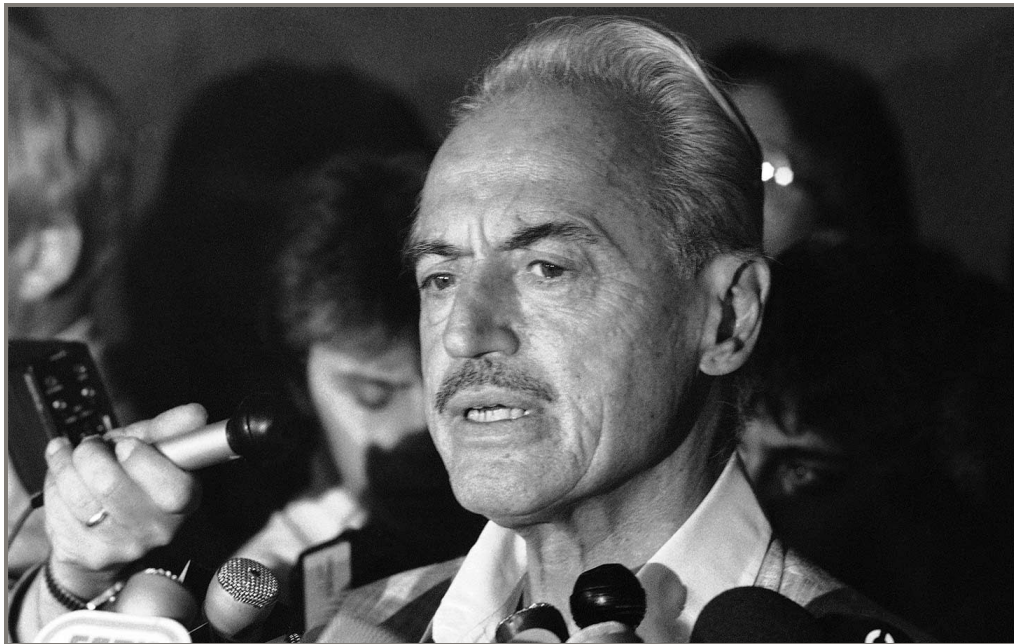


# Baseball's Hall of Fame Finally Admits Labor Pioneer Marvin Miller

*At least two owners and executives cast their secret ballot for the Major League Baseball Players Association's former head.*

*By Peter Dreier*

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Marvin Miller speaks to reporters after rejecting a proposal to end a baseball strike on July 16, 1981. (AP / Howard)

**M**arvin Miller, the pathbreaking executive

director of the Major League Baseball Players Association from 1966 to 1982, was elected to baseball's Hall of Fame on Sunday.

Hardly anyone, including me and *Nation* writer Marc Normandin, expected this to happen. The Hall of Fame has long been controlled by anti-union team owners and executives along with friends and

business associates of Jane Forbes Clark, the Hall's conservative chair, and the granddaughter of its founder. One longtime board member, David Glass, is a former Kansas City Royals owner, a former CEO of Walmart, and a virulent foe of unions.

Miller retired in 1982, but the Hall of Fame refused to put him on the ballot until 2003. It rigged the elections by appointing enough owners and executives on the Modern Baseball Era (formerly called the Veterans) committee to guarantee that he didn't get the required votes. Before Sunday's vote, he had been snubbed seven times.

Miller was baseball's Moses, helping lead the players out of indentured servitude by ending the reserve clause, which bound players to teams in perpetuity. Hall of Fame sportscaster Red Barber said that Miller, Jackie Robinson, and Babe Ruth were the most influential people in baseball history.

Miller's election is somewhat bittersweet for three reasons. First, the Hall of Fame's corporate plutocrats waited until seven years after Miller's death to do the right thing. Second, the Players Association did little to push to get Miller into the Hall. And third, Miller's two children announced that they will boycott next summer's induction ceremony in Cooperstown.

**B**orn in 1917, Miller grew up in Brooklyn, walked

picket lines with his parents, traveled in left-wing circles, and worked as an economist for the United Steelworkers union before the MLBPA hired him in 1966 as its first full-time director. Before Miller's arrival, players were tethered to their teams.

Contracts were limited to one season. Each year, team owners told players: Take it or leave it. Even superstars had no leverage to negotiate better deals. Players had no insurance, no real pensions, and awful medical treatment.

Kelly Candaele and I interviewed Miller in 2008 for an article in *The Nation* titled “Hall of Fame Shut-Out.” He had just been rebuffed by the Hall of Fame for the third time. He was angry about the slight, but proud of what the union had accomplished.

“People today don’t understand how beaten down the players were back then,” Miller told us. “The players had low self-esteem, as any people in their position would have—like baggage owned by the clubs.”

Miller raised players’ political awareness and taught them to stand up for themselves.

“We had to get players to understand that they were a union,” he recalled. “We did a lot of internal education to talk to players about broader issues.”

Miller instructed ballplayers in the ABCs of unionism: Fight for your rights to be treated as more than property; don’t allow owners to divide you by race, income, or your place in the celebrity pecking

order; work on behalf of players who came before you and who would come after you; and prepare yourself for life after your baseball career is over.

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Two years after Miller joined the union, it negotiated the first-ever collective-bargaining agreement in professional sports. Minimum salaries increased from \$6,000 to \$10,000. Two years later, the Players Association established players' rights to binding arbitration over salaries and grievances. Most importantly, he helped overturn the reserve clause. In 1970, with union support, outfielder Curt Flood filed a lawsuit against Major League Baseball for trading him without his consent, which he claimed violated federal anti-trust laws. Two years later, the US Supreme Court ruled against Flood, but in 1976, Miller persuaded pitchers Andy

Messersmith and Dave McNally to play that season without a contract, and then file a grievance arbitration. The arbitrator ruled in their favor, paving the way to free agency, which allows players to choose which team they want to work for, veto proposed trades, and bargain for the best contract.

Under Miller, the union won better pay, pensions, travel conditions, training and locker room facilities, and medical treatment. When Miller retired in 1982, the average player salary had increased to \$240,000. Today, the minimum salary is \$555,000, the median salary is \$1.5 million, and the average salary is \$4.5 million, inflated by superstars' lucrative contracts.

Through several strikes and tough bargaining, the union dramatically improved pensions—an important issue, since players stay in the majors for an average of only four years. In 2007, Duane Kuiper—a second baseman for the Cleveland Indians and San Francisco Giants from 1974 to 1985—told the *San Francisco Chronicle*, “I don’t

think any of us really appreciated Marvin until we all got older.”

**F**rom the start, owners claimed that the Players

Association would destroy the sport. But baseball has seen a steady increase in attendance and television fees. Major league revenues reached a record \$10.3 billion last year.

Even so, the owners hated the union and despised Miller. They demonstrated their disdain in 2007 when the Hall of Fame inducted longtime baseball commissioner Bowie Kuhn but rejected Miller, who had outmaneuvered Kuhn many times in contract negotiations.

In 2008, Miller wrote a letter to the Baseball Writers Association of America, 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.”

But, perhaps out of spite, the Hall of Fame kept Miller on the ballot and, until last Sunday, kept rejecting him.

Over the years, many Hall of Fame players—including Hank Aaron, Tom Seaver, Joe Morgan, Brooks Robinson, Dave Winfield, Joe Torre, and Nolan Ryan—spoke out individually on Miller’s behalf. Former baseball commissioner Fay Vincent said in 2009, “It’s preposterous that Marvin Miller isn’t in the Hall of Fame. It’s an embarrassment.” Bud Selig, while he was baseball commissioner, repeatedly argued for Miller’s

admission to the Hall. So did Ray Grebey, who went toe to toe with Miller as the owners' chief negotiator during the 1981 players strike.

I'd always believed that unless the Players Association waged a campaign for Miller, the Hall of Fame would continue to blacklist him. The union could have mobilized living Hall of Fame players (there are now 71 of them) to issue a statement, call a press conference, or even boycott the annual induction ceremonies. They didn't.

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But this year, even without such an effort, the Hall of Fame relented. On the eighth try, Miller finally got enough votes.

As in previous years, six owners and executives sat on the Hall of Fame's 16-member Modern Baseball

Era committee—enough to deny Miller the requisite 12 votes. Though the Hall's ballot is secret, because Miller was elected, we know for certain that at least two owners and executives voted for him.

It is sad, despite his recent election, that baseball's corporate plutocrats denied Miller his rightful place in the Hall of Fame during his life. He died in 2012 at 95. His children, Peter and Susan, say they won't attend the ceremony in Cooperstown next summer because they want to honor their father's wishes. That is a huge mistake, because, as *New York Times* columnist William Rhoden wrote in 2008, "With all due respect, this issue is larger than the individual."

Many others have echoed that sentiment. The Hall of Fame was diminished by Miller's absence. His plaque on the wall is a triumph for social justice. Hopefully, his children will reconsider and accept the honor on his behalf.

Two unsung former major league pitchers deserve much of the credit for Miller's election to the Hall. Bob Tufts, who died on October 4, was a tireless crusader for Miller and even taught a course at New York University about his role in American trade unionism. And Bob Locker, who in 2010 started a "Thanks, Marvin" website to promote Miller's accomplishments, and who I hope gets to attend the Cooperstown ceremony.

**H**ad Miller been given the chance to deliver an

induction speech, he surely would have been gracious, but he might also have had some forceful things to say about the state of major league baseball, including the owners' current efforts to weaken free agency.

He'd certainly thank the union for helping get the Smithsonian Institution's National Portrait Gallery to include his portrait, unveiled last month. But he might also have expressed disappointment over the

Players Association's direction in the past few decades.

He'd be upset that the union no longer does much to educate players about the labor movement or even about MLBPA's own history, so they can appreciate the union's role in improving conditions for superstars and rank-and-file players alike.

It would have galled Miller that the Players Association sat on its hands last year while the Yankees and Dodgers crossed a union picket line at Boston hotels where workers were on strike. He would have urged the Players Association to insist that their contract requires teams to stay in union hotels and boycott hotels where workers are in the midst of labor disputes with management.

Miller would have wanted the Players Association to support emerging efforts to unionize minor league ballplayers, who currently earn an estimated \$7,500 a year, most of whom will never climb into the better-paying majors. It could also challenge baseball's plans to drop 42 minor league teams

after next season, an idea that Senator Bernie Sanders called “an absolute disaster for baseball fans, workers and communities throughout the country.” The Players Association could insist that teams purchase players’ uniforms, bats, and other equipment from union companies—or at least from those that provide decent pay, working conditions, and benefits. A Players Association–sponsored visit to Costa Rica could draw attention to the Rawlings factory (co-owned by Major League Baseball) where all major league baseballs are made in sweatshop conditions.

The Players Association’s collective-bargaining contract expires next year and the union faces its toughest test in decades. Commissioner Rob Manfred told union leaders that “maybe Marvin Miller’s financial system doesn’t work anymore,” threatening that there is “not going to be a deal where we pay you in economics to get labor peace,” daring them to strike. He clearly believes that the players don’t have the confidence or solidarity to

challenge MLB's insistence on givebacks and will be too timid to walk out.

Perhaps the union should distribute armbands for players to wear on their uniforms next season that say, "WWMD"—What would Marvin do?

### Peter Dreier

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