



**“RISING IN RESISTANCE WITH PAUL ROBESON:  
ATHLETES JOINING THE STRUGGLE FOR RACIAL JUSTICE”**

*Los Angeles Sentinel, 09-03-20, p.A6*

**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

**T**HE RECENT WAVE OF WALKOUTS AND walkaways from playing and practice in protest against the savage shooting of Jacob Blake, first by the Milwaukee Bucks and followed by others in solidarity, i.e., the NBA, the WNBA, Major League Baseball, the National Hockey League and Major League Soccer, is clearly worthy of rightful notice, prolific praise and a good measure of celebration. But it is also worthy of our most careful reflection. For we must always think deeply about our lives, our struggles and our history. The fact that the life and death issues of police violence would find a fertile ground for protest and resistance on these billion-dollar entertainment and playing fields of America reveals the pervasive and pernicious reach of racism and why the athletes felt compelled to resist it.

Indeed, this coming to consciousness and action by Black athletes reminds us of Paul Robeson, honored singer, actor, athlete, pan-Africanist and global activist and his classic statement to the artists, intellectuals, scientists and all those who would try to stand outside the struggle, including athletes. It is as real and relevant now as it was then in that time of resisting the fascism that was sweeping the world. He said, “Every (one) must decide where he stands. He has no alternative. There is no standing above the conflict . . . There are no impartial observers . . . The battlefield is everywhere. There is no sheltered rear. (We) must either fight for Freedom or Slavery. I have made my choice. I had no alternative.” This, then, is our first lesson of history and struggle.

Moreover, we must be careful not to let the dominant society interpret these acts of resistance for us, changing the focus from racial justice to social justice. For they are not the same and our specific interests are continually lost in the larger project without our staying focused. Black lives can’t really matter in any real or specific way, if they and their interests are conflated or erased in overarching categories or goals. Also, we must not walk away from the battlefield and front until

the struggle is truly won. And that must mean the end of the police and vigilante violence, systemic racism, and a radically reconceived and reconstructed society of freedom, justice, flourishing, shared good and the well-being of the world.

Especially, we must be aware of the history of our struggle as a people and of the struggle of the athletes before these we now see standing up. For the stands taken now are a continuation of and contribution to the space, commitment, consciousness and action made possible by the pathways opened up by a century of personal and collective decisive actions taken by Black athletes earlier. These brave and defiant ones risked their reputations, their salaries, their careers and even their lives in the interest of our struggle for racial justice and the end of racist oppression.

From Jack Johnson, Jackie Robinson, Althea Gibson, Wilma Rudolph and others resisting the rawest and most violent racism, to Jim Brown, Bill Russell, Karim Abdul Jabbar, Walter Beach, and all the other players who stood with Muhammad Ali in his resistance to the draft. And we recognize Bill Russell in his own right, who stood up and led a 1961 NBA boycott to protest racial injustice so that “everybody, everywhere knows that Black people are deciding they’ll stand up for themselves.”

From Curt Flood and the struggle for free agency and John Carlos and Tommie Smith refusing “to run in the Olympics in Mexico and crawl back home” and to Arthur Ashe and Harry Belafonte and other athletes and artists, resisting apartheid in South Africa. And then there was Craig Hodges standing against racism and challenging his fellow athletes to use their wealth and status to assist the poor and vulnerable and to be unashamedly Black. (Hodges was a student of Professor Amen Rahh and of mine at Cal State University Long Beach and noted our influence on him in his autobiography.)

Then more recently, there is Colin Kaepernick who began kneeling during the anthem and inspired others in the NFL to do the

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same to protest police violence and racism. And there were Black women players from the WNBA like Indiana Fever who stood up and kneeled with Kaepernick. Likewise, the Washington Mystics and players from the Seattle Storm and New York Liberty stood up and resisted also and continue to do so for racial justice as protests around the country continue. Reaffirming in the midst of the resistance her identity as a concerned Black woman, Ariel Atkins of the Washington Mystics stated that “We’re not just basketball players.” And Naomi Osaka defiantly declared “Before I am an athlete, I am a Black woman.”

Maya Moore, WNBA player from the Minnesota Lynx, stopped at the height of her career to work tirelessly and successfully to free a Black man, Jonathan Irons, wrongfully convicted. And she is sitting out another season to continue her work in criminal justice reform. She stated that “deep overtime commitments to people” are key to life and legacies and “Seeing athletes looking inside themselves saying, what can I do to empower someone else is amazing.” And she has inspired other players to get involved in the struggle, Natasha Cloud of the Washington Mystics, Tiffany Hayes and Renee Montgomery of Atlanta Dream.

And I talk history and stress putting things in context to remind us we are talking about the lives and continuing struggles of a great people, a Black people. And this offers instructive lessons of history. The first of these is that there is no real or safe and separate life outside of our lived-experience and history as an African people, a Black people, regardless of other various identities we might have or assume.

Secondly, our oppression is inclusive, pervasive and savage, allowing no real sanctuary, even in the bubbles our oppressors build to protect their investment in our capacity to entertain or serve them in some way. In fact, the athletes realized that although the hygienic and antiseptic bubble near Orlando could protect them from the COVID 19 virus, it could not protect them from the virus of racism and the pathology of oppression.

Thirdly, freedom and justice for us as a people are indivisible and thus there is no freedom or justice for one person or one group, one sex or one age, one religion or one profession, or one-color variation on the defining and shared shade of Black. And finally, our oppression will not be overcome and ended by one battle, one group or one mobilization, and it will not be defeated on one battlefield, for it is a sickness in society, a viral racism that is deep-rooted and rabidly irrational and destructive.

**T**HUS, THE CURRENT MASSIVE MOBILIZATION, demonstrations, protests and movement initiatives against police violence and systemic racism are part of a long and ongoing history of struggle. And likewise, the recent joining by athletes in this struggle for racial justice and the end of racist oppression are not only rooted in and reflective of our past struggles, but also a continuing opening of the ways beyond the oppression of the present to the promises of a future of freedom and flourishing for ourselves, this country and the world. In this way, we honor our past, improve our present and not only demand “a whole new game,” but also forge a whole new future for African peoples, human-kind and the world. ▲

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Dr. Maulana Karenga, Professor and Chair of Africana Studies, California State University-Long Beach; Executive Director, African American Cultural Center (Us); Creator of Kwanzaa; and author of *Kwanzaa: A Celebration of Family, Community and Culture* and *Essays on Struggle: Position and Analysis*, [www.AfricanAmericanCulturalCenter-LA.org](http://www.AfricanAmericanCulturalCenter-LA.org); [www.OfficialKwanzaaWebsite.org](http://www.OfficialKwanzaaWebsite.org); [www.MaulanaKarenga.org](http://www.MaulanaKarenga.org).