

Commissioner Rob Manfred cancels opening week of Major League Baseball season as owners' lockout continues

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Late Tuesday afternoon, the Major League Baseball Players Association (MLBPA) bargaining committee unanimously rejected the team owners' "best and final offer" for a new collective bargaining agreement (CBA). Less than an hour later, Baseball Commissioner Rob Manfred announced at a press conference that he was canceling the first week of the regular season, scheduled to begin on March 31.

"I had hoped against hope I wouldn't have to have this press conference where I am going to cancel some regular season games," Manfred said. "We worked hard to avoid an outcome that's bad for our fans, bad for our players, and bad for our clubs. Our failure to reach an agreement was not due to a lack of effort by either party."

The MLBPA responded to Manfred's announcement by issuing the following statement:

Rob Manfred and MLB's owners have cancelled the start of the season. Players and fans around the world who love baseball are disgusted, but sadly not surprised.

From the beginning of these negotiations, Players' objectives have been consistent—to promote competition, provide fair compensation for young Players, and to uphold the integrity of our market system. Against the backdrop of growing revenues and record profits, we are seeking nothing more than a fair agreement.

Manfred's announcement came on the 90th day of a lockout by the owners. The previous CBA expired last

December 2, after which the owners immediately announced a lockout. Spring training games were supposed to begin March 8. Now the owners have put a question mark over the regular season.

Since collective bargaining agreements were first negotiated in the late 1960s, they have been structured to expire during the off-season. Initially, owners' lockouts were frequent occurrences, with lockouts taking place in 1973, 1976 and 1990. The players carried out four strikes—in 1972, 1980, 1981 and 1994-1995. For the past 30 years, however, Major League Baseball has proceeded without any lockouts or strikes.

Manfred's announcement on Tuesday will impact the first two scheduled series for each team, resulting in the cancellation of 90 games. This will mark the first time baseball has lost any regular season games to a work stoppage since the 1994-95 players' strike.

MLB, which represents the owners, maneuvered so as to put the onus on the players for any loss of regular season games. MLB made no contract offer during the first 42 days of its lockout. Bargaining did not begin in earnest until February 21. Representatives for the players and owners met for nine straight days at Roger Dean Stadium in Jupiter, Florida, the spring training facility of the Mariners and the Cardinals.

After a marathon session that lasted over 16 hours into Monday night and the early morning hours of Tuesday, the owners claimed that significant progress toward a deal had been made. But later Tuesday morning, an MLB official accused the players' representatives of suddenly adopting "a decidedly different tone today" and making proposals "inconsistent with the prior discussions." The official

then reiterated the owners' 5 pm deadline for an agreement.

A number of players issued statements on Twitter denouncing the owners' provocative move. Alex Wood, a pitcher with the San Francisco Giants, wrote: "MLB has pumped to the media last night & today that there's momentum toward a deal. Now saying the players tone has changed. So if a deal isn't done today it's our fault. This isn't a coincidence. We've had the same tone all along. We just want a fair deal/to play ball."

Lance McCullers, Jr., a pitcher with the Houston Astros, posted the following Tweet:

It's mind blowing these dudes legitimately caused these issue & continue to lie about it. Walk out on us in Dallas. Lock us out. Don't speak to us for 6 weeks. Take weeks at a time to respond to our proposals. Clearly don't care about fans, baseball or the game.

How players are paid, and the schedule itself, are workplace conditions subject to bargaining between MLB and the MLBPA. Manfred does not have the authority to declare that players will not be paid for games missed.

"It would be our position in the event of games being canceled—that as a feature of any deal for us to come back—that we would be asking for compensation and/or that those games rescheduled," MLBPA chief negotiator Bruce Meyer said in response to Manfred's unilateral decision.

The conflict between owners and players mirrors many of the issues and conditions workers are facing globally, with the portion of revenues going to salaries declining and the portion going to profits increasing.

Baseball players' salaries have decreased for four consecutive years, even as MLB revenues have significantly increased, and franchise values have soared. Players' service time also has been manipulated to keep them from free agency and salary arbitration, both avenues that result in much larger salaries.

The luxury tax, instituted to encourage competitive balance, has been transformed into a de facto salary cap, resulting in declining salaries. This "tax" imposes

a limit or threshold on the total amount each team can spend on players' salaries. Any team that exceeds this threshold has to pay a significant tax.

The amount of the threshold over the last 10 years has risen by only 18 percent, while baseball revenues have risen by at least 40 percent. Moreover, most teams have been operating far below this "cap," and many others have gutted their rosters and slashed their payrolls because the game's rules reward teams with the worst records by giving them the highest draft choices.

Over this same period, franchise values have exploded to the point that, in 2021, *Forbes* estimated that the 30 MLB teams were worth a combined \$55.28 billion, compared to \$15.68 billion a decade ago.

MLB's "final" offer raised the luxury tax threshold from \$210 million to \$220 million in each of the next three seasons, and to \$224 million in 2025 and \$230 in 2026. The MLBPA countered with the demand for \$238 million this year, \$244 million in 2023, \$250 million in 2024, \$256 million in 2025 and \$263 in 2026.

Another major issue for the players is increasing players' minimum salary. The last five-year CBA raised minimum salaries by only 12.5 percent over the life of the agreement.

MLB's final proposal raised the minimum salary from \$570,500 to \$675,000 this year, followed by increases of \$10,000 annually. The union proposed \$725,000 this year, \$745,000 in 2023, \$765,000 in 2024 and increases for 2025 and 2026 based on the Consumer Price Index for Urban Wage Earners.

The billionaire owners view their lockout and the cancellation of games as a prudent business decision. To them, baseball is an investment that at times may necessitate short-term losses to achieve long-term gains. They count on the fact that most players, even those with very high salaries, have short careers.



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