

In defiance of Trump threats, US athletes protest police repression

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Hundreds of National Football League players took part in symbolic protest actions against police violence Sunday, kneeling or sitting during the playing of the US national anthem before professional football games, or locking arms with those who did.

Dozens of players have been taking part in such protests since the beginning of the season, angered by the continuing police shootings and killings and expressing particular concern over the disproportionate police violence directed at minority youth. Three quarters of NFL players are African-American.

The protests escalated Sunday in response to the intervention of President Trump, who, in the course of a Friday night campaign appearance in Alabama, vilified the protesters with an obscenity and called on NFL owners to fire any player who refused to stand at attention during the playing of the anthem.

Many teams met Saturday night or Sunday morning to decide on a response, and at every game the participation by players increased from previous weeks. Those who did not kneel or sit stood with arms locked behind the protesters, supporting their democratic right to voice their political views.

At least three teams effectively boycotted the playing of the national anthem, deciding to stay in their locker rooms until the ceremony was over rather than publicly show division between those who kneeled and those who stood behind them.

The sentiment among the players to defy the president was so overwhelming that coaches, owners and even NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell were compelled to rebuke Trump for his demand that public dissenters be fired on the spot.

No less than six of the 32 owners, most of whom are right-wing billionaires, made contributions of \$1 million or more to Trump's inauguration committee.

One of the sharpest rebukes came from Robert Kraft, owner of the New England Patriots and a longtime Trump crony.

He said he was "deeply disappointed with the tone of the comments made by the president," concluding, "Our players are intelligent, thoughtful and care deeply about their community, and I support their right to peacefully effect social change and raise awareness in a manner they feel is most impactful."

There is much hypocrisy in the statements of Goodell and the owners, since they have carried out a de facto blacklisting of Colin Kaepernick, the starting quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers, who began the protest against police violence last year.

Despite finishing as one of the top 20 quarterbacks in the league, statistically, in last season's play, Kaepernick has not been able to find a job with any of the 32 teams. Some owners with teams struggling with poor quarterback play have openly said they would not bring Kaepernick in under any circumstances because of his political views.

The protests resumed this season, with fuel added to the fire not only by continuing police killings and the racist rampage by neo-Nazis in Charlottesville, Virginia, but also by a racist police attack involving Michael Bennett of the Seattle Seahawks, who was assaulted by two cops outside a Las Vegas nightclub.

Trump combined his diatribe against Kaepernick and other protesting football players with a public fight with Stephen Curry, the star point guard for the National Basketball Association champion Golden State Warriors and the NBA's most valuable player in 2015 and 2016.

After Curry was quoted Friday saying he was reluctant to participate in a team visit to the White House to receive congratulations on their

championship, the White House disinvited him, a slap that touched off hundreds of hostile tweets and statements from NBA players and other athletes. Notable was Curry's top rival, LeBron James of the Cleveland Cavaliers, who denounced Trump as a "bum."

For the Trump White House, the clash with professional athletes, the vast majority of them African-American, is a deliberate effort to whip up racial tensions and appeal to the same fascistic forces who rioted in Charlottesville. At the time, Trump praised the ultra-right provocation as including "very fine people."

Trump curses at football players peacefully protesting racism and police violence, demanding that they be fired, while he has kind words for violent neo-Nazis who killed a young antifascist demonstrator in Charlottesville.

Adding to the backwardness of Trump's assault was his tweeted demand for even greater violence in National Football League games. He denounced the NFL for its very modest efforts to reduce the number of concussions and other severe injuries by penalizing helmet-to-helmet and other risky collisions.

This tweet came the same day as a report that the autopsy of former star NFL tight end Aaron Hernandez, who committed suicide in prison at the age of 27, while serving time on a murder conviction, had found an extreme case of CTE, the brain disease suffered by hundreds of NFL players over the years because of repeated head injuries.

Particularly noteworthy is the attempt by the Trump administration to present the protests over police violence as disrespectful of the US military. The NFL players have made no such connection, for the most part having no clear understanding of the connection between US imperialist violence abroad and the carnage in American cities.

But the Trump administration itself is well aware of the connection. And it is particularly unsettling to the ruling elite that expressions of social anger and protest erupt at professional sporting events, which have long been used to promote chauvinism and militarism.

Twenty-five years of unending warfare abroad have had domestic consequences. A police force that has always functioned as the last line of defense for capitalist property and privilege has been repeatedly reinforced by recruits drawn from the military, trained

to view the entire civilian population as a threat.

Moreover, police departments have been systematically equipped with "surplus" military weaponry, from automatic weapons to armored cars, tanks and helicopters, put on display against antipolice protesters in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014. Only a few weeks ago, the Trump administration rescinded an Obama-era order that limited such shipments of equipment, issued after public outrage over the militarized response to the Ferguson protests.

Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin expressed the full class arrogance of the billionaires who constitute Trump's real constituency when he made an appearance Sunday on the ABC interview program "This Week." He flatly defended Trump's call for NFL owners to fire players who engage in public protest before games.

Speaking like the corporate boss he was for decades, on Wall Street and in Hollywood, Mnuchin said the players had no democratic rights in the workplace. "They have the right to have their First Amendment off the field," he said. "This is a job." The issue was not democracy, he continued, "This is about respect for the military, the first responders."



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