



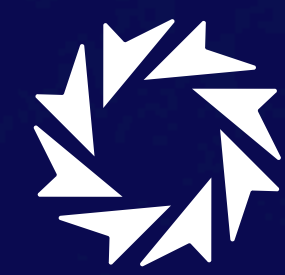
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TOOLKIT

WORLD PLAYERS

Union Busting in Professional Sport: Strategies for Player Associations

A practical framework for recognising, assessing and responding to union busting strategies in elite sport — from national clubs and leagues to global governing bodies.



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About this toolkit — This first edition has been developed by World Players to support player association leaders to identify, understand, and respond to union busting practices. It is a practical tool and does not replace the need for tailored legal advice or detailed negotiation strategies. Contributions are welcome — please contact info@worldplayersassociation.com if you would like to participate in a future edition.



'Union busting' is widespread in elite sport and the wider world of work. It broadly refers to actions by employers — in sport, clubs, leagues, federations or other management bodies — that undermine workers', or players'. Rights to effectively form and join unions, to organise collectively, to collectively bargain, and to be represented by organisations of their choosing.

Prevalent strategies include efforts to discourage or prevent players from establishing or joining a players' association (PA), retaliation or pressure linked to PA activity, and interference with the independence or functioning of a PA — including through measures designed to effectively exclude the PA and/or the creation of management-controlled "representative" bodies.

This toolkit is designed to help PAs **recognise, assess and respond** to union busting strategies. Union busting campaigns usually start when a PA is forming or doing its job — organising, winning changes, or challenging decisions — and is seen by clubs, leagues or federations as a real power in the system. The guide helps PAs understand that reaction and respond in a way that strengthens, rather than weakens, the organisation.

It gives a clear, sport-specific overview of:

1. How union busting looks in practice: at the different levels of representation (national, regional and global), the tactics clubs, leagues and governing bodies use to avoid or weaken collective player voice, with examples from football and other sports, and short parallels from other sectors.
2. Where the line is: when "hard" bargaining crosses into conduct aimed at undermining or destroying the PA itself.
3. What is at stake: the key risks these tactics create for players (contracts, selection, health, safety, reputation) and for PAs (recognition, access, internal capacity).

The document is a practical tool. It offers:

1. Early warning signs so staff and player reps can spot emerging patterns before they escalate.
2. Traffic-light indicators (green/amber/red) to decide when to monitor, when to engage, and when to treat behaviour as active union busting.
3. Step-by-step response PAs can use both in anticipation of these tactics and in reaction to specific incidents — from securing safe communication with players to activating legal, public and solidarity mechanisms with the broader trade union movement.

The most effective strategy against union busting in all cases is a **well-informed and actively engaged membership** that holds leadership to account, supported by an organisational culture grounded in the core purpose of collective advocacy and governance structures with clear firewalls to safeguard independence. Where an union loses sight of its core representative function, it risks undermining those it is there to protect.

This tool gives PAs a fast, usable guide they can turn to under pressure, and to underline why linking up with the wider labour movement can help when facing determined union-busting campaigns. It is general advice and does not replace the need for tailored legal advice or detailed negotiation strategies.



"Where athletes are organised, informed, and united, they are better equipped to challenge union busting practices and to secure fair and sustainable conditions."

The history of the labour movement is defined by the collective struggles of workers to secure fundamental rights; from the eight-hour day and workers' compensation, to pension systems, equal pay for work of equal value, and the abolition of child labour. These gains were not granted; they were won through sustained organising, solidarity, and collective action in the face of persistent resistance.

This resistance has not diminished. In many parts of the global economy, it has become more organised, more sophisticated, and more deliberate. "Union busting" is no longer ad hoc opposition to worker organisation; it is a set of dedicated strategies designed to prevent, weaken, or bypass independent collective representation, and to preserve existing power imbalances. In the United States, there is an entire industry of law firms with revenues in the hundreds of millions dedicated to keeping its clients, many of which are multinational corporations, "union free."

The first edition of [Union Busting in Professional Sport: Strategies for Player Associations](#), developed by the World Players, has been developed to support player association leaders to identify, understand, and respond to union busting practices. It sets out a practical framework for recognising union busting in its various forms, and outlines strategies that can be deployed to counter it effectively.

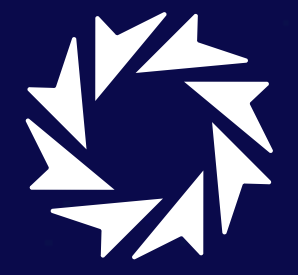
Across industry, union busting strategies are well established: increasingly intrusive surveillance of workers; captive audience meetings used to disseminate anti-union messaging; the creation of employer-controlled "representative" bodies; and bad faith bargaining practices that exploit legal and procedural loopholes to frustrate collective agreements. While often presented as legitimate management practices, their underlying purpose is consistent: to limit workers' ability to organise and exercise their rights collectively.

In professional sport, these dynamics operate within a highly concentrated and globalised industry, where governing bodies and organisers exercise significant control over access to competitions, working conditions, and commercial opportunities. Consequently, players and their unions have faced intimidation, exclusion from training and competition, and direct or indirect threats designed to deter collective action. Management-aligned athlete commissions or committees are routinely used to dilute independent representation, while sections of the sports media ecosystem are mobilised to question the legitimacy of player unions and their role within the game.

These practices are often obscured by the unique structures of sport, including its regulatory frameworks and the blurring of lines between employment, participation, and governance. However, the underlying dynamic is familiar: efforts to control, fragment, or sideline the effective collective representation of athletes.

At its core, this report is grounded in a simple premise: where athletes are organised, informed, and united, they are better equipped to challenge union busting practices and to secure fair and sustainable conditions. As recently reiterated in guidance from the International Labour Organization, strong, independent player associations are not an obstacle to the development of sport, but rather a necessary condition for its long-term success.

Walter Palmer
Executive Director, World Players



SECTION 2

Identifying Union Busting

International standards make clear that all workers, including athletes, shall enjoy adequate protection against acts of anti-union discrimination. This section sets out how to distinguish hard bargaining from union busting, and documents direct, indirect, and global-level tactics as they manifest in sport.

Key principle

The line is crossed when the objective shifts from exercising leverage to secure favourable terms to **weakening, bypassing or dismantling the players' association itself.**

Hard bargaining vs. UB

Direct tactics

Indirect tactics

Global level

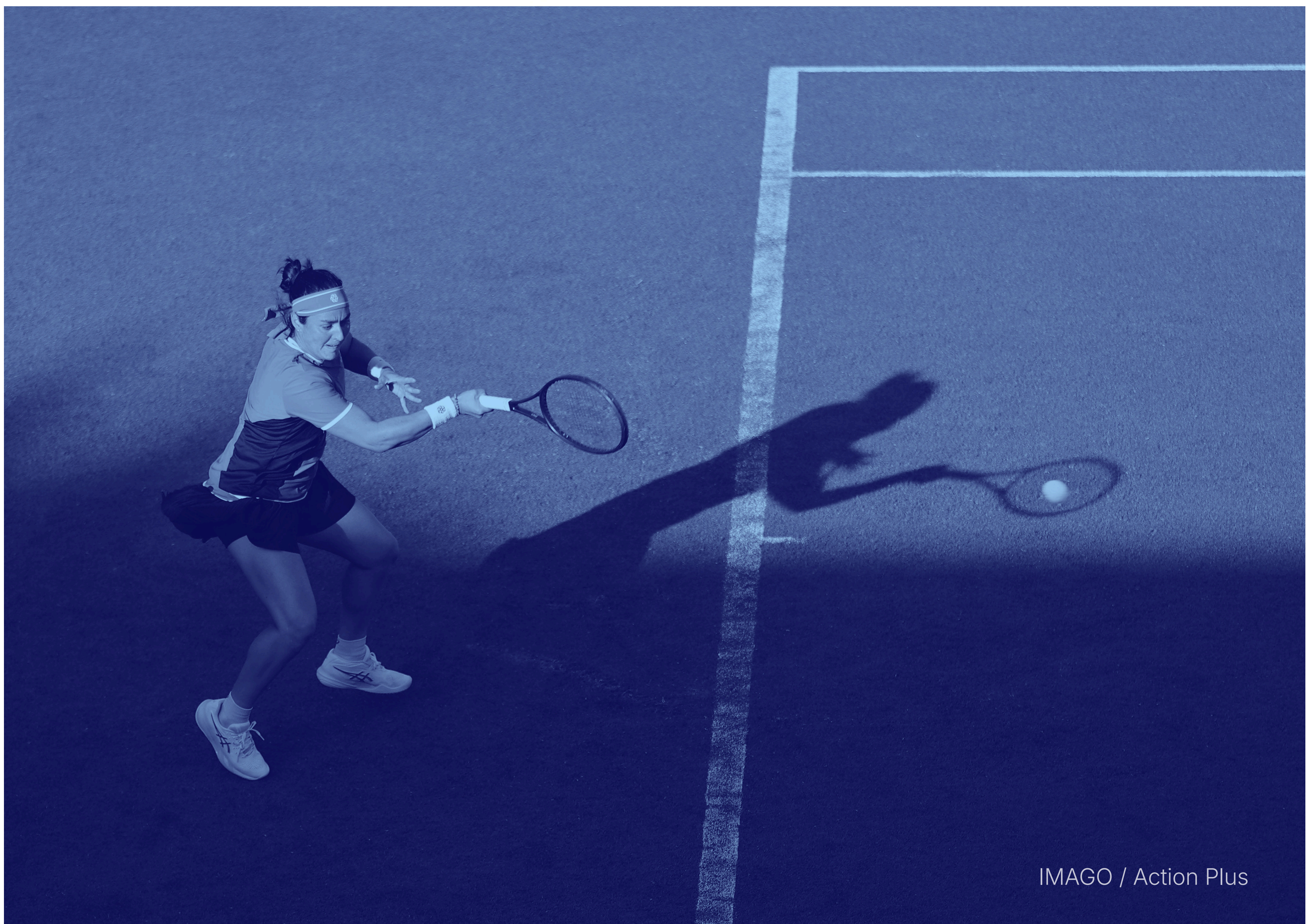
SECTION 2 – IDENTIFYING UNION BUSTING

International standards make clear that all workers, including athletes, shall enjoy adequate protection against acts of anti-union discrimination, for the purpose of this guide referred to as union busting, in respect of their employment.

Union busting is not unique to sport. It is a well-documented feature across industries, with employers deploying a range of legal, structural and informal tactics to weaken or deter collective representation including:

- Early intelligence gathering
- Coordinated union avoidance campaigns
- Captive audience meetings delivering one-sided messaging without reply.
- Delay tactics, targeting of organisers, and strategic concessions to undermine momentum.
- Restricting access to workers and organisers, and bypassing or undermining independent representation.
- In more advanced cases, efforts shift from opposition to co-option, including cultivating compliant leadership and embedding representation within structures that dilute genuine collective power.

Trade unions have long confronted such practices, and a substantial body of law, jurisprudence, and organising practice has developed in response which are highlighted in this report.



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SECTION 2 – IDENTIFYING UNION BUSTING



Union busting tactics in sport should therefore be understood as part of this broader pattern. Common tactics may include any action by a club, league, federation or employer that:

- Tries to block players from organizing or joining a PA
- Punishes or pressures players for PA activity
- Undermines the PA, including through directly dealing with players or establishing employer-controlled "representation" bodies
- Uses structural or reputational tactics to neutralize collective voice and organizing attempt

This can include direct tactics, often unlawful actions (e.g., retaliatory firing of players, intimidation, surveillance) and indirect tactics, often formally "legal" measures (statute changes, establishing funded player commissions or councils) that have the practical effect of undermining the right to organize and effective collective representation. Such indirect measures can appear as "sporting decisions", governance reforms, or "player engagement initiatives". Union busting can take place at all levels of PA structures, national, regional, and global. In some regions, especially where federations control access to dispute resolution, licensing and limited funding, union busting includes using that dependency to pressure unions into compliance or to promote management-friendly "yellow unions" that compete with genuine player associations.

In some cases, union busting is a reaction to a functioning or emerging players' association that is starting to win for players threatening the unilateral governance system.

These patterns are now explicitly addressed in the [International Labor Organization's \(ILO\) Guidelines on the promotion of fundamental principles and rights at work and the prevention and elimination of violence and harassment for professional athletes](#), which confirm that all athletes, regardless of their contractual classification, should be able to form and join organisations of their own choosing and should be protected against acts of anti-union discrimination and interference in line with ILO Conventions Nos 87 and 98. In other words, when clubs, leagues, federations or other sports bodies try to prevent players from organising, retaliate against union activity or create alternative bodies to bypass a PA, they are not only undermining collective voice in sport, but cutting across internationally recognised labour-rights principles that apply to athletes as workers.

Hard bargaining or union busting?

Not all tough negotiations or difficult conduct qualify as union busting. Clubs, leagues and federations are entitled to take firm positions in negotiations. However, the line is crossed when the objective shifts from exercising leverage to secure favourable terms to **weakening, bypassing or dismantling the players' association itself.**

SECTION 2 – IDENTIFYING UNION BUSTING

Level	Characteristics & key indicators
<p>✓ Legitimate Hard Bargaining</p>	<p>Hard bargaining occurs where an employer takes firm or even confrontational positions in negotiations while continuing to engage in genuine collective bargaining.</p> <p>Employer conduct may include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Taking firm positions on financial terms, calendars or regulatory rules • Using lawful economic leverage recognized in labor relations, which may include lockouts where lawful, strike response action • Continuing to attend negotiations and exchanges information and proposals • Respecting procedural obligations such as consultation duties and collective bargaining timelines <p>Key test: <i>The Employer continues to bargain with the objective of reaching an agreement and does not intend to weaken, bypass, or undermine the union. There is still a genuine intent to reach agreement. This approach may be adversarial, but it remains within accepted labor-relations practice. Under international labor standards, the obligation to bargain in good faith implies making every effort to reach agreement.</i></p>
<p>✓ Warning Zone</p>	<p>Warning Indicators:</p> <p>Systematic Delay</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Repeated cancellations of meetings without valid reasons. • Attending meetings but refusing to respond substantively. • Endless procedural diversion (committees, “studies”, postponements). <p>Punitive Bargaining Signals</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Statements such as: “Things were better before the union.” • Conditioning negotiations on weakening or sidelining the PA. • Refusing to implement agreed clauses unless unrelated concessions are made. <p>Legal context:</p> <p>In accordance with ILO jurisprudence, prolonged and deliberate stalling can amount to union busting where the effect is to render collective bargaining ineffective.</p>
<p>✓ Union Busting</p>	<p>Aim is no longer the agreement, but the erosion of the association.</p> <p>Red-Flag Indicators:</p> <p>1) No Genuine Intent to Conclude Agreement (surface bargaining)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participation only to create appearance of negotiation. • Explicit internal or public refusal to sign any agreement. • Long-term pattern of refusing to conclude collective agreements. <p>2) Retaliation Linked to Negotiation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Squad exclusion, non-renewal of contracts or visa interference affecting PA leaders. • Structural changes targeting PA leadership or membership base. • Competition restructuring designed to weaken PA resources. <p>3) Structural Attack on Representation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Withdrawing-recognition. • Statutory exclusion from governance bodies. • Creating employer-controlled “player councils” to replace the PA. <p>4) Bypassing the PA</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Direct approaches to players offering individual agreements. • Making major decisions unilaterally rather than through the PA. • Undermining the PA’s legitimacy in communications. <p>Key test:</p> <p>If the objective of this conduct is to undermine the existence, independence or effectiveness of the PA, the conduct qualifies as union busting.</p>

SECTION 2 – DIRECT UNION BUSTING TACTICS

DIRECT TACTIC Direct pressure on individuals

Indicators:

- Non-renewal of contracts, benching, transfers or demotions following visible PA activity.
- Threats (e.g., “union players don’t last here” or “union will harm career prospects”).
- Selective rewards for certain players who stay away from the PA or break ranks in bargaining, e.g. better contracts, bonuses or national team opportunities or invitations to FIFA/Ba back events offered only to those who do not support the union.

This is similar to: classic anti-union discrimination (dismissals, discipline, blacklisting) documented by ILO and national labour bodies.

Case Study: Korea — KPFA and the "No-Union" Culture (Football)

(Source: World Players #Right2Organise Report, p. 47)

In 2017, players in Korea established the Korean Pro Footballers Association (KPFA) in a context characterized by a notoriously anti-union culture. Since KPFA’s foundation, players have faced significant pressure from clubs and powerful businesses promoting a “no-union” policy, and employers have systematically refused to engage with KPFA on key employment issues. One senior international player helped establish the association, but suddenly quit and could no longer be contacted, having even changed his phone number, which is attributed to the severity of the pressure.

Lesson for PAs:

- Build safe off-club communication channels and regional support before visible leaders come under pressure, particularly in anti-union cultures

Warning signs for PAs:

- Notion of a “no-union” policy or warnings that “players will have problems” if they organise.
- Sudden, unexplained disappearance or incommunicado status of key leaders.

Immediate steps:

- Create information log (who/when/where/what)
- Set up secure communication lines (e.g., Signal groups) with all core leaders, separate from club systems.
- Notify the relevant regional PA network that a leader may be under pressure.
- Connect with wider trade union movement to build solidarity and support



DIRECT TACTIC 2 Access, surveillance and information control

Indicators:

- Sudden changes to access rules: PA staff no longer allowed at training grounds, in dressing rooms, or at team hotels.
- Managers or security monitoring who attends PA meetings, taking photos or asking players for lists of attendees.
- Club-initiated messaging to players that PA communications must be cleared through management.

This is similar to: “Surveillance” and captive audience tactics used by employers in other sectors to scare workers away from unions.

SECTION 2 – DIRECT UNION BUSTING TACTICS

Case Study: UFL – retaliation against a union leader (American football)

(Source: [Reporting on UFPA unfair labour practice charges to NLRB](#))

In 2025, the United Football Players Association (UFPA) filed unfair labour practice charges at the US National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) against the United Football League (UFL). The charges allege the league retaliated against union supporters, including the dismissal of quarterback Quinten Dormady after he engaged in protected union activity, and that new disciplinary rules were introduced to deter union organising. UFPA also accuses the league of restricting union access to facilities and creating an “impression of surveillance” to chill players’ involvement.

Lesson for PAs:

- When multiple tactics (dismissal, new rules, access blocks, surveillance) appear at once, treat it as a coordinated campaign and escalate legally and publicly in parallel.

Warning signs for PAs:

- A player is released or disciplined shortly after visible union activity.
- New disciplinary or conduct rules appear that explicitly or implicitly restrict union talk.
- Changes in facility access rules for PA staff or representatives.

Immediate steps:

- Create information log (who/when/where/what)
- Secure direct, off-site contact with affected players and key team leaders.
- Work with legal counsel to assess whether national labour law (e.g. unfair labour practice) or CBA mechanisms apply and file quickly.
- Issue a concise public statement describing the pattern, not just the individual case.
- Where existing and helpful, activate national PA and trade union networks



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SECTION 2 – INDIRECT UNION BUSTING TACTICS



INDIRECT TACTIC 1 Management-created and controlled 'athlete voice'

Indicators:

- Denying player/worker status (e.g. labelling players as "students", "independent contractors", or "amateurs" to block labour rights and union recognition).
- League or federation refusal to recognise PAs or exclude them from decision-making bodies.
- Management-created councils, commissions or "players" bodies" that claim to represent player 'voice' but are controlled or funded by clubs/leagues. In African football, FAs have created rival "player unions" funded or politically backed by federation or Confederation leaders, then recognised in place of independent PAs, echoing classic yellow-union strategies.
- Threats to delay or block recognition of NDRCs or other regulatory structures unless the PA cooperates with federation-backed bodies or stops raising sensitive issues, such as abuse cases or unpaid wages.
- Coopting individual top players (current or former) to represent the interests of management.
- Management hiring top talent from the PA/union movement.

This is similar to: company unions or "yellow unions" in other sectors where employers create complaint "staff associations" to bypass independent unions.

CASE STUDY: SPORTS-STYLE EMPLOYER CONTROL OVER 'PLAYER BODIES'

Major esports publishers have, in some cases, created and funded their own 'players' associations' that are not independent of management. At the same time, they want that independent groups organising boycotts or collective wage demands could face antitrust liability because they lack the labour exemption that applies to recognised unions. Players being locked into highly restrictive contracts with little bargaining power illustrates how employer-backed associations can neutralise genuine representation.

Lesson for PAs:

- Any player body that is funded, created, or controlled by the employer is a risk. In football or other sports, similar "councils" should be treated as potential interference and challenged early. Models from World Rugby show how the risk can be successfully mitigated by having these councils be staffed by PA representatives.

Warning signs:

- Clubs, leagues or federations announce a new 'player council/leadership group' without consulting the PA.
- The new body is funded or administered by the employer, and membership is appointed, not elected.
- Officials suggest players should use the new body 'instead of' the PA.

Immediate steps:

- Create information log
- Gather documents on how the new body was created and funded (announcements, statutes, budgets)
- Send a written communication insisting that the PA remains the main representative body and requesting formal recognition and consultation
- Alert regional/global bodies (e.g. World Players, FIFPRO division), as well as national PA and trade union networks
- Explore legal avenues to challenge employer interference where possible.

SECTION 2 – INDIRECT UNION BUSTING TACTICS

INDIRECT TACTIC 2 Reputational attacks

Indicators:

- Framing the PA as “greedy”, “political”, “foreign-influenced”, or “not really representing players.”
- Suggesting that the PA is “hurting fans” or “damaging the national team” by raising issues around pay, safety, calendar or governance.
- Implying the PA only serves top players or one particular group (e.g. men's teams only).
- Positioning playing sport as “privilege”, “dream job”, “once in a lifetime opportunity” (“millions would do this for free”) to deny that sport is real work with real rights, suggesting players should accept poor conditions, stay silent.
- Coordinating personal media attacks against PA/union leadership.
- Leveraging the hosting of international competitions to frame the PA/union as damaging the reputation, holding back, or costing the country.

This is similar to: corporate PR campaigns that try to isolate unions from the public and portray them as self-interested special interests.



SECTION 2 – UNION BUSTING AT THE INTERNATIONAL LEVEL

Union busting tactics are often more sophisticated, but nevertheless, prevalent at the global level.

A common strategy is the establishment of **athlete or player commissions** to give them “a seat at the table”. However, in practice sport bodies create and control:

- Who sits on them, how representatives are chosen, what their mandate is, and what topics they can or cannot address.
- Their role in wider governance structures (committees, boards, working groups).

As a result, they often lack independence and full accountability to the players they are meant to serve. While such structures can play a constructive role — similar to works councils in other sectors — concerns arise when they are used as a substitute for meaningful engagement with established player unions, or as a vehicle to legitimise unilaterally imposed regulations and systems.

In those circumstances, they risk amounting to a form of union busting, particularly when accompanied by statements from organisational leadership that seek to undermine the legitimacy or role of player unions. Such tactics have been evident across global sport, including within the International Olympic Committee and, more recently, in FIFA’s public conduct.

Case Study: FIFA’s Exclusion of the Legitimate Global Representative of Players

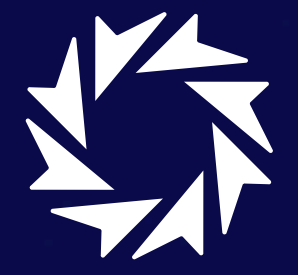
Context: When FIFPRO raised substantive concerns regarding the congested match calendar, increasing player workload and the unilateral introduction of new competitions, FIFA responded with public criticism of the union and exclusionary measures rather than engaging with the underlying issues.

Conduct: FIFA deliberately excluded FIFPRO from a series of parallel meetings — including gatherings in Marakech and New York — presented as discussions on player welfare, instead inviting a hand-picked group of individuals it described as “player representatives.”

Union busting implications: Under international labour standards, workers, including professional football players, have the right to form organisations and federations at the international level to advance their collective interests and address matters of common concern. Refusing to engage with the legitimate global representative of players, while creating alternative forums that bypass it, undermines this right and risks weakening the effectiveness of collective representation.

This pattern is replicated at the regional and national levels, where FIFA or confederations convene side-meetings with favoured unions or former players, and FAS threaten to derecognise or stop “working with” independent PAs if they do not participate on management’s terms.

Similar dynamics have appeared in the Olympic Movement, where structures such as the IOC’s Athletes’ Commission, Athlete365 platform, and World Olympians bodies are presented as athlete voice but are created, funded and controlled by sports authorities themselves. These forums offer services and paid travel to handpicked, co-opted athletes, while independent athlete unions or associations are excluded from key governance and human-rights discussions or only consulted on the margins. When such structures are used as a substitute for meaningful social dialogue with representative player organisations, and when they sidestep the recognition of athletes as workers with rights to organise and bargain collectively as set out in the ILO Fundamental Rights and Principles at Work Guidelines, they function as management-controlled representation and a form of union busting at the global level.



SECTION 3

Identifying Early Warning Signs

Recognising union busting early is the first line of defence. This section outlines the key behavioural indicators that signal emerging anti-union strategies — from signals coming from players, to club and federation conduct, to patterns in the wider environment — and documents the anti-union playbook so PAs can inoculate members before campaigns take hold.

Key principle

Treat the first signs as part of a coordinated campaign — not isolated incidents.
The earlier a PA recognises the pattern, the more options it has to respond.

From players

Clubs & leagues

Wider environment

SECTION 3 – IDENTIFYING EARLY WARNING SIGNS



The following section outlines behaviours and indicators that serve as early warning signs of potential union-busting strategies. By recognising these signs early on, player unions can proactively develop counterstrategies and be ready to respond.

From Players

- Players report that coaches or staff "do not want union talk"
- Rumours that union players will not be renewed or will be overlooked
- Players are suddenly reluctant to be seen talking to PA staff

Clubs / Leagues / Federations

- New access and right of entry rules
- Officials are complaining about interference and politics in public
- Sudden response to player demands re conditions or benefits (e.g., access to physio), paired with narrative how there is no need for a PA to address player concerns

Wider Environment

- Media repeating management narratives
- Agents warning players not to be associated with PA

SECTION 3 – IDENTIFYING EARLY WARNING SIGNS

Case Study: Recognising the Script — What Dartmouth teaches about union busting (2024)

In 2024, Dartmouth men's basketball players became the first US college team to vote to unionise, after an NLRB Regional Director ruled they were employees entitled to organise and bargain collectively. The players organised with SEIUX Local 560 and won the election 13-2, explicitly framing their move as a way to address compensation, injury protection and working conditions.

Dartmouth's response followed a structural union-busting script:

- The college publicly insisted that "athletes in the Ivy League are not employees," describing them as students whose educational programme "includes athletics," and announced it would not bargain with the union, despite the NLRB decision.
- Alumni and institutional voices issued "warnings" that players' unionisation would affect their post-graduation career opportunities and risk exclusion from NCAA competitions.
- The administration appealed the NLRB decision and refused to recognise the union, using legal procedures and non-recognition to delay and potentially overturn the players' victory, forcing them into a long unfair labour-practices and court process.
- Additionally, the college followed a classic anti-union playbook, hiring an external union-avoidance firm which organised mandatory "captive-audience" meetings to pressure players to vote against the union, and later retaliating against the lead organiser of the campaign.

The support for the players by SEIU and the broader labour movement showed why external union allies are crucial. They provided: legal expertise on NLRB procedures and employee status; and organising support and bargaining experience that the players themselves did not yet have.

Lessons for PAs:

- Where legal frameworks are weak or include loopholes, employers can deploy status arguments (e.g., contesting employee/workers status) and procedural delays as tools for union-busting.
- Cooperation and strong relationships with established national union structures and global player association federations matter the most in these contexts.

SECTION 3 — IDENTIFYING EARLY WARNING SIGNS

What the anti-union playbook looks like (in sport and beyond)

- **Contest player-worker status** to argue there is no right to unionise or bargain collectively.
- **Delay and surface-bargain:** attend meetings but refuse to engage substantively or conclude agreements, using legal appeals and procedure as tools to exhaust players.
- **Saturate players with anti-union messaging**, including mandatory captive-audience meetings and one-on-one conversations that stress career threats and "risks" of unionising.
- **Offer selective incentives and benefits** to players who distance themselves from the PA or break ranks in bargaining.
- **Create or promote management-friendly** "player bodies" or yellow unions that can be recognised instead of the independent PA.

Recognising this playbook in advance allows PAs to inoculate players, prepare counter-messages and treat the first signs as part of a coordinated campaign rather than isolated incidents.



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SECTION 4

Response Playbook

This response playbook provides player associations with a traffic light guide to identify and respond to employer union busting tactics. The most effective safeguard is a strong and independent union — a culture of organising in which players take ownership of the union's decisions and activities, rather than viewing it as something distinct from themselves.

 **GREEN**
Monitor

 **AMBER**
Engage

 **RED**
Act Urgently

Traffic-light diagnosis

Phase 1: Stabilise

Phase 2: Organise

Phase 3: External leverage




SECTION 4 – RESPONSE PLAYBOOK

This response playbook provides player associations with a traffic light guide to identify and respond to employer union busting tactics. The most effective safeguard is a strong and independent union — a culture of organising in which players take ownership of the union’s decisions and activities, rather than viewing it as something distinct from themselves.

Traffic-light assessment = diagnosis

Use the green/amber/red indicators to decide how serious the situation is. This tells you which phase of the response playbook to start with.

Rule: multiple tactics appearing simultaneously = treat as RED.

Level	Indicators	Response phases
	Isolated incidents; no action yet	Phase 1 + 2 (engagement with team reps)
	Access restrictions; new management established body or player leaders; repeated messaging	Phase 1 + 2 (full application); prepare Phase 3
	Retaliation; bypassing of union and direct engagement with players; dismissals; coordinated tactics	Phase 1, 2, and 3 — without delay

In short: colour → phase → checklist

- For **GREEN**, focus on Phase 1 (stabilise) and parts of Phase 2 (organise and strengthen internally).
- For **AMBER**, use Phases 1 and 2 fully, and prepare parts of Phase 3 (external leverage).
- For **RED**, move quickly through Phases 1 and 2 and activate Phase 3 (legal/public/solidarity) without delay.

Additional tactics from other sectors

- **Inoculation:** Prepare players in advance for the most likely employer moves (threats, rumours, etc.)
- **Sponsor / broadcaster pressure:** In serious cases, quietly brief key sponsors or broadcasters about union-busting behaviour as a risk (reputational framing).
- **Challenge player bodies:** Publicly insist that any player representation structure must be independent, elected by players, and not created or controlled by management.

SECTION 4 — RESPONSE PLAYBOOK

Response playbook = action plan

<p>Phase 1 — Stabilise</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secure independent communication • Open shared fact log • Clarify internal roles (who speaks to club / media) • Send calm internal message to players 	<p>Phase 2 — Organise & Strengthen Internally</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify squad leaders • Confirm at least one rep per team • Conduct short "Know Your Rights" sessions • Build rapid communication tree 	<p>Phase 3 — External Leverage</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CBA grievance & national labour authorities • NDRC or FIFA DRC (contract retaliation) • Regional mechanisms (European Social Charter) • ILO Freedom of Association complaint (systemic cases); particularly where employers extensively stall or refuse to bargain) • Public strategy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Focus on issues that resonate with public: non-payment, safety, excessive workload, fairness ◦ Describe patterns, not personalities. Avoid defamation risk. • Allies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Other national PAs • National trade union confederation • World Players Association & UNI Global Union ◦ Players' families • Fans • Civil society • Referees • Sponsors and commercial partners
<p>Checklist</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secure comms channels established • Facts centralised • Legal assessment initiated • Communication responsibilities clear 	<p>Checklist</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spoken to key leaders of affected teams / all reps • Confirmed at least one rep per squad • Players provided guidance on their rights and process 	<p>Checklist</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At least one legal route prepared • Core public messaging agreed with players • At least two external allies contacted

"The most effective strategy against union busting is a well-informed and actively engaged membership that holds leadership to account, supported by an organisational culture grounded in the core purpose of collective advocacy."

SECTION 4 – SUCCESSFUL COUNTERSTRATEGIES BY TRADE UNIONS IN OTHER SECTORS



CASE STUDY: NRL-RLPA 2023 CBA OWNING THE NARRATIVE WHEN MEDIA BACKS THE LEAGUE

In 2023, the NRL and the Rugby League Players Association (RLPA) spent around 20 months in difficult CBA negotiations. While many elements were agreed, disputed areas concerned player data, season length, welfare, and the independence of RLPA funding. The NRL publicly framed the dispute as a “pay war” that was dragging on unnecessarily, stressing the “landmark 37% pay increase” and launching personal attacks on RLPA CEO Clint Newton.

Most mainstream coverage echoed this framing: the NRL was presented as generous and player-friendly, while the RLPA was painted as holding out over “details” and “punishing fans” when it escalated action.

In response, the RLPA shifted from traditional media engagement to using players’ visibility as leverage. Players announced a media boycott on game days, refusing pre-match, half-time and post-match interviews, including for major fixtures. Coaches still spoke, but players’ silence itself became the story and exposed the imbalance in how their voices were heard.

The RLPA tied the boycott to clear conditions: finalising a full CBA text, using an independent mediator, and resolving key welfare and governance issues (not just headline pay).

Players took visible on-field action, such as taping over the NRL logo, and released their own video in which they explained that the dispute was about respect, voice and long-term welfare, not short-term greed.

The combination of controlled disruption, clear messaging and direct fan communication helped rebalance the narrative and increased pressure on the league. In August 2023, the parties reached an in-principle CBA and industrial action was lifted.

Lesson for PAs: Controlled, visible collective action by players — combined with clear, welfare-focused messaging that speaks to fans — can counteract a management-controlled media narrative. The action must be tied to specific, achievable demands. Describing patterns (not personalities) is key to maintaining public support and avoiding defamation risk



SECTION 4 — SUCCESSFUL COUNTERSTRATEGIES (CONTINUED)

STARBUCKS WORKERS UNITED — MULTI-FRONT RESPONSE

What workers did:

- Built dense, worker-led networks across hundreds of small stores, sharing scripts, experience and legal advice peer-to-peer.
- Filed hundreds of unfair labour practice charges documenting firings, store closures and other retaliation, leading the NLRB to find Starbucks committed widespread violations.
- Used media and social networks to expose Starbucks' gap between its progressive public image and its behaviour toward workers.
- Coordinated rolling strikes and actions across different cities — more than 55 strikes in at least 17 states by mid-2022.

What they achieved: Starbucks' anti-union record became a reputational problem, forcing the company into negotiations. In 2024–25, Starbucks and Startups Workers United agreed on a framework to restart bargaining towards first contracts, something that seemed impossible at the start of the campaign.

What's in there for PAs: High-participation networks (like strong locker-room reps), not just a central office. Legal pressure + public pressure + limited, strategic collective action. Framing the employer's behaviour as a values problem (hypocrisy) that fans and sponsors care about.

AMAZON LABOR UNION (ALU) — PATIENCE AND OUTSIDE ALLIANCES

What workers did: At a warehouse, Amazon workers formed an independent union (ALU) and won an NLRB election in April 2022 despite heavy anti-union campaigning. Their tactics included:

- worker-to-worker organising and high visibility (rallies, social media, presence outside the warehouse);
- building relationships with community groups, politicians and established unions for legal and campaign support;
- continuing to organise after the vote, understanding that Amazon would try to delay bargaining.

What they achieved: They proved it was possible to unionise one of the world's most aggressively anti-union companies, inspiring organising in other warehouses and sectors. Even though Amazon has stalled negotiations, the existence of JFK8 as a unionised warehouse has changed the debate about what is achievable.

What's in there for PAs: Sometimes the victory is getting recognition and surviving the first wave of retaliation and stalling. ALU's story shows why partnering with broader trade unions and community allies is crucial for surviving a long fight with a powerful employer.

Common thread across all three cases: The winning strategy combined worker-to-worker organisation, legal pressure through formal channels, strategic public communications, and solidarity with the broader trade union movement. No single lever was sufficient alone — coordinated, multi-front campaigns outperformed any single-track response.



Section 5 — Risk Management Grid

Risk	Likelihood	Impact	Mitigation
Defamation exposure	Medium	High	Use documented facts only; review external communications with legal counsel before publishing
Player retaliation	High	High	Collective framing; establish legal fund; activate solidarity networks before incidents occur
Visa / residency risks	Context-specific	High	Early legal review for migrant players; coordinate with national confederation and immigration counsel
Staff overload in crisis	High in crises	Medium	Delegate clearly; activate regional support networks in advance; pre-agree crisis protocols
Perception of selective defence	Medium	Medium	Establish and communicate transparent case-criteria





Contact list

Level	Organisation
	<p><u>World Players Association</u></p> <p><u>FIFPRO Global</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > FIFPRO Africa > FIFPRO Americas > FIFPRO Asia/Oceania > FIFPRO Europe
Global / Regional	<p><u>World Cricketers Association</u></p> <p><u>International Rugby Players Association</u></p> <p><u>Professional Tennis Players Association</u></p> <p><u>European Athletes & Players Association</u></p> <p><u>EuroLeague Players' Association</u></p> <p><u>UNI Global Union</u></p> <p><u>ITUC</u></p>





If this happens → do this. Use this guide under pressure. Assume club systems are monitored. Record facts only — avoid opinion language. Escalate stepwise unless a safety risk exists.

If this happens →	Do this
Player intimidated (e.g., dropped or benched) after PA meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Move communication off club channels (personal phone/Signal) • Start incident log (who/what/when/witnesses/screenshots) • Discreetly check if similar threats or pattern with 2–3 teammates • Develop structured follow-up with player and reps
Bypassing existing PA, e.g., through direct engagement with players or through new "player council" announced without PA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Start incident log (who/what/when/witnesses/screenshots) • Save announcement + statute of new body • Send written request for consultation and clarification of mandate/funding • Alert the relevant regional PA network and legal adviser
PA staff denied access to training ground	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Log date/time/location person blocking access • Send written reference to union rights (CBA, labour law, ILO standards) • Inform national trade confederation (if existing relationship) + regional PA network if repeated
Coach states "union players don't last here"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Start incident log (who/what/when/witnesses/screenshots) • Record exact wording + witnesses • Cross-check similar reports from other players • Send written notice to club. • Escalate if repeated or followed by retaliation.

Important under pressure:

Use secure communication. Assume club systems are monitored.

- Record facts only — avoid opinion language.
- Escalate stepwise unless safety risk exists.
- Connect with WPA and the wider trade union movement — you are not alone.

ABOUT THIS TOOLKIT

Union Busting in Professional Sport: Strategies for Player Associations

First Edition - Contributions Welcome

This toolkit is a first edition. Contributions are welcome from players associations or unions, particularly case studies, experiences of union busting, and ideas to improve the guidance. It is general advice and does not replace the need for tailored legal advice or detailed negotiation strategies. Please contact World Players at info@worldplayersassociation.com if you would like to participate in a future edition.