



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

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

***UALE 2021 Summer Institute for Union Women
Friday, August 6th***

The Facebook Livestreamed event is available at:

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

Now also on YouTube: <https://youtu.be/jmJNszyIvbw>

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 to **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, Breonna Taylor
 - Carry Breonna Taylor’s name on every jersey, every stat sheet, and every team’s social media and website
 - Conduct 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 Georgia Senate primary; (Warnock challenged and defeated the OWNER of one of the WNBA teams who had disparaged the players’ social justice activity)
- The story of the summer in the WNBA Bubble – the “Wubble” – is beautifully told in the ESPN documentary “**144**” available on ESPN+
 - 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/31440672
 - Full movie, is available on ESPN+ (requires a subscription; free 30 day subscription is available)

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=IwAR3LyCpxUH2i28G13pbSiDz7hbCJZKKcZ97lXafyfA7Nz1EX8XfaJPnYLMw>

- Part 1: **WNBA Player Activism & Leadership**: conversation between the union President and the Sec-Treasurer about their work as leaders among their players, in the world of sports, and 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; reproductive health; and special focus on Black Trans inclusion.

Other Resources:

NEW! Radio Feature (NPR):

- **“Should Athletes Be Activists? WNBA Star Nneka Ogumwike Says They Have To Be”** – 17-minute feature on the players’ choice to take on owner Kelly Loeffler, endorsing and supporting candidacy of Rev. Raphael Warnock:
 - <https://www.npr.org/2021/09/13/1036712552/should-athletes-be-activists-wnba-star-nneka-ogumwike-says-they-have-to-be>

Videos:

- **ESPN: The story of the summer in the WNBA Bubble** – the “Wubble” – is beautifully told in an ESPN documentary available on ESPN+ :
 - Trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SaEboaRO7CM>
 - Full movie is available on ESPN+ (requires subscription)
 - Candid footage of players’ meeting before they called a “pause” in league play: (Deeply identifiable for any union member who has ever been in a difficult contract or strike vote meeting.)
https://www.espn.com/video/clip/_id/31440672
- **WNBA.com: The Social Justice Council:** in players’ own words. Note that these are provided on the League website – the employers’ association 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/>
- **2020 Breakthrough Contract:**
 - WNBPA President Nneka Ogumwike and WNBA Commissioner announce landmark agreement on Good Morning America: <https://www.goodmorningamerica.com/living/video/bargaining-agreement-breaks-barriers-wnba-players-68265176>
 - Sue Bird and Diana Turasi on CBS This Morning to discuss contract: <https://youtu.be/rEv-hMa-l6Y>
 - Ogumwike and WNBA Commissioner post-bargaining public dialogue: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IHSHTZ74h_4
- **Profile of Terri Jackson**, Executive Director of the WNBPA:
 - Groundbreaking 2020 Collective Bargaining Agreement, and Jackson’s growth into leadership of the Womens National Basketball Players Association.

<https://www.si.com/wnba/2020/10/29/terri-jackson-wnbpa-executive-director-the-unrelenting?iwsourc=c>

Reading:

- **2020 Contract:**
 - New York Times: *W.N.B.A. Makes ‘Big Bet on Women’ With a New Contract:* <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/14/sports/basketball/wnba-contract-collective-bargaining-agreement.html>
 - New York Times: *“How the WNBA Deal Got Done”:* <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/26/sports/basketball/wnba-collective-bargaining-agreement.html>
 - Sports Illustrated: *Analyzing the WNBA’s New CBA Deal and What It Means for the Future of the League:* <https://www.si.com/wnba/2020/01/14/wnba-cba-labor-salary-raise-players-association>

- **Political Action:** Role of WNBA players’ activism 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....

- **Racism and sexism on the business side of sports:** Broad and deep Sports Illustrated story on the WNBA to launch 2021 25th season. Why women pro athletes still struggle for pay and respect; and the role of racism and sexism in shaping players’ activism:
 - <https://www.si.com/wnba/2021/05/13/wnba-25th-season-daily-cover>
- **Role of white allies** among the players – and media’s over-attention to their work. Also credits WNBA players with definitive impact on Warnock’s electoral victory.
 - https://www.insider.com/wnba-players-deserve-recognition-on-off-court-warnock-loeffler-georgia-2021-1?fbclid=IwAR2p4ez9OuD0RYbngS_URD71aRU61ERtPqNVlshwLXjH1CdFLfAtPVpfYBM

People profiles:

- **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 champions!). 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) to promote social justice in the community. Upon her retirement from play, Langhorne became director of community engagement:
 - <https://www.swishappeal.com/wnba/2021/2/10/22273155/wnba-crystal-langhorne-retirement-washington-mystics-seattle-storm-director-community-engagment>
- **WNBPA VP Layshia Clarendon**, the first openly non-binary, transgender player in the WNBA. 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