

# PLAYERS' ASSOCIATIONS AND LABOUR STRUGGLES SPORTS STARDOM AND WORKING-CLASS HEROES?

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**T**he launch of the Sri Lanka Cricket Association (SLCA), by a group of professional cricketers is a new development in the sports culture of Sri Lanka. It is an organisation, commonly described as a Players Association, which is a form of a trade union representing interests of players as workers.

The emergence of the SLCA at this particular political historical moment is no coincidence. In effect, it is indicative of the changing nature of sports business, globalisation and labour struggles. It is a historical moment, given that the Sri Lankan cricketers have arrived at the core of international sports entertainment industry. An industry, more appropriately a service, that has expanded rapidly with advances in media technology since mid-1980s. Consequently, sports entertainment is at present a significant realm of capital flows where profits are accumulated by the labour of sporting men and women.

The necessity for a Players Association arose after a series of events that compelled professional cricketers to act collectively to protect their interests as workers. These events involved the expulsion and penalties imposed on players for various reasons, from "bad" behaviour to match-fixing.

The ways in which the match-fixing and gambling issues came into the mainstream press, as a scandal, not only exposed the "corruption," but also the contradictions of professional sports under conditions of capitalism. The issues of corruption were primarily linked with the violation of some social norms and values concerning egalitarian principles of sports.

What lurks behind this "scandal" is a range of contradictions of sport labour under contemporary conditions of capitalism. The mainstream media along with conservative players and fans, continues to describe the scandal as an ethical issue. What is at the heart of the scandal is this. Here you have a group of high-wage workers who are making a quick, side buck, violating some ambiguous ethical norm. Ambiguous since the public outcry and legal outcomes has varied. Depending on the country of citizenship the legal outcomes have varied from fines to life-time bans. For similar "offences" Wasim Akram and Mushtaq Ahmed in Pakistan are still in the national team. Shane Warne and Mark Waugh in Australia were fined. Ajey Jadeja and Majoj Prabhakar in India were banned for five years, while Mohammed Azharuddin and Ajay Sharma were imposed a life time ban.

This entry point into the match-fixing as an ethical issue, avoids looking at the ways in which wages are determined in professional sports. The lucrative wages of a handful of players, those who reached celebrity status, is the catalyst that somehow justifies the

unequal power relations between the employers and players. This justification represents a specific class compromise between sellers and buyers of labour. A whole range of other actors, cricket officials, bureaucrats, businesses, lawyers, journalists and fans, are complicit in sustaining this unequal power relation. Issues about wages and how they are determined are intently erased from popular discourse in this class compromise. The gambling issue effectively ruptured this class compromise. In the case of Sri Lanka, the players collectively organised and launched the Players Association. It is an expression of resistance against the increasing powerlessness of players, amidst increased capital flows into cricket, for example, by way of new expensive cricket stadiums.

## Cricketers as Wage Labour

**P**rofessional cricketers are wage labourers, somewhat similar to high-wage white-collar workers. Within a diverse services sector, the white-collar workers comprise of a segment of the working-classes that have some responsibility, skills, and/or qualifications. Their labour process involves a degree of autonomy and the absence of rigid job control. The wages of technical workers are often associated with their qualifications and responsibility. Professional cricketers sell their sports labour and performance to employers. This relationship between the player (worker) and employer is mediated by range of other actors who decide pay scales and conditions of play (work).

The professional cricket player didn't get to this privileged status without sacrifices. Most of these workers have spent years practising monotonous routines in a self-isolating pursuit of "excellence." Along the way, they have had to make various compromises with coaches, officials, private sector sponsors, in order to have access to play and training facilities. Of course, it's not always play, but also performance and labour. The notion of "play" at this level includes a process of alienated labour. This alienation is often intensified by the effects of hierarchical and undemocratic nature of most sports institutions (particularly the sports ministry and sports governing bodies). The undemocratic nature of sports organisations is illustrated by the elections for the Cricket Board as well as various labour disputes (i.e. the Roshan Mahanama case). In effect, the undemocratic power hierarchies in sports institutions and self-alienating compromises have combined to trigger the launch of the Players Association.

## Wage Insecurity

**T**he emergence of the SLCA illustrates an erosion of the compromise between players and their employers. The erosion of the compromise occurred with the employers gaining

excessive market power. The employers have maintained a monopoly over determining codes of conduct in this labour market. The employers with the help of politicians, lawyers, and sports bureaucrats determine when and how to set wages, conduct physical tests, urine tests, and ban players. The Singapore football authorities are even planning on lie detector tests.

Meanwhile, the players often retreat individually to political patronage or the judiciary to protect their interests. Even then, the uneven power relationship between players and employers is left unaltered. All these dynamics in the professional cricket scene highlight how employers treat sports workers instrumentally. In response, a few enlightened sports workers are now organising themselves to exercise their market power. In effect, the players are organised as a collective to renegotiating the next phase of compromises.

Players forming unions, although a new phenomenon for the local context, it is not so in other more advanced urban sports economies. In the international realm, the Federation of International Cricketers Association was launched in 1998 in England, to protect the interests of professional cricket players. In America, the professional baseball players, basketball, ice hockey formed unions in the early 1980s. This collective strength of sports workers mobilised not only to negotiate better wages but also better conditions for sports labour and worker welfare. Baseball's owners' attempts to assert management's power to set wages and conditions of employment in a union-free workplace was resisted by the players association going on strike. The Major League Baseball Players' Association has survived lockouts and won strikes, forcing baseball's owners to cave in during various disputes in the last 20 years. Along with increased salaries, the players association formed in 1998, by women basketball players in the WNBA (Women's National Basketball Association) demanded an year-round health plan and maternity leave.

## Sports Media

**A** key actor in the employer-player class compromise is the sports media, which is also an integral agent of adding value to spectator sports. In general, the mainstream "free" media has often restrained from publishing sports news from the players' perspective. This parallels the "business" section news about the economy that is intently from the standpoint of the employers and rarely from the workers.

The collective organisation among the players is also a reaction against standard (capital biased) practices of sports journalists that erase players' perspectives. The standard sports media that manufacture sports entertainment, by way of personal biographies, convoluted statistics, record-setting mania, and trivial details have been exposed of its complicity with the employers.

The mainstream media strategy is to interpret and present the demands of the players associations as a grudge match among millionaires. Certainly a handful of players are in high wage brackets, but a majority are in low wage short-term contracts tense with uncertainty. Labour disputes in the realm of spectator sports in Sri Lanka is unheard of and are often presented as interpersonal conflicts. Much of the press coverage isolates players' campaigns, from other struggles of organised workers and working people general.

## Union Strategies

**T**he new association has two immediate tasks in order to gain some notion of legitimacy. One is to inform the public from the players' perspective of issues and concerns that face them. The second task is to learn from other international players associations as well as the contemporary trends in the international trade union movement.

The public campaign is not only to improve the quality of play (work) and players (workers) but also to enhance the notion of democracy in sports. The historical process of in-house inquiries on labour disputes in sports institutions, have consistently marginalised players. The Susanthika controversies since 1997, have illustrated the limitations of judiciary to even put a dent in the authoritarian structures of sports, both local and international.

The SLCA is an organisation embedded in a male biased cricket culture. Male biased cricket players, officials, sponsors, journalists and fans have often failed to acknowledge women playing cricket. In order to encourage more democratic practices within cricket, the SLCA will need to transform this "boys club" tendency by promoting alliances within and outside the sport of cricket. In order to change enduring hierarchical structures and male biased practices within cricket will have to include a broad range of actors including women.

In terms of labour struggles, major damage was done to both the WTO in particular and neo-liberal business agenda in general, at the 1999 battle of Seattle. The dynamics of Seattle illustrated that interests of labour were articulated through a 'cross-movement, cross-border' alliance but one that was also cross-ideological, cross-strategy, and networked.

In a way, the launch of the SLCA is a wake up call for all sports fans. It demands from the sports fans to look a bit deeper from the spontaneous celebration of team spirit and nationalism, into the processes of wage-labour behind the spectacle of cricket. The SLCA is entering new ground in an attempt to redescribe the sports culture in Sri Lanka. Specifically, it is a collective attempt to influence the production relations behind the sports entertainment spectacle. It is hoped that the enlightened cricket fans will also break new ground by rethinking their role in the unequal employer-sports worker relations in professional sports. ■