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Hall of Fame Shut-Out

A conspiracy of management cronies is blocking 91-year-old union pioneer Marvin Miller from the Baseball Hall of Fame.

Peter Dreier and Kelly Candaele July 22, 2008 | This article appeared in the August 4, 2008 edition of *The Nation*.

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When the Baseball Hall of Fame holds its induction ceremony in Cooperstown, New York, July 27, three pillars of baseball's corporate establishment will join the ranks. But the man who freed ballplayers from indentured servitude will not. This is not only a travesty, it's the result of a coup engineered by the conservative cabal that controls the Hall of Fame.



AP Images

Baseball owes a huge debt of gratitude to Marvin Miller, who, as

Marvin Miller announces to reporters in New York City that the 13-day-old baseball strike has ended on April 13, 1972.

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director of the players union from 1966 to 1983, dramatically improved players' pay and working conditions. It's time for the union and players--Hall of Famers, veterans and current players alike--to speak out on behalf of this baseball and labor pioneer, now 91, before it's too late.

Miller has been snubbed three times by the Hall of Fame--in 2003, 2007 and this year. The selection committee for executives (non-players who contributed to the game) isn't scheduled to vote again until late 2009, but the movement to put Miller in the hall should begin now.

Miller, a Bronx native, worked as an economist for the Steelworkers Union before the Major League Baseball Players Association (MLBPA) hired him in 1966 as its first full-time director. Union leaders, led by star pitchers Robin Roberts and Jim Bunning (now a Republican US Senator from Kentucky) recruited him to help transform the sport's outdated labor relations. The owners, and their hired commissioners, fought Miller at every turn. Most sportswriters at the time sided with the management, severely attacking Miller and the very idea of a players union. Even some players, glad just to be getting paid to put on a uniform, initially resisted the idea.

Before Miller, team owners ruled baseball with no pretense of giving players the same rights enjoyed by workers in other industries. Players were tethered to their teams through the reserve clause in every player's contract. Under the reserve clause, contracts were limited to one season. The contract "reserved" the team's right to

civilians.

**Peter Dreier and Donald Cohen
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Peter Dreier and Donald Cohen

agents to negotiate their contracts. In 1976, they gained the right to become free agents, allowing players to decide for themselves which employer they wanted to work for, to veto proposed trades and to bargain for the best contract. Under Miller, the union won increased per-diem allowances, improvements in travel conditions, better training facilities, locker room conditions and medical treatment.

In 1967, the minimum salary was \$6,000 and the average salary was \$19,000. The first collective bargaining agreement the next year raised the minimum to \$10,000—paltry by today's standards, but a giant improvement in players' standard of living back then. When Miller retired in 1982, the average player salary had increased to \$240,000. Today, the minimum salary is \$390,000 and the average salary is over \$2.8 million.

Like all business leaders, baseball's owners at the time warned that the union, higher wages and stronger workplace rules would destroy the industry. In fact, baseball is more popular and prosperous than ever. Last year, Major League Baseball reached a record of over \$6 billion in revenues and a record 79.5 million in attendance. The union simply gave players the power to win a greater share of their employers' growing revenues.

Before the union could challenge the owners, however, Miller had to get the players to stand up for themselves. "People today don't understand how beaten down the players were back then," Miller observed in a recent telephone interview. "The players had low self-esteem, as any people in their position would have—like baggage owned by the clubs."

Miller instructed ballplayers in the ABCs of trade unionism: fight for your rights to be treated as more than property, stick together against management, work on behalf of players who came before you and who would come after you, prepare yourself—professionally and financially—for life after your playing days are over and don't allow owners to divide players by race, income or their place in the celebrity pecking order.

And like any good union negotiator, Miller helped the players focus on pension issues. Most professional athletes are lucky to have ten-year careers. The average stay in the big leagues for baseball players is 5.6 years—but less for pitchers. So increasing payments and shortening the number of years needed to qualify for a pension became critical issues. The 1972 baseball strike was primarily about pensions for players. Today, unlike many ex-National Football League players who scrape by because of a much weaker union, even baseball players who had short and less-than-illustrious careers have good retirement benefits. Duane Kuiper—a second baseman for the Cleveland Indians and San Francisco Giants from 1974 to 1985—told the *San Francisco Chronicle* last year, "I don't think any of us really appreciated Marvin until we all got older."

For an executive, owner or other non-player to gain induction into the Hall of Fame, he (or she) must have made "significant contributions to the game of baseball." In 1992, Red Barber, the great Hall of Fame broadcaster for the Dodgers and Yankees said, "Marvin Miller, along with Babe Ruth and Jackie Robinson, is one of the two or three most important men in baseball history."

"retain" the player for the next season. Other teams were not permitted to bid for the player and players were not permitted to negotiate with other teams. Teams offered players their contracts on a take-it-or-leave-it basis. Players had no insurance, no real pensions, and awful medical treatment.

With Miller's guidance, the players association negotiated the first collective bargaining agreement in 1968, which established players' rights to binding arbitration over salaries and grievances. Players also won the right to have

In 2003, the first time Miller's name appeared on the Hall of Fame ballot, Miller received only 35 of 79 votes (44 percent) of the veterans committee--then comprised of Hall of Fame players, broadcasters and writers--which was responsible for selecting veteran players as well as non-players (umpires, owners, executives, broadcasters, writers, managers). In fact, no non-player received the 75 percent required for admission to the hall that year.

In 2007, the veterans committee failed to pick Miller again. This time, however, he received 63 percent, 12 percent short of the magic number. He was the only candidate to earn a majority of the votes. That year, former commissioner Bowie Kuhn received only fourteen votes.

That tally for Miller was obviously too close for comfort for baseball's establishment, concerned that he would probably reach the three-quarters threshold in the next vote. Later that year, the Hall of Fame board carried out a coup. They changed the rules and transformed a democratic voting process into a conspiracy of cronies. They created a twelve-member committee, responsible solely for considering baseball executives, with nine votes required for selection. The much smaller group included seven former executives, two Hall of Fame players, and three writers. When that group met last December, the ballot they considered included ten people, eight of them former team owners or executives as well as Kuhn and Miller. Miller only got three votes. Three people received enough votes to gain entry into the exclusive club. Walter O'Malley, who owned the Brooklyn and Los Angeles Dodgers from 1950 to 1979, received nine votes. Barney Dreyfuss, who owned the Pittsburgh Pirates from 1900 to 1932, earned ten votes. Kuhn, baseball commissioner from 1969 to 1984, also received ten votes.

How do these men's accomplishments compare with those of Miller? O'Malley uprooted the Dodgers from Brooklyn and brought major league baseball to the West Coast in 1958, a milestone that many consider a significant turning point in baseball history. Dreyfuss is sometimes credited with creating the World Series and with building the first modern steel and concrete baseball park, Forbes Field, in 1909. These are important achievements, but hardly equal to Miller's impact on the game. As for Kuhn, a former corporate lawyer, he is best known for being the owners' mouthpiece and for having been consistently outmaneuvered by his adversary Miller, who used his negotiating and organizing skills to wrest rights for the players.

Who was on the twelve-member committee that perpetrated this travesty? It included two Hall of Fame players--Harmon Killebrew (the former Minnesota Twins slugger) and Monte Irvin (the former Negro Leagues and New York Giants outfielder who served for many years working for Kuhn in the commissioners' office). It had three baseball writers--Paul Hagen of the *Philadelphia Daily News*, Rick Hummel of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* and Hal McCoy of the *Dayton Daily News*. It also included two retired baseball executives (former American League President Bobby Brown and former Red Sox CEO John Harrington) and five current executives (Jerry Bell of the Twins, Bill Dewitt of the Cardinals, Bill Giles of the Phillies, Davis Glass of the Royals and Andy MacPhail of the Orioles).

What's especially outrageous about this list is that Miller was blackballed by executives with whom he'd done battle--and defeated-- during baseball's most intense labor wars. Each of them had a clear ideological and organizational conflict of interest in voting on Miller's candidacy for the hall.

For example, in 1968, when Miller negotiated baseball's first collective bargaining agreement, the owners demanded that players be prohibited from holding joint negotiations. Miller insisted that the owners live by the same rules and added language in the agreement that prohibits owners from colluding on salaries and other contract matters. In the 1980s, the Players Association accused the owners of colluding to deny them their right to exercise free agency. Miller testified at the arbitration hearings on behalf of the players. The owners denied that they'd conspired, but the neutral arbitrator ruled otherwise. In effect, the arbitrator

accused the owners of lying, similar to the tobacco company CEOs who testified before Congress that cigarettes weren't addictive. The union won every case, costing the owners over \$280 million in fines.

DeWitt, MacPhail and Giles were each on baseball's management side during the collusion scandal, and surely harbor a grudge against Miller. Moreover, all three are heirs of baseball dynasties. Their fathers (and, in McPhail's case, father and grandfather) were part of baseball's management during the pre-Miller era, before the players union weakened the owners' power and profits.

Another committee member, Kansas City Royals owner David Glass, is the former president and CEO of Wal-Mart, perhaps the country's most anti-union corporation. He has served on the Royals' board since 1993 and bought the team in 2000. According to a source close to the negotiations, during the 1994-95 baseball strike, Glass, who was then the team's chairman, was a strident opponent of settling with the players' union. He advocated the use of strikebreaking "replacement" players, despite a court ruling that owners were violating federal labor laws.

In a recent telephone interview, Miller said that the changes to the selection committee may have been made in order to pick fellow executives more than to exclude him from hall membership. But Miller, who is hardly naïve, is being too generous.

The baseball corporate establishment isn't just anti-Miller. It is anti-union. And the MLBPA is the nation's strongest union.

When Miller led the MLBPA, he sought to raise players' political awareness. "We didn't just explain the labor laws," he recalled. "We had to get players to understand that they were a union. We did a lot of internal education to talk to players about broader issues."

Unfortunately, those days are long gone. Having freed the players from the owners' domination, the union now focuses on negotiating to give players a greater share of proceeds from ticket sales, television contracts and the marketing of player names and team logos.

In 2004, the *New York Times*, drawing on a report by National Labor Committee called *Foul Ball*, [shed light](#) on the terrible working conditions at the Rawlings baseball factory in the remote city of Turrialba, Costa Rica. The story revealed that the Costa Rican workers who stitch baseballs for the major leagues were paid 30 cents for each ball, which were then sold for \$15 in US sporting-goods stores. According to a local doctor who worked at the Rawlings plant in the 1990s, a third of the workers developed carpal tunnel syndrome, an often-debilitating pain and numbness of the hands and wrists. The MLBPA was silent on the controversy. But the factory still exists, and the players union could send a fact-finding delegation of players to inspect the working conditions at the Costa Rican sweatshop and other factories where their uniforms and equipment are made.

The players association could also demand that teams provide a living wage for all stadium employees and encourage politically conscious athletes to express their views and even walk picket lines and do commercials for labor causes.

Unfortunately, it is unlikely that a majority of current players even know who Marvin Miller is, or how much they owe this legendary baseball pioneer. But over the years some players have demonstrated the spirit of solidarity that Miller brought to the organization. In 1982, for example, Brooks Robinson, the former Orioles star third baseman, was a color commentator for games broadcast on WMAR-TV when station employees went on strike, picketing outside the building for two months before the start of the baseball season. Robinson refused to cross the picket line, which put pressure on management to settle. The strike ended the next day.

After the 234-day 1994-95 baseball strike ended, catcher Mike Piazza, then with the Los Angeles Dodgers, donated \$100 for every home run he hit to the union that represented the concessionaires, who lost considerable pay while 921 games were canceled. It was an individual gesture of empathy with Dodger Stadium's working class--ushers, ticket takers, parking-lot attendants and food vendors--that generated tremendous good will among the Dodgers' fan base. As an organization, the MLBPA could follow Piazza's example and set aside a small part of its large strike fund to help stadium employees temporarily put out of work by any future players' strikes.

Even if he's only judged by his contribution to improving the pay, working conditions and pensions of ballplayers, Miller deserves a spot in the Hall of Fame.

Many high-profile Hall of Fame players agree. Pitching great Tom Seaver said that Miller's exclusion is a "national disgrace." "Whether you agree or disagree, he was one individual who had as large a ramification as anybody on the history of the game," Seaver, a Hall of Famer, [told](#) the *New York Times* a few years ago. "If the Hall of Fame is an historical repository, he deserves to be there."

Hank Aaron wrote that "Miller should be in the Hall of Fame if the players have to break down the doors to get him in."

When he was inducted into the Hall of Fame in 1999, legendary pitcher Nolan Ryan devoted part of his speech to paying tribute to Miller. Ryan reminded the audience that when he broke into the major leagues in 1966, he had to spend the winter months working at a gas station from 3 pm to 9 pm, while his wife worked at a local bookstore, to make ends meet. Because of Miller's efforts, Ryan [said](#), "we brought that level up to where the players weren't put in that situation."

In 2003, when Miller's name appeared on the ballot for the first time, Hall of Fame slugger Reggie Jackson--whose wealth is due not only to his own talent but also to Miller's efforts to strengthen players' bargaining power--left his ballot blank and explained at the time, that he believed that only ballplayers should be in the Hall of Fame. The outspoken Jackson, a Hall of Famer, has since [changed his tune](#), telling the *New York Times* in 2006 that, "Marvin Miller absolutely should be included in the Hall of Fame."

Rather than simply make isolated statements that Miller should be inducted into the hall, the players and their union should implement the lessons they learned from Miller. They should organize a collective campaign of some of the greatest players and advocate on his behalf. If twenty of the greatest players in baseball history came together, how could the committee that makes the decision deny Miller his due?

Although the sixteen-member Hall of Fame board is dominated by owners and team executives, the five former players on the board--Seaver, Frank Robinson, Joe Morgan, Robin Roberts and Brooks Robinson--could use their collective voice to raise a stink. Brooks Robinson, a longtime MLBPA leader during his outstanding career, is also president of the players Alumni Association

Miller now says he doesn't want to be considered for the Hall of Fame again. He even wrote a [letter](#) to the Baseball Writers Association of America in May, observing, "The anti-union bias of the powers who control the hall has consistently prevented recognition of the historic significance of the changes to baseball brought about by collective bargaining." He criticized the "rigged veterans committee whose members are handpicked to reach a particular outcome while offering the pretense of a democratic vote." He added: "It is an insult to baseball fans, historians, sports writers and especially to those baseball players who sacrificed and brought the game into the twenty-first century. At the age of 91, I can do without farce."

The players should ignore Miller's comments, made out of pride and frustration. At this year's induction ceremonies on July 27, players in the audience and on the stage should wear armbands with Miller's name on it. And the Player's Association should circulate a petition of both veterans and current players demanding that Miller be selected. They should lobby the players and writers on the selection committee to demand that the no other management executives be selected to the Hall of Fame until Miller is voted in.

That's the kind of solidarity that would best reflect Miller's important legacy.

Peter Dreier and Kelly Candaele July 22, 2008 | This article appeared in the August 4, 2008 edition of The Nation.

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