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WORK

Pitchers and pickets

Ballplayers are a model, if richly so,
for workers in other labor unions

BY PETER DREIER

This Labor Day the biggest story in labor-management relations is the baseball strike. Most Americans view this off-the-field struggle as a dispute between greedy owners and spoiled athletes.

A "plague on both your houses" attitude is exacerbated by the nation's economic woes. De-

spite some indicators of an upswing, most Americans don't feel confident about their financial future. When even middle-class Americans find it hard to make ends meet, they don't have much sympathy for muscle-bound millionaires complaining about salary caps.

LABOR, Page 67

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But the baseball strike offers some important lessons for working people.

In the last two decades, players' average salaries have skyrocketed, from \$36,500 in 1973 to \$1.2 million today. But average salaries can be misleading, skewed by the incomes of a few dozen superstars. A more realistic figure is the *median* income - now \$410,000 - which is the dividing line with half the players above and below. Many ballplayers make closer to the minimum salary of \$109,000 than the huge sums paid to future Hall of Famers.

During that same period, the majority of American workers - including many white-collar and professional employees - have seen their incomes decline. Real wages fell by 1.8 percent from 1973 to 1978, and by 9.6 percent from 1979 to 1993. A recent Census Bureau report revealed that 18 percent of the nation's full-time workers earned poverty-level wages, compared with 12 percent who had such earnings in 1979.

Some observers attribute the ballplayers' rising pay scale to supply and demand: the nation's 760 major leaguers are highly-skilled, almost irreplaceable athletes, which gives them enormous leverage at contract time.

This "labor shortage" theory may apply to the few dozen superstars and the next hundred top players. But the majority of players last fewer than 5 years in the majors. They may be gifted athletes, but they could be easily replaced. So why do these second- and third-tier players boast such high salaries? The Major League Baseball Players Association. Beginning in the 1970s, and accelerating in the last 10 years, the union turned baseball's labor-management situation upside down.

Since the overturning of the reserve clause in 1976, players have had the right to negotiate as free agents. The union solidarity of these rugged individualists leveled the playing field between team owners and players. Collective bargaining has forced owners to submit to binding arbitration of salary disputes and share their profits with the players. As a result, players' salaries, pensions and other benefits have spiraled. And the players have hung together, resisting the team owners' attempts to bust their union and reverse the MLBPA's hard-won gains - "give-backs" in union jargon.

While baseball players were enjoying the fruits of their solidarity, most other Americans weren't so lucky. Union strength, which reached a peak of 35 percent in the mid-1950s, allowed workers to share in the postwar prosperity and join the middle class. Union pay scales even helped boost the wages of nonunion workers. But since 1983, overall union membership has declined from 22 percent to 16 percent of the work force - the lowest since the Great Depression. Omit government employees, and unions represent only 11 percent of private-sector workers. (In contrast, 37 percent of Canada's work force is unionized).

The erosion of the US labor movement is the chief reason for the declining wages and living standards of the majority of Americans as well as for the nation's widening economic disparities. In the United States, unionized workers have higher wages, better pensions, longer vacations and maternity leaves, and better health insurance than their nonunion counterparts.



AP FILE PHOTO

Walter Reuther, United Auto Workers president, joins striking grape pickers in Delano, Calif., in 1965.

The major factor behind unions' decline has been the nation's outmoded labor laws and the antilabor stance of the National Labor Relations Board, especially during the Reagan-Bush era. Corporate America has engaged in widespread union-bashing, unchecked by the NLRB. Since Reagan busted the air traffic controllers' union in 1981, the NLRB has looked the other way while companies intimidate employees from joining unions. Today, 1 in 40 workers engaged in union organizing drives is fired illegally - a dramatic increase since the union heyday of the 1950s. Corporations have hired anti-union consultants to thwart organizing drives, used a variety of illegal delaying tactics to foil workers' rights to unionize and even refused to sign contracts with unions that have won elections.

Once a political powerhouse, the labor movement couldn't even summon the muscle earlier this year to get Congress to pass a weak law prohibiting employers from replacing striking workers.

After two decades of falling wages, there's some new excitement among labor's ranks - such as the innovative organizing

drives among janitors, hotel workers and pink-collar office workers. Union membership actually grew in 1993 for the first time in 14 years. But the labor movement is unlikely to make significant headway until the nation's labor laws are changed to give working people a more level playing field.

William Gould, President Clinton's new NLRB chairman, is likely to bring more balance to the agency, but real change will require Congress to enact the first serious labor law change since 1935. Clinton's Commission on the Future of Worker-Management Relations, headed by former Labor Secretary John T. Dunlop, is expected to make recommendations later this year to revise the laws governing labor-management relations. With studies documenting productivity growth in companies where union members gain a voice in management, the commission is likely to propose an expanded decision-making role for unions.

Polls indicate that most Americans resent major league players' huge salaries. The MLBPA risks losing the allegiance of even die-hard fans. Unfortunately, the MLBPA has made little effort to forge stronger ties with the broader labor movement and consumers.

Major league players should be reaching out, lending their celebrity status to help other workers, particularly those struggling to improve their working and living conditions. Last month, Bo-Jackson complained on "The Tonight Show" that too much attention was paid to the baseball strike and not enough to the needs of others, such as the nation's schoolteachers. Bo knows. So why doesn't he organize his colleagues to

support teachers unions who are struggling to upgrade salaries, reduce classroom sizes and improve learning conditions in the city's schools?

Fans might be shocked to see some St. Louis Cardinals walk the picket lines with United Auto Workers on strike against Caterpillar in nearby Peoria, Ill. The MLBPA could also refuse to stay in nonunion hotels during road trips.

The MLBPA should devote resources to improve working conditions in other sectors of their own industry. The pay scales and working conditions of minor leaguers - most of whom never reach the majors - are comparable to those of blue-collar workers. They need a union, too. So do the workers at Russell Mills in Alexander City, Ala., the company that makes most major league

uniforms. It is "one of the most anti-union companies around," says Billy Tindle, head of the Alabama AFL-CIO. The MLBPA could set aside a small part of their large strike fund to help the ushers, ticket takers and other stadium employees who are temporarily out of work during this strike. And shouldn't the game's highly-paid athletes speak out against the Wilson company's exploitation of Haitian women paid \$1.07 for a 10½-hour day stitching baseballs? •

The real message of the players' economic success is that the best route to upward mobility for working people - not just miners and factory workers, but secretaries, nurses, computer programmers, sales clerks, farmworkers, teachers and others - is to join a union.

Don't expect to see Tony Gwynn or Greg Maddux marching in this year's Labor Day parades singing "Solidarity Forever." But let's recognize that these men - from mostly modest backgrounds - owe their economic gains not only to natural talent and hard work but also to their loyalty to each other and their union.

Most ballplayers probably never heard of John L. Lewis, Walter Reuther, Samuel Gompers, Mother Jones and Eugene Debs, but they've learned that, as the song goes, "the union makes us strong." Until more Americans learn that lesson, our nation's living standards will continue to erode.

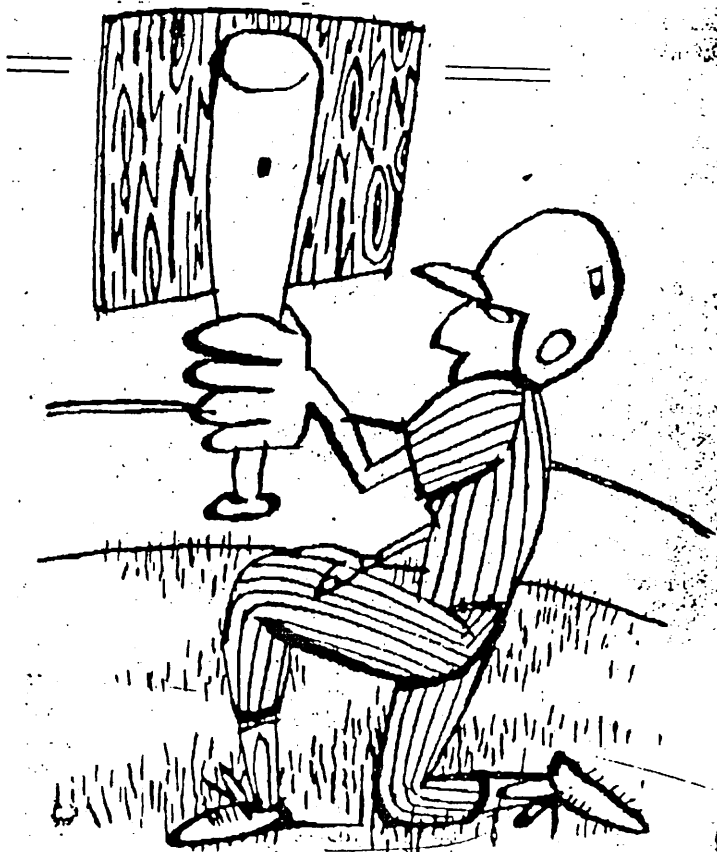


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