

THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigour, journalistic flair



Liverpool captain Jordan Henderson tweeted in support of the new #PlayersTogether fund. Peter Powell / EPA

In defence of footballers

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This is going to be a difficult argument to win – but as sports economists, we are going to try to convince you that footballers are in the right.

Though the season has been suspended, footballers themselves are back in the news since Matt Hancock, the UK health secretary, called for them to “make a contribution” and give up some of their wages during the coronavirus pandemic. Premier League clubs then piled on the pressure, declaring that they had “unanimously agreed to consult their players” on 30% cuts in pay and other benefits.

But once politicians start demanding something, it is right to ask whether this might be the wrong thing to do. And we agree with Alan Shearer (among others) that it is right for footballers to resist the whistle calling from politicians and the print media, and take their own lead on salary cuts. We believe Premier League players should continue with collective initiatives along the lines of the newly announced fund for NHS charities called #PlayersTogether.

The argument that footballers should make a contribution is a fairly easy one to make. But should they be forced to contribute?

Superstar salaries for idle workers

Premier League footballers earn superstar wages, despite being only marginally more talented than players in lower leagues on much more modest salaries. They are not performing vital services, especially at this time of national crisis. But they are excessive earners because fans all around the world buy expensive TV subscriptions to watch them kick a bag of air around a grassy field for 90 minutes.



Players like Manchester City's Kevin De Bruyne are paid hundreds of thousands per week. Peter Powell / EPA

Right now, though, like many of us, they aren't doing what they are paid for. Footballers can't even work from home, besides the odd amateur E-Sports tournament. This clearly makes it harder to justify still earning many multiples of the average annual salary.

Premier League footballers have been slow to react to the developing crisis. From day one, they should have been working through the Professional Footballers' Association (PFA) for a joint approach, which helps their competitions and their clubs to survive, and ensures all non-playing staff continue to get 100% of their salaries while on furlough.

But the Premier League and the government trying to force them into these moves is both shaming and shameful. It is not helpful to just say that footballers should cut their salaries without any real idea of why or what this would do, other than to satisfy a culture of shame and blame deflection.

It could be argued that it is financially necessary for clubs to cut their wage bills – but it is not clear that Premier League clubs are currently in danger of going bankrupt. A bigger problem for the clubs is a potential breach of contract with Sky and BT, costing £1.2 billion if the season is not resumed. Sky itself must be concerned that its subscribers may not come back. So it is in the game's interests to broker a solution that keeps all sides happy, and to ignore the government on this.

Footballers are easy targets because they live continuously in the public eye. But this line of attack from the media and some politicians is dangerous and intrinsically unfair. Who else do we challenge about their excess earnings? Different rules seem to apply for other sports stars or wealthy and famous writers, film stars and musicians.

Indeed, why couldn't we go further and target highly remunerated CEOs or bankers? A member of the cabinet is even linked to a firm that is making totally legal but morally dubious investments in businesses set to profit from the pandemic. Perhaps these individuals should also be publicly shamed into doing more. Is it a coincidence that footballers are generally younger, mostly working class, often foreign and disproportionately black?

What should the footballers do, if they decide to?

We agree with the footballers that they should have a say in what happens to the salary cut. In a response to the Premier League proposal to take a 30% cut, they argued through the PFA that just to cut would not benefit the NHS nor their own furloughed club staff. It was also reported that they were unhappy with this plan as it would favour unscrupulous owners.

Therefore, one tidy resolution to the current logjam would be to see a commitment that player staff "savings" are explicitly linked to paying non-playing staff, topping up the furlough payments, as well as benefiting local charities. Anything else may be seen by the PFA as just a way for owners to cushion their own vast fortunes.

Without adapting, the football pyramid does not have the in-built resilience to survive the upheaval to the economy and society caused by COVID-19. The problems in the Premier League are replicated in all the lower divisions, right down to the grassroots of the game. Perhaps a good outcome from this debate and others within football is that the Premier League reconsiders the way funds flow down through the game.