

## American players demand basic rights in MLS

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Negotiations between Major League Soccer and its players on a new collective bargaining agreement have reached a critical juncture. The current agreement in place expires on January 31, but despite months of negotiations the two sides have made little progress on a new deal.

The league is now threatening to lock the players out on February 1 (effectively shutting down the league) if the players don't agree to a continuation of the status quo.



The primary point of contention is the league's unique system, which differs substantially from other leagues around the world and violates FIFA regulations in several respects. Thus, for example:

- Player contracts are routinely terminated by the league during their term, as almost 80% of players in MLS do not have guaranteed contracts;
- MLS operates as a cartel in that every player's contract must be entered into with the league instead of his club;
- The contract of virtually every player in the league contains multiple unilateral one-year options that may only be exercised by the league;
- Virtually any player in the league can be transferred to another club within the league without his consent even if such transfer is international, such as a transfer from an MLS club in the United States to or from an MLS club in Canada;

There is no freedom of movement for any MLS player to any other MLS clubs when his contract expires – in fact, even if a player's contract is unilaterally terminated by a club during its term, that club continues to hold such player's rights and he is prohibited from signing with another club in the league.

The players, through the MLS Players Union, have made it clear that this system must change in order for the league to progress.

'What we are looking for are the same basic rights that players enjoy in other leagues around the world', said Kasey Keller, longtime U.S. international and veteran of the top leagues in England, Germany and Spain. 'We have made great strides in developing the game in the United States. But we can't truly compete internationally, either for players or fans, with a system that is so radically different than other leagues around the world.'

Thus far FIFA has remained silent, despite MLS's blatant violations of its regulations.

Players are concerned, but resolved. Landon Donovan, who at 27 is already the leading goal scorer in U.S. history, remarked that 'the league shutting down MLS in February would do real damage to the development of the game in the United States and to our efforts to prepare for South Africa. It is difficult to understand why the owners would take this course, w



hen all we are asking for are the same rights enjoyed by other players around the world, not just in the biggest leagues, but in leagues of all sizes.'

