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Kaepernick's protest is gaining support while he's still out of a job

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Updated 3:04 PM ET, Tue August 22, 2017

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(CNN)The protest movement Colin Kaepernick started is rightfully growing and having a much needed impact on the conversation of racial inequality in America. On Monday, seemingly motivated by the violence that erupted in Charlottesville, Virginia, a dozen players from the Cleveland Browns knelt during the national anthem before their game against the New York Giants, the largest NFL protest since Kaepernick first took a stand by taking a knee in August 2016. Among those participating were Isaiah Crowell, Duke Johnson, Jabrill Peppers, Christian Kirksey, Seth DeValve, Jamie Collins, Kenny Britt, Ricardo Louis and Jamar Taylor. DeValve is the first white player to kneel after Michael Bennett of the Seattle Seahawks called on white players to join the protests and bolster the effectiveness of the movement.

Last week, Justin Britt of the Seahawks, Derek Carr of the Raiders and Chris Long of the Eagles responded by holding onto black teammates during the singing of the anthem.

Still, there is every indication that the NFL is blackballing Kaepernick for conspicuously expressing his political views. The decision of more NFL players to take a knee is also a way to stand up for their former colleague. Are professional athletes like gladiators whose role is to entertain the crowd, run and throw the ball, and be seen but not heard? Last season, Kaepernick, then a quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers, took a stand against police abuse and racial violence when he took a knee and sat down during the singing of "The Star-Spangled Banner," a song that, in part, celebrates the murder of runaway slaves who fought with the British in 1812, according to writer and academic Jason Johnson.

Kaepernick's resounding, yet silent, on-the-field protests drew support from many and outrage from others, bringing into focus important yet long-neglected issues of racial justice. Athletes should be allowed to speak their mind, as social protest; wanting to make America a better place is a most noble form of patriotism. Instead, the NFL seems to be penalizing Kaepernick for his pro-Black Lives Matter stance. This recalls other condemnations of athlete-activists. Let us not forget Muhammad Ali, who refused to serve in the Vietnam War and lost his boxing license and title, or Olympic medalists John Carlos, Peter Norman and Tommie Smith, who were vilified and ostracized for the iconic "Black Power" salute at the 1968 Summer Olympics in Mexico City.

"I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color," Kaepernick told NFL Media. "To me, this is bigger than football and it would be selfish on my part to look the other way. There are bodies in the street and people getting paid leave and getting away with murder." Indeed, it is bigger than football. And for a league that is

made up of 70% black men, it's ironic that the NFL expects police brutality against African-Americans not to incite feelings of outrage and the spirit of protest among its players.

Fortunately, in light of his continued free-agent status, Kaepernick has received support, not only from other NFL players, but from celebrities and military veterans. A Change.org petition threatens an NFL boycott if a team doesn't sign him for the coming season.

And on Saturday morning a surprising show of support came from retired and current New York Police Department officers during a rally in Brooklyn Bridge Park. Filmmaker Spike Lee lent his support for a planned rally Wednesday for the football star at NFL headquarters in New York. Though Kaepernick is receiving much needed and deserved support, it's hard to ignore the blatant hypocrisy from conservatives when deciding who has the right to speak out against what they perceive as injustice in America.

President Donald Trump has had far harsher words for Kaepernick and Black Lives Matter than for Unite the Right -- the violent white supremacist rally in Charlottesville that resulted in one woman's death.

Trump even took credit for NFL teams refusing to sign Kaepernick. "Your San Francisco quarterback, I'm sure nobody ever heard of him," Trump said at a rally in Louisville, Kentucky. "... There was an article today, it's reported, that NFL owners don't want to pick him up because they don't want to get a nasty tweet from Donald Trump. Can you believe that?"

"I think it's personally not a good thing," Trump told a Seattle radio station last year about Kaepernick's protest. "I think it's a terrible thing. And, you know, maybe he should find a new country that works better for him. Let him try. It won't happen." Trump also said he believes Black Lives Matter has instigated the killings of police officers, calling the movement a "threat" and accusing the group of "essentially calling death to the police."

Ironically, extreme right-wingers -- who have been highly critical of Kaepernick exercising his right to free speech -- have come to the defense of James Damore, the Google engineer who was fired for writing an internal memo critical of the tech company's diversity program. Damore has become a cause célèbre of the hard right over free speech and his claims that the underrepresentation of women in Silicon Valley is linked to inherent biological differences rather than gender discrimination. In the memo, Damore asserted that women have "higher levels of anxiety" and "neuroticism." He decried Google's "culture of shaming and misrepresentation," and as prescriptions suggested the company "reconsider making unconscious bias training mandatory," "stop alienating conservatives," "de-moralize diversity," "de-emphasize empathy" and "be open about the science of human nature."

Apparently, the extreme right canonizes tech bros such as Damore for perpetuating sexist stereotypes and celebrating a culture in which white men rule. Yet those people demonize, even criminalize, Kaepernick for silently protesting institutional racism, the abuses of law enforcement and the criminal justice system, and for seeking a world free from police and vigilante violence against black bodies. Apparently, for some, the right to free speech applies to some people and not others.

For his political protests on the field, Colin Kaepernick has faced accusations he is un-American. Yet freedom of expression is quintessentially American, and fighting to make one's country match its rhetoric with its actions is an ultimate form of patriotism.