



2021 Summer Institute for Union Women

Evening Plenary

**"Women of the WNBA Players Association and  
Their Epic Fight for Gender & Racial Justice"**

August 6th, 6:30 PM EST

Watch LIVE on Facebook

<https://www.facebook.com/UALEUnitedAssociationforLaborEducation>



**Resource Guide**

## Women of the WNBA Players Association and their epic fight for gender & racial justice

*UALE 2021 Summer Institute for Union Women*  
Friday, August 6<sup>th</sup>

*a Facebook Livestreamed event:*

<https://www.facebook.com/UALEUnitedAssociationforLaborEducation>

The women of the WNBA – elite professional athletes and union members – spent the summer of 2020 locked down in a sports facility in Florida, practicing together, living together, suiting up and playing basketball for the ESPN cameras – and organizing for social justice. The WNBA Bubble – the “Wubble” -- protected them from the COVID19 virus, and allowed some of the finest athletes on earth to perform before empty stands. But the Wubble separated players from family, friends and community during the most politically tumultuous moments of our lifetime: the nation reeled in the aftermath of police shootings of unarmed black women and men, and approached the most consequential election since the Civil War.

How the women of the WNBA turned their anger and pain to collective action, and how they helped focus national attention on the Senate campaign of Rev. Raphael Warnock, is the subject of the extraordinary ESPN documentary “**144**”.

Tonight we will hear the story not yet told: how the WNBA Players Association members’ organizing strategy over the preceding years built unity, focus and trust around their social justice work. With this history, the WNBPA bargained a unique COVID-era back to work agreement granting them the right to fight for Black lives on and off the basketball court.

### **Speakers:**

- **Terri Jackson**, Executive Director, Womens National Basketball Players Association (WNBPA)
- **Crystal Langhorne**, Seattle Storm’s Director of Community Engagement for Seattle’s *Force4Change*, retired WNBA All-Star (Washington Mystics and Seattle Storm), USA Basketball National Team, Seattle Storm team representative WNBPA
- **Bianca Cunningham**, Campaigns Director, Bargaining for the Common Good Network.

### **Moderator:**

- **Cheryl Coney**, Secretary, United Association of Labor Educators

## The key elements of the WNBPA story:

- The players of the Women’s National Basketball Association are 80% black; LGBTQ+
- The WNBPA, like most unions, had to negotiate terms for safely returning to work – “play” in the world of sports – as the COVID pandemic of 2020 landed.
- Their COVID Return to Play agreement went well beyond testing and masking protocols. The Players Association leaders insisted that they would only undertake the risks of play, if they could use their media platform, as professional athletes, to fight for racial and social justice. During bargaining, players clearly stated: NO DEAL without a signed commitment from the League (the association of employers, aka “owners”) that the entire season would be publically dedicated to the fight for social justice; that the league itself would commit money, time, and communications resources to this effort.
- The result: a joint labor management project which became the **Social Justice Council**. <https://www.wnba.com/socialjustice/>
- And the season was dedicated to **#SayHerName** and **Justice for Breonna Taylor**
- The 144 WNBA players spent 90 days locked down together, playing ball by day and organizing at night, through the tumultuous summer of 2020. They used their collective power and smart organizing to:
  - Brand every TV appearance with BLM, #SayHerName, Breanna Taylor
  - Carry Breonna Taylor’s name on every jersey, every stat sheet, and every team’s social media
  - Conduct smart player-run social media campaigns throughout the summer.
  - Engineer a highly visible “pause” in league play after the murder of Jacob Blake
  - Call attention to the crisis in mental health for black women and men everywhere
  - Endorse and organize national support for Raphael Warnock during the GA Senate primary; Warnock challenged and defeated the OWNER of one of the WNBA teams.
- The story of the summer in the WNBA Bubble – the “Wubble” – is beautifully told in an ESPN documentary available on pay per view:
  - Trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SaEboaRO7CM>
  - Amazing candid footage of players’ meeting before they called a “pause” in league play: [https://www.espn.com/video/clip/\\_id/31439935](https://www.espn.com/video/clip/_id/31439935)
  - Full movie, pay per view, is available on ESPN+

## 2021 Follow up!

Watch this one-hour public event, streamed by the LEAGUE, as part of a special mid-season media event/Challenge Cup tournament. It carries the mark of the Social Justice Council, and develops themes near and dear to our movement

<https://www.wnba.com/video/commissioners-cup-conversations/?fbclid=IwAR3LyCpxUH2i28G13pbSiDz7hbCJZKKcZ97IXafyfA7Nz1EX8XfaJPnYLMw>

- Part 1: **WNBA Player Activism & Leadership** conversation between the union president and the Sec-Treasurer about their work as leaders in the league, in the movement for social justice. What great organizing material
- Part 2: **Mental Health in the Fight for Social Justice** Mental health, wellness, and the connection to racism, women's bodies, and social justice work! Simone Biles' decisions. Personal self-care. Totally worth watching, for those developing this important conversation
- Part 3: **WNBA Social Justice Priorities** - the fight for Black women's health, broadly defined, and the special focus on Black Trans inclusion

## Other Resources:

### Videos:

- **ESPN:** The story of the summer in the WNBA Bubble – the “Wubble” – is beautifully told in an ESPN documentary available on pay per view:
  - Trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SaEboaRO7CM>
  - Full movie, pay per view, is available on ESPN+
  - Candid footage of players’ meeting before they called a “pause” in league play: [https://www.espn.com/video/clip/\\_/id/31439935](https://www.espn.com/video/clip/_/id/31439935) . Anyone who has ever been in a hard strike vote meeting will be able to identify.
- **WNBA.com:** The Social Justice Council: in players’ own words. Note that these are provided on the LEAGUE website – the employers’ website. A reflection of the success of the negotiations and the shared strategy.
  - <https://www.wnba.com/socialjustice/>
  - In particular: Layshia Clarendon: <https://www.wnba.com/video/social-justice-council-layshia-clarendon/>
  - Jacob Blake Unity action: <https://www.wnba.com/video/moment-of-recognition-wnba-players/>

### Reading:

- **Role of white allies** among the players – and media’s over-emphasis of their work. Also credits WNBA players with huge impact on Warnock victory. [https://www.insider.com/wnba-players-deserve-recognition-on-off-court-warnock-loeffler-georgia-2021-1?fbclid=IwAR2p4ez9OuDORYbngS\\_URD71aRU61ERtPqNVlshwLXjH1CdFLfAtPVpfYBM](https://www.insider.com/wnba-players-deserve-recognition-on-off-court-warnock-loeffler-georgia-2021-1?fbclid=IwAR2p4ez9OuDORYbngS_URD71aRU61ERtPqNVlshwLXjH1CdFLfAtPVpfYBM)
- Role of WNBA players’ work in unseating owner of the Atlanta Dream – and the eventual sale of the team to one of the team’s players: <https://www.thenation.com/article/society/kelly-loeffler-wnba-montgomery/>

*By any measure, it should be the biggest story in sports: A franchise owner runs a racist Senate campaign, throwing her own Black players under the bus in the process. Meanwhile, one of those players takes the year off from playing ball to dedicate herself to social justice concerns. That player asks to meet with the aforementioned franchise owner to discuss those concerns and is denied. The franchise owner refuses to meet and respectfully engage with someone who disagrees with her for political reasons. After the franchise owner faceplants their election campaign, ending in ignominious defeat, the players, the union, fans, and eventually even the league pressures her to sell the club.*

*That in and of itself would be a hell of a story. But this one goes to the next level: The aforementioned player joins an ownership group and buys the team. It’s positively cinematic. But this story isn’t getting the media attention it should be. That’s because it took place in the WNBA. Sexism is a hell of a drug, and it’s a damn shame because this is a story for the ages....*

- WNBPA Director Terri Jackson on getting ready to bargain work during 2020:
  - <https://www.wsj.com/articles/three-questions-with-the-womens-national-basketball-players-associations-terri-jackson-11591369720>
  
- Crystal Langhorne: (panelist) Former starter with the WA Mystics and the Seattle Storm, played in the bubble last summer for the Storm (the champs!). She was also on the last bargaining team. The Seattle Storm owners group -- the only all-women's ownership group in professional sports -- created a new division (Force4Change) and when Langhorne retired made her the director of community engagement:
  - <https://www.swishappeal.com/wnba/2021/2/10/22273155/wnba-crystal-langhorne-retirement-washington-mystics-seattle-storm-director-community-engagment>
  
- Feature story on WNBPA VP Layshia Clarendon, her role in the players' union, and her insistence that the agreement with the league around **#SayHerName** be in writing.
  - [https://www.espn.com/espn/feature/story/\\_/id/31681454/the-power-layshia-clarendon](https://www.espn.com/espn/feature/story/_/id/31681454/the-power-layshia-clarendon)
  
- Broad and deep Sports Illustrated story on the WNBA to launch 2021 25<sup>th</sup> season. Focus on the role of racism and sexism on the business side of sports; and the role of racism and sexism in shaping players' activism:
  - <https://www.si.com/wnba/2021/05/13/wnba-25th-season-daily-cover>