hit that was not penalized.

The near-chaos on the field, directly related to the incompetence of the scab referees, has exposed as hypocritical the NFL's newfound emphasis on player safety. With the recent exposure of the dangerous and long-term health effects of repeated concussions, the NFL had mandated for the first time this season that officials take an active part in protecting players' safety. The league's injury and safety panel had

directed that officials receive concussion awareness training, and that they remain alert for possible concussions during games.

It became apparent to players and fans that the scab referees did not have the ability to comprehend the complex rules of the game and clearly were ill-prepared to protect the players from preventable injuries.

On “CBS This Morning” on Wednesday, DeMaurice Smith, executive director of the National Football League Players Association, called the issues with the replacement referees a “health and safety issue” for players. “So the way we look at this issue is a little bit beyond even a bad call on a Monday night. The referees on the field are the first responders for health and safety for a group of players where we know that virtually every player in the National Football League is going to be injured at work.”

The NFL initiated its lockout over the referees’ initial refusal to agree to eliminate the defined-benefit pension plan and accept a defined-contribution plan. The cost differential would have amounted to a little over \$100,000 per team per year. Additionally, the NFL insisted that 21 referees be added as a standby pool to be utilized to “sit down” or replace referees who it feels are underperforming. The referees object to the arbitrary standards that would be used to “evaluate” them. Moreover, the overall compensation pool would thereafter be divided by 142 referees instead of 121, thereby significantly reducing their individual compensation.

The outpouring of anger and frustration from fans, players and broadcasters is based in large part on the recognition that the referees, who are highly skilled, are justified in their demands, which are easily affordable by a league whose teams are owned by many of the wealthiest people in the country.

According to *Forbes Magazine*, of the 32 NFL owners, 19 are billionaires. Seattle’s owner, the beneficiary of the “Monday Night Football” travesty, is Paul Allen, the cofounder of Microsoft, whose net worth is \$15 billion.

Under conditions of high unemployment, wage and benefit reductions and cuts to the most elementary social services, the greed and arrogance of the NFL’s billionaire owners, who run one of the most successful and profitable business enterprises in history, angered a

broad section of the sports-watching population.

The aristocrats who run the NFL made a farce out of game closely followed by tens of millions of people. Their “let them eat cake attitude” illustrated not only their contempt for football players and fans, but provided a glimpse into how they viewed and treated the hundreds of thousands of other workers employed by their various enterprises and whose exploitation has enabled them to amass their personal fortunes.

Moreover, their tactic of locking out the referees is intended to both intimidate the working class as a whole and provide a guide to corporate America as to how to best confront resistance. These same owners locked out the players before the start of the 2011 season to extract concessions. This same tactic is now being used by the owners of the National Hockey League against their players.

The lockout has become one of the preferred methods of employers to obtain concessions from their workforces. According to Bloomberg BNA, as a percentage of US work stoppages, lockouts increased to more than 8 percent last year, the highest ratio on record, from less than 3 percent in 1991. The survey also pointed out that although work stoppages over the same period declined by 75 percent, of those that did occur a much higher percentage were initiated by employers.



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