

The NY Knicks championship and the social reality behind New York's "impossible joy"

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The New York Knicks defeated the San Antonio Spurs Saturday night to win their first National Basketball Association championship since 1973, ending a 53-year drought. The victory, secured in Game 5 of the finals, triggered mass celebrations across New York City, with crowds pouring into the streets.

What is extraordinary, and troubling, is the manner in which this sporting event has been presented by the corporate media, politicians of both parties and a host of celebrities as a major political event of national and international significance. Add to that the intensity of the popular response.

Donald Trump attended game three along with the Democratic mayor of New York Zohran Mamdani, a member of the Democratic Socialists of America. "Progressive" Democrats such as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez spent the week posting online about the NBA finals, hailing a Knicks victory as a victory for all New Yorkers.

This, after all, was in the midst of a criminal war against Iran, an ongoing assault on immigrants, an inflationary spiral that is impoverishing tens of millions in the US, savage cuts in vital social programs and Trump's ongoing erection of a presidential dictatorship. It follows strikes this year by New York nurses and Long Island Rail Road workers. The speculative bubble centered in New York's financial district has minted the world's first trillionaire, Elon Musk.

On Sunday, the *New York Times* published no less than seven articles on its website on the Knick's victory, including a prominent article headlined "Knicks Give Their City Something New: Impossible Joy." In a tone of ecstasy, the author described the celebrations as "giggling, weeping, spinning, convulsing, mosh-pitting, truck-honking, law-skirting, trumpet-playing, cowbell-ringing, off-key-singing, cigar-lighting, all-night-ing." In another article, the newspaper declared that the team's success had produced "a monocultural touch point, unifying classes, races and creeds across the five boroughs."

The Knicks' victory loomed large on the Sunday talk shows of the broadcast and cable networks.

The official, and even the popular, response is clearly disproportionate to the intrinsic significance of a basketball championship. There is nothing wrong with fans cheering on their home teams, and sports have a place in the social life of the people. There is, moreover, much to be admired in the extraordinary skill and determination of professional athletes and how they work as a team. Basketball is a beautiful game, and millions of people legitimately admire the abilities of players such as Jalen Brunson, who was named finals most valuable player after leading the Knicks' championship run.

But the Knicks hysteria is so over the top as to mark it as a significant social phenomenon and raise the question: Why? What is behind it?

The media presents the victory as proof that the city is united, that the immense social gulf between billionaires and workers can be overcome through shared sports enthusiasm. The wealthy celebrities in courtside seats, costing thousands of dollars, the Wall Street financiers in luxury suites, the politicians posting selfies in Knicks gear and the youth crowded into the streets are all presented as part of the same New York.

But the unity is fraudulent. New York is one of the most unequal cities on earth. It is home to the headquarters of finance capital alongside millions of workers living under conditions of rent-gouging, depressed wages, insecure employment, homelessness, police violence and collapsing social services. The same city that produces billionaires and luxury towers forces immigrant workers, delivery drivers, transit workers, teachers, nurses, food service workers and students into poverty.

The class issues underlying the celebration were revealed almost immediately. The very youth encouraged by the media and politicians to see the Knicks' victory as a collective civic triumph were met with police repression when they poured into the streets. According to the New York Police Department, 63 people were arrested overnight following the game. Police said charges included assault on an officer, criminal possession of a weapon, criminal mischief, disorderly conduct, resisting arrest and obstruction

of governmental administration.

The ruling class promotes the frenzy, then deploys the police when the social energy it has helped unleash threatens to spill beyond acceptable channels. Workers and youth may celebrate, consume and identify with the spectacle, but they must not occupy public space except under police control.

As for the scale and intensity of the popular response, media and political manipulation play a role. More fundamentally, however, the fervor reflects the absence of any mass progressive outlet for the social anger and desire for solidarity that exist within the working class. In an earlier period, broad layers of workers and youth were connected to mass working-class organizations and socialist political movements. The explosive class struggles of the 1930s gave birth to powerful industrial unions, including the United Auto Workers, which were built through sit-down strikes and direct confrontations with capital. In New York, the Transport Workers Union demonstrated the same militant traditions.

In January 1937, Transport Workers Union workers occupied the Brooklyn-Manhattan Transit Corporation's Kent Avenue power plant in Williamsburg after two boiler room engineers were fired for union activity. By seizing a strategic choke point in the city's transit system, workers threatened to shut down the electricity powering trains and trolleys, forcing management to reinstate the fired workers within hours. Socialists, including members of the Trotskyist movement and the Communist Party, played leading roles in these struggles.

Today, after decades of McCarthyism, red-baiting, deindustrialization and the corporatist transformation of the trade unions into arms of the employers and the state, there are no mass outlets for workers to realize their desire for solidarity and unity in the fight for democratic and social rights.

The trade unions, including the UAW, the Teamsters, UNITE HERE and the AFL-CIO as a whole, function not as instruments of struggle, but as mechanisms for containing it. They systematically subordinate the working class to the parties of big business, mainly the Democrats. They shut down strikes, isolate workers, enforce sellout contracts.

The betrayal of the Long Island Rail Road strike is only the latest example. The unions shut down a powerful three-day strike by 3,500 workers and then pushed ratification of a deal workers had not even been allowed to see in full. Subway and bus workers in the TWU, meanwhile, are being told by the MTA to accept even lower wage increases, higher healthcare costs and attacks on working conditions.

In this vacuum, sports can become a substitute form of social cohesion. Fans experience, in distorted and temporary form, a sense of belonging, shared purpose and collective

identity that capitalist society otherwise denies them. The celebration of the Knicks becomes a surrogate for solidarity. The championship becomes a symbolic victory in a social order in which workers experience defeat after defeat at the hands of employers, landlords, police, courts and politicians.

There is something of what Marx described, in another context, as the "sigh of the oppressed" in this phenomenon.

This manipulation is reinforced by the proliferation of sports gambling. Over the past several years, gambling has been integrated into nearly every level of American sports. The major leagues, broadcasters and betting platforms have fused into a single commercial apparatus. Disney-owned ESPN has entered the gambling business through sportsbook partnerships. CBS Sports' betting page functions as a portal for betting previews, "expert picks," promo codes and promotions for FanDuel, DraftKings, Bet365, Kalshi and other platforms.

The smartphone has made this apparatus ever-present. A user can download a betting app, upload a credit card or link a bank account, and begin wagering within minutes. Push notifications, odds boosts, parlays, "no sweat" bets and individualized promotions are used to draw users back into the app throughout the day. The same behavioral technologies used by social media companies to maximize engagement are deployed by gambling firms to maximize losses.

The Knicks spectacle is not merely a story about basketball. It is a concentrated expression of American capitalism in 2026: staggering inequality, war, political reaction, gambling, media manipulation and the desperate attempt to manufacture social unity where none exists.

The fervor surrounding the Knicks is a portent. The same social energy that today finds a distorted expression in sports mania will, under the impact of war, austerity and dictatorship, erupt in far more explosive forms. The decisive question is whether that energy is consciously organized around a socialist program, directed against capitalism and the rule of the billionaires. Against the ruling class's manufactured distractions, the working class must assert its own independent interests and build the revolutionary leadership necessary to realize them.



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