

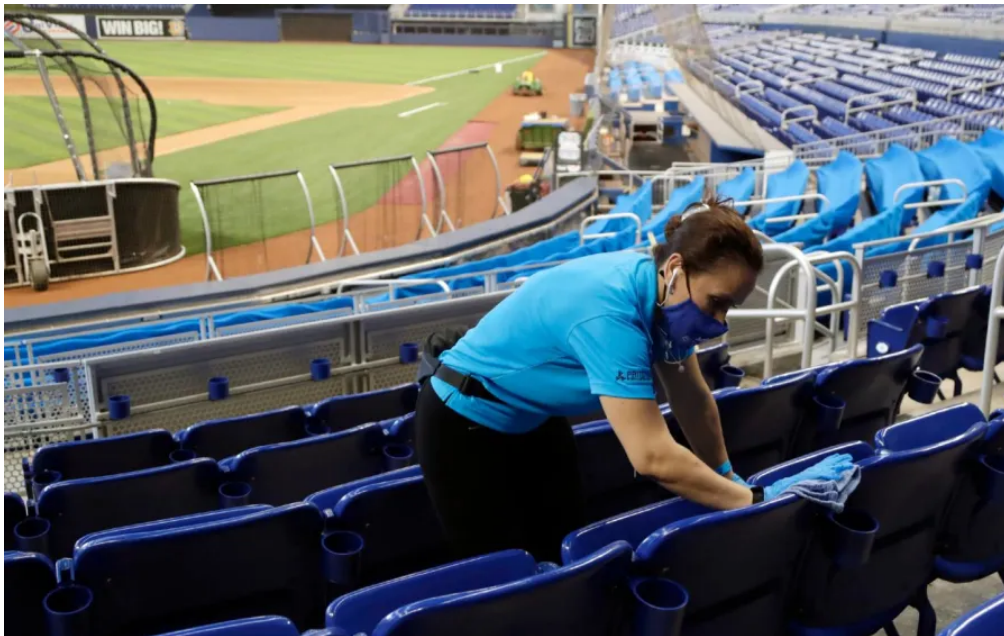
**ECONOMY** **LABOR** **SPORTS**

# Baseball's Stadium Workers Are Getting Peanuts From the Billionaire Owners

*When baseball shut down, 39,000 stadium workers lost their jobs, and the MLB has done little to help them out.*

*By Peter Dreier and Kelly Candaele*

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A stadium worker wears a protective face mask and gloves to protect against the coronavirus as she cleans seats before a Miami Marlins baseball workout at Marlins Park. (*Lynne Sladky / AP Photo*)

**M**ajor League Baseball has imposed a Covid-shortened 60-game season on the ballplayers after months of haggling over salaries and health provisions. Meanwhile, Jackie Walker worries about her future.

“I’m appalled about how the Nationals have treated us,” Walker said, referring to Washington, D.C.’s World Series–winning team that she has worked for since 2011. Walker, a catering cook at Nationals Park, who is a diabetic and has heart problems, lost her health insurance in mid-March after Major League Baseball (MLB) delayed the start of the regular season as a result of the health pandemic.

She is one of the roughly 24,000 food service workers who sell beer, peanuts, and hot dogs and staff the luxury suites at the 30 MLB stadiums throughout the country.



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When baseball shut down in March, these workers—along with another approximately 15,000 workers who help park cars, clean the stadiums, sell caps and T-shirts, show fans to

their seats, and provide security—lost their jobs. Many of those who were lucky enough to have health insurance—and many did not—lost that as well.

Major league players are playing again and being paid a prorated salary, but the stadium workers have been left in the lurch. Fans have been banned from stadiums, so there will be no need for most of the workers who normally staff the games.

“I’m in serious debt,” Walker explained. “My bills are piling up. I ran out of my medicine for diabetes and a heart problem.”

Walker’s church members helped her out with some one-time donations, but she’s still worried. When she had health insurance, she had no co-payments for the 11 pills and two insulin shots she needs each day for her diabetes and heart condition. She can’t afford the roughly \$2,000 a month she estimates it would cost for those same medications over the counter.

She gets \$268 a week in unemployment insurance, “but that’s not enough to pay the rent” of \$1,550 a month. “I’m behind on my rent. My landlord is allowing me to pay \$200 a week because I’ve been a faithful tenant, but I’m \$5,000 behind in my rent and I’m worried I might get evicted.”

Soon after the season was postponed when Covid-19 erupted, MLB Commissioner Rob Manfred and the team owners announced to much fanfare that each club would pony up \$1 million to help the ballpark employees. But most of the teams claimed that they had no obligation to help the

food service workers—who are the majority of stadium employees—because they don’t work directly for the teams but are employed by food subcontractors.

“We didn’t get a dime of that money,” Walker said angrily.

When Heidi Hashem, who has worked at Fenway Park, home of the Boston Red Sox, for 30 years, was laid off, neither the team nor Aramark—her immediate employer—provided any relief.

“We were upset because we didn’t feel part of the Fenway family,” she said.

After Boston Unite HERE Local 26 mounted a petition and publicity campaign to pressure the Red Sox to allocate funds to the Fenway Park food workers the union represents, the team added \$500,000 to its million-dollar commitment. That translated into a one-time \$500 payment for Hashem and about 1,000 of her fellow workers. The money came directly from the Red Sox, not Aramark.

UNITE HERE, which represents the food and beverage employees at 21 of the 30 stadiums, waged similar efforts in other major league cities, and with similar results. Most, but not all, teams provided the stadiums’ blue-collar workers between \$300 and \$600 one-time checks, less than a week’s rent for most of them.

Since being laid off, Ashley Rose Harwood, who has worked at San Francisco Giants home games at Oracle Park since 2015, has shifted from eating beans and rice to get by to a “liquid” diet.

“It’s more cost-effective to buy fruits and vegetables and grains in bulk and then blend them to get the nutrients you need,” Harwood says. Harwood, who served food and drinks in the stadium’s luxury suites, says she tried to make people “feel like superstars.”

Her direct employer, Bon Appetit, provided no relief. The Giants sent her a \$500 check.

Deedee Reed lives six blocks from Dodger Stadium in Chavez Ravine, an area that was cleared of its remaining Latino residents to make way for the stadium in the 1950s. She’s worked at the ballpark since 1991, when she was 18, and has been the manager of one of the stadium bars for several years.

“I love my job. I love the atmosphere. I love my coworkers. I love the fans,” she said.

A shop steward for her union, Unite HERE Local 11, Reed earns \$20.69 an hour and last year took home about \$15,000 for the season, working the 81 home games at Dodger Stadium. She also earned a little more than that amount working at Staples Center, home of four professional sports franchises—the NBA’s Los Angeles Lakers and Los Angeles Clippers, the NHL’s Los Angeles Kings, and the WNBA’s Los Angeles Sparks—each of which have canceled their seasons, too.

Like her 1,700 Dodger Stadium food service colleagues, Reed is employed by Levy, a division of Compass. After UNITE HERE circulated a petition and got some local media

coverage for their plight, the Dodgers donated \$350 to each food service worker. This was half as much as the workers employed directly by the Dodgers, who received \$700.

“The fact that they think that \$350 is enough is a slap in the face,” Reed said. “The worst part is, we had to apply for it. We had to go online. They sent us an electronic check, but if we wanted to have it deposited in our checking accounts, they charged us \$20.”

“I can’t understand how people can be so greedy,” Reed said. “We were treated like stepchildren. I’d like to see the owners of the Dodgers live one day in my shoes.”

For many years Reed, who is divorced, had a full-time job as a clerk/typist and worked at Dodger Stadium at night. After she was laid off from her office job, she began driving for Uber, but grew weary of working until four in the morning. When times got tough, she and her two children moved in with her parents. Now she lives with her brother and children, all of whom work at Dodger Stadium.

Reed said that she’s “stressed” that her government unemployment checks (\$394 every two weeks) will stop coming and the supplemental help from the federal Covid-19 fund will end as well.

“We don’t know how long that will last. That’s what’s scaring us,” she said. “I’m worried about paying rent, I’m worried about bills, about food, about car payments.” After September, Reed will be without health insurance.

Levy agreed to pay into the union's health insurance fund for its Dodger Stadium employees until September. After that, though, Reed will be without coverage.

"My daughter and I both have medical conditions and we're worried about our health insurance."

Thanks to the union, Erika Monter, who worked as a prep cook at Angels Stadium in Anaheim for six years, earned \$15.85 an hour, higher than the state's \$13 minimum. In the off-season she found similar jobs in restaurants and cafeterias. With three children at home—a 9-year-old son, a 13-year-old son, and an 18-year-old daughter, who is in college—she was frustrated that she couldn't be with them after school because most Angels games are at night.

She and her husband—who paints cars but is now out of work—pay \$2,800 a month in rent. She's been jobless since March and receives health coverage through Medical, the California state system that serves low-income residents. Her children were able to keep getting lunch from school, but now that the school year has ended, she's spending more on meals.

"Kids eat a lot more when they're at home. I have to feed them breakfast, lunch, and dinner now. And since the pandemic hit, all the stores have raised their prices. I look for the cheapest food."

Since the Angels laid her off, Monter has relied on food banks to help feed her family. So far she's been able to pay the rent, but she knows at least one former Angels Stadium worker who is living in her car and knows about others who are also homeless.

Angels spokesperson Marie Garvey said that the team “tried to help as best we can” after the season was put on hold. But all Monter received was a one-time check for \$350.

“If I saw Mr. Moreno the first thing I’d say is, ‘Be more human. We’re the workers who make you as rich as you are,’” she said, referring to Arte Moreno, the team’s owner.

Moreno purchased the Angels from the Walt Disney Company for \$180 million in 2003. The team is now worth \$1.97 billion. Adjusting for inflation, that’s a 680 percent increase. Moreno’s personal net worth is \$3.4 billion.

Bill DeWitt Jr., owner of the St. Louis Cardinals, recently told a St. Louis sports radio program that the baseball industry “Isn’t very profitable, to be quite honest.” DeWitt purchased the team in 1996 for \$150 million. It is now valued at \$2.2 billion. DeWitt is personally worth \$4 billion.

In fact, 22 of the 30 owners of MLB teams are billionaires. The poorest, Cincinnati Reds owner Bob Castellini, has a net worth of \$400 million. The richest, the Toronto Blue Jays’ Edward Rogers, is worth \$11.5 billion. Most of the team owners inherited their wealth from their families, primarily through real estate and banking.

**O**wning an MLB team has become increasingly lucrative. The average value of an MLB team increased from \$811 million to \$1.8 billion in the past six years. Last year, team values ranged from \$1 billion for the Miami Marlins to \$4.6 billion for the New York Yankees, according to *Forbes*. The Dodgers, Red Sox, Giants, and Cubs are each worth over \$3 billion.



Real estate developer Ted Lerner purchased the Washington Nationals in 2006 for \$450 million. Today the team, now run by his son Mark, is worth \$1.9 billion. Since John Henry and Thomas Werner bought the Red Sox in 2002 for \$380 million, they've seen the team's value skyrocket to \$3.3 billion. Mark Walter and his co-owners purchased the Los Angeles Dodgers for \$2.15 billion in 2012; now the team is valued at \$3.4 billion. Charles Johnson purchased the San Francisco Giants in 1993 for \$100 million. Today the team is worth \$3.1 billion, and Johnson's personal wealth is \$4.3 billion.

Over the last four years, team revenues have grown by 15 percent, while players' salaries increased by only 1 percent during that period.

All 30 teams belong to the entity called Major League Baseball, and while they cooperate on various aspects of the sport—including the league schedules, the rules, distribution of television revenues, and the negotiations with the players union—they fend for themselves on almost everything else, including stadium employees.

There's no system-wide union contract, minimum wage or pay schedule, or benefits package for the roughly 24,000 food service workers and 15,000 other stadium employees. Instead, each team subcontracts out most of the stadium work and decides which company to hire to provide the workers that make the stadiums run smoothly.

Although UNITE HERE represents the food and beverage employees at 21 stadiums, the union contracts with the different firms—Compass, Delaware North, Sodexo, Legends Hospitality, and Aramark—vary widely.

The workers at Dodger Stadium have one of the best contracts, according to union officials. LA's municipal minimum wage—which increased from \$14.25 to \$15 an hour on July 1—puts a floor on what Dodger Stadium employees earn, but their union contract guarantees a higher wage. The typical Dodger Stadium food worker earns about \$17.39 per hour and is paid for a minimum of eight hours a shift. Even so, a stadium employee who works all 81 home games earns just \$11,268.72 for the baseball season.

In other cities, stadium employees earn less per hour and often get paid for only five or six hours a game. Not surprisingly, most workers at the 30 ballparks have second or third jobs during and after the baseball season. Some get similar jobs at other sports arenas and convention centers, while others find other work. Even piecing together two or three jobs, most of them can barely make ends meet.

Food service contractors at some ballparks pay for workers' health insurance during the baseball season, but workers doing the exact same job in other stadiums have health care options that are so meager they are forced to find health insurance on their own. Only seven food workers at Boston's Fenway Park have utilized the health care plan offered by the contractor Aramark, while close to 400 in San Francisco enrolled in the plan negotiated by UNITE HERE Local 2 with food contractor Bon Appétit.

Food service workers at the Giants' Oracle Park work for Bon Appétit, a division of Compass. Employees who work at least 10 events a month received full health insurance for the next two months, but neither Compass nor the Giants committed to maintain that coverage once the games were

halted. The UNITE HERE local in San Francisco is using its reserve funds from its health care trust fund to cover health insurance for its members through October.

“Concession workers are not employed by the club nor do they receive healthcare benefits through us,” Zineb Curran, vice president of Corporate Communications for the Boston Red Sox, commented via e-mail. “We fully understand that the disbursement [\$500] in no way compensates for their loss.”

The 39,000 stadium workers are in no better or worse shape than the tens of millions of other low-wage workers who were thrown overboard by the failing ship called American capitalism. The only difference is that they work for an industry that is one of the most visible in the US economy, that the teams they work for are among the most profitable corporations in the country, and that the owners who control those companies are among the wealthiest individuals in the nation.

**C**orporate baseball’s treatment of those who work in its stadiums reflects the precarious conditions of low-wage work in America.

In most European countries, where people are covered by universal health insurance that is not tied to their job, governments have also subsidized workers up to 80 percent of wages and salaries lost due to Covid-19. In Canada, where ballpark workers for the Toronto Blue Jays have also lost their jobs, employees are covered by provincial health care plans, part of Canada’s national health care system. It’s one of the reasons Anand Singh, president of the UNITE HERE local in San Francisco, supports Medicare for All.

Like many other Major League teams, the Dodgers issued a statement condemning the murder of George Floyd, turned on the Dodger stadium lights for eight minutes and 46 seconds to commemorate his killing, and produced Dodger Blue T-shirts with the slogan “In This Together” printed on the front. Most Dodger Stadium food service workers are people of color. For Deedee Reed, who is Latina, such statements don’t help them pay the rent.

What can team owners do beyond mere gestures of support for George Floyd and gauzy corporate messaging? The team’s “pronouncements about racial justice should start at home,” UNITE HERE International President D. Taylor said recently.

Every team can make a commitment—as the NBA did when its season abruptly ended (although not every team lived up to that commitment)—to pay their permanent and contract employees their full wages for the entire season, even if the teams play in empty stadiums without fans and with few stadium workers. It would cost MLB about \$175 million to compensate the 24,000 food service workers for the income they will lose by not being able to work the 81 games they would have worked if the Trump administration hadn’t mishandled the Covid-19 crisis. Add to that another \$110 million to cover the 15,000 other stadium employees.

The 30 MLB teams are worth over \$55 billion. The 30 principal owners of those teams are worth \$78 billion. During a period when many American leaders are calling for “shared sacrifice,” for these sports moguls to spend \$285 million to help their employees avoid hunger, eviction, and illness doesn’t seem like much to ask.

The teams and their stadium subcontractors should also make sure that employee's health benefits are covered through the end of the year. While owners will claim that it is the subcontractor who legally employs and negotiates with the stadium workers unions, the real power in the arrangement is with the teams. "The Giants," Local 2 President Singh observed referring to the San Francisco team, "are the ones who have the power to make a difference here."

Such a bold move would not be unprecedented. In 1955, the United Auto Workers, led by Walter Reuther, extracted from Ford Motor Company a supplemental unemployment benefits program that kicked in during economic downturns or company retooling of the factories. It was the outgrowth of Reuther's campaign for a guaranteed annual wage. Today, auto workers who are laid off can earn up to 95 percent of their annual wage for a year when auto company and state unemployment benefits are combined.

Until we develop a more social-democratic national unemployment system that does away with the devastating impact of economic cycles on poor and working-class people, wealthy corporations who have monopoly power—as the "Big Three" auto makers had in the 1950s and MLB has today—should foot the bill.

**W**hen stadium workers return to the ballparks next spring, it should not be business as usual. Just as the MLB commissioner's office imposes national standards for drafting, paying, and maintaining the ballplayers on the field, the same principle should apply for stadium workers, regardless of which contractor pays their salaries. In the

lingo of labor-management relations, that's called "sectoral" collective bargaining, something that is widespread in Europe's social democracies.

Professional ball clubs have been transformed from family-owned businesses into entertainment and real estate mega-corporations that happen to have baseball teams as their anchor tenants and ballplayers as their high-profile employees.

St. Louis Cardinals owner Dewitt—a former business partner with George W. Bush who also owns the investment firm Reynolds, DeWitt & Co., which owns Arby's franchises—is now developing a \$260 million "Ballpark Village" next to Busch Stadium that includes new high-end hotels, restaurants, and retail and office space. He can afford to pay the hot dog vendors a living wage.

The Los Angeles Angels are doing the same. In December, the city of Anaheim sold Angels owner Arte Moreno a 150-acre site for \$325 million so he can construct an "urban village" of luxury housing, office space, restaurants, and entertainment venues next to Angels Stadium.

Just as corporations like General Motors and Nike have outsourced core business functions offshore to save on labor and production costs, professional baseball corporations have done the same with their employees to absolve themselves of labor and employment responsibilities. (All MLB baseballs, for example, are made in a Costa Rican sweatshop co-owned by MLB and Rawlings.) The logic of hedge fund and private equity investment firms, the compulsion to "unlock value" by squeezing employees, sits at the center of MLB's business operations.

If Major League Baseball and the individual team owners are serious about ending systemic racism and helping people of color, they can begin by making sure that the workers who sell the hot dogs, beer, and peanuts at their stadiums can provide for themselves and their families. The time for charity is over. It's now time for justice. **N**

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**Peter Dreier** Peter Dreier is the E.P. Clapp distinguished professor of politics at Occidental College. He is the author of *The 100 Greatest Americans of the 20th Century: A Social Justice Hall of Fame* (Nation Books) and an editor (with Kate Aronoff and Michael Kazin) of *We Own the Future: Democratic Socialism, American Style* (coming in 2020 from the New Press). He is coauthor of the forthcoming *Baseball Rebels: The Reformers and Radicals Who Shook Up the Game and Changed America*.

**Kelly Candaele** Kelly Candaele, a union organizer for 15 years, produced the documentary film *A League of Their Own* about his mother's years in the All American Girls Professional Baseball League.

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