

NFL issues new policy forbidding anthem protests by players

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The National Football League announced on Wednesday a new policy which forbids players from engaging in on-field protests and requires all players present on the field to stand for the national anthem. Any team whose players violate this rule will face being fined by NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell. The new policy also encourages individual teams to create their own policies to punish players who engage in on-field protests.

The new policy was issued after a meeting of the 32 billionaire and millionaire owners of the various teams. Only a few owners were said to have reservations about the policy, with one team suggesting it would pay any individual fines that might be levied on players for protest actions. The NFL Players Association, the union to which most players belong, said it was not consulted and issued a statement in opposition to the new rules.

Many players, and some team officials, expressed their opposition to the new policy. Malcolm Jenkins of the Philadelphia Eagles said in a statement, “What NFL owners did today was thwart the players’ constitutional rights to express themselves and use our platform to draw attention to social injustices like racial inequality in our country.”

Chris Long, also of the Eagles, correctly exposed part of the owners’ motivation in passing the new policy, stating in a tweet: “This is a fear of a diminished bottom line. It’s also fear of a president turning his base against a corporation. This is not patriotism. Don’t get it confused. These owners don’t love America more than the players demonstrating and taking real action to improve it.”

The policy shift by the NFL stems from the controversy which first started two years ago when Colin Kaepernick, at the time the starting quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers, began kneeling during the

playing of the national anthem at the beginning of games. Kaepernick has stated that his kneeling was a protest against the wave of police killings of young black men, which had inspired nationwide outrage.

“I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color,” he said at the time. “To me, this is bigger than football and it would be selfish on my part to look the other way. There are bodies in the street and people getting paid leave and getting away with murder.”

Kaepernick’s brave actions, and the subsequent right-wing media assault upon his freedom of speech, inspired widespread protests by professional athletes around the country, including players from nearly every NFL team. Throughout the 2016 football season dozens of players either took a knee during the playing of the national anthem, raised their fists in protest, or remained in the locker room.

Similar protests were engaged in by both high school and college athletes around the US, an indication of broad support for Kaepernick among the population.

Kaepernick left the 49ers at the end of the 2016 season and entered free agency, making him eligible to be signed by any NFL team. Despite his universally acknowledged skill as a player, Kaepernick has yet to be signed by another team. This has been widely understood as punishment for his political views. The Seattle Seahawks reportedly canceled negotiations with Kaepernick after he refused to sign an agreement that he would not engage in on-field protests. The Baltimore Ravens also considered signing Kaepernick, but were reportedly dissuaded after consulting with officials from the Pentagon.

In October 2017, Kaepernick filed a collusion grievance against the NFL owners, alleging that they were conspiring to deny him employment due to his

political stance.

The on-field protests had diminished by the start of the 2017 season, with only a few players continuing to kneel. This changed when President Trump, in an attempt to mobilize his most reactionary supporters and divert attention from his crisis-ridden administration, launched a public attack on the NFL for not cracking down more forcefully on protests, declaring, “Wouldn’t you love to see one of these NFL owners, when somebody disrespects our flag, to say ‘get that son of a bitch off the field right now, out, he’s fired.’”

In the following months, Trump continued his attacks in public appearances and on Twitter, oftentimes using thinly disguised racist terminology to attack the NFL players, 75 percent of whom are black. In one instance, Trump compared the NFL players unfavorably to the predominately white drivers and fans of NASCAR auto racing, stating, “So proud of NASCAR and its supporters and fans. They won’t put up with disrespecting our Country or our Flag, they said it loud and clear!”

Trump’s actions inspired a new upsurge of protests, with entire teams taking a knee or remaining in the locker rooms before games. In many cases, the players were joined by the coaching staffs and in some cases even the owners themselves. Behind the scenes, however, the owners were terrified of the effect Trump’s actions were having on their bottom line and conspired to silence the players.

An article published in the *New York Times* earlier this year described a meeting between owners and players in which both the protests and Kaepernick’s blacklisting were discussed. Though they refused to address the issue of Kaepernick’s lack of a new contract, multiple owners expressed their fear that Trump’s statements in opposition to the protesting players would continue to affect the league’s profitability.

A portion of those profits have come from payments made by the Department of Defense to the NFL. A Senate investigation launched in 2015 revealed that between the years 2012 and 2015, the Pentagon spent \$53 million on contracts with various professional sports teams to promote US militarism. These included “patriotic tributes at professional football, baseball, basketball, hockey, and soccer games. These paid tributes included on-field color guard, enlistment, and

reenlistment ceremonies, performances of the national anthem, full-field flag details, ceremonial first pitches ... DOD even paid teams for the ‘opportunity’ to perform surprise welcome home promotions for troops returning from deployments.”

The new policy prohibiting protests represents not merely a capitulation to the president on the part of the NFL owners, many of whom supported Trump in his 2016 campaign, but more fundamentally the need by the ruling class to suppress any public demonstrations against its militarist aims. This has taken on particular significance due to the advanced state of preparations for new wars that the US plans to launch in the near future.

In just the last month the US has withdrawn from the Iran nuclear deal, issuing new demands as a prelude to a military attack against that nation. It has declared the re-election of President Nicolas Maduro of Venezuela to be illegitimate, and openly encouraged a military coup to replace him. On Wednesday, President Trump canceled a planned summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un and renewed his threats to use nuclear weapons against the Stalinist dictatorship.

Come September, when the new NFL season begins, the US could be at war with any or all of these countries. These new wars will be accompanied by increasing censorship of left-wing and anti-war voices, the arrest and imprisonment of protesters, and a jingoistic campaign by the corporate media in support of US imperialism. Given the longstanding relationship between the NFL and the Pentagon, the possibility of NFL players inspiring resistance to these new wars, and the political repression that will accompany them, is unbearable to the owners and the government.



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