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## *The Olympics open in the shadow of mass death*

The summer Olympics opened Thursday against the backdrop of a massive surge of the COVID-19 pandemic. Like the 1936 Berlin Olympics that preceded the outbreak of World War II and its attendant horrors, this year's games have the aura of a looming human tragedy.

The 2020 Olympics were not held last year amid the first wave of the pandemic. The games are now being held under the pretense that the pandemic is under control, and the mass gathering of athletes and their support staffs is safe.

But this illusion is being punctured by the massive surge of COVID-19 cases—inside the Olympic Village and around the world.



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People protest on June 23 against the July opening of the Tokyo 2020 Olympics near the Tokyo Metropolitan Government building in Tokyo [Credit: AP Photo/Eugene Hoshiko]

“In the time it takes me to make these remarks, more than 100 people will lose their lives to COVID-19,” noted World Health Organization Director-General Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus in remarks to the International Olympic Committee on Wednesday. “And by the time the Olympic flame is extinguished on the 8th of August, more than 100,000 more people will perish.”

Around the world, daily new COVID-19 cases have surged by 47 percent over the past month to more than 523,000 cases a day, with daily deaths standing at 7,900.

Cases among the tens of thousands of Olympic athletes and staff are also spreading. One hundred and ten people directly working for or participating in the Olympics have so far been infected, about two-thirds of whom are Japanese citizens working at the games and the rest are athletes or staff of the national teams traveling from overseas. At least four of the cases have occurred in municipalities outside Tokyo where athletes are training, indicating the extent of the spread, and dozens of others were in close contact with the infected.

That so many have been infected makes clear that the nominal measures to isolate athletes from the broader population and vice versa have failed. A running tally from *Forbes* shows that infections have occurred both before and after athletes arrived in Japan, as well as among several who are fully vaccinated and “took every precaution” against the virus.

Hans Westerbeek, a professor at the Institute for Health and Sport at Victoria University, Australia warned in an interview with *Newsweek* that, “The athlete COVID cases reported in Tokyo are most likely the start of a superspreading event.” He continued, “Given the close proximity of athletes and their teams, and the constant moving and interacting in living quarters, dining halls and training and competition venues, the virus is likely to spread rapidly.”

In other words, every athlete is competing in two different contests: athletic pursuit and pushing the boundaries of human physical achievement, while at the same time in a horrifying race to escape infection.

Japan, the host of the Olympics, is recording more than 3,500 new COVID-19 cases a day and climbing, including nearly 1,400 in Tokyo alone. In total, Japan has suffered more than 852,000 cases of the disease and 15,000 recorded deaths, of which the vast majority have occurred since the beginning of this year.

Polls show that up to 83 percent of Japan's population opposes holding the Olympics this year. Protesters gathered outside National Stadium during the opening ceremony chanting "Cancel the Olympics! Stop them immediately! Stop the Opening Ceremony now!"

An online petition on change.org, "Cancel the Tokyo Olympics to protect our lives," has so far gained more than 458,000 signatures, and asks the pointed question "Is hosting the Olympics worth risking our lives?"

Despite the mortal threats to the lives of the athletes, their trainers, stadium staff and the broader population, International Olympic Committee (IOC) President Thomas Bach has maintained that the Olympics remain "safe and secure" and will continue through August 8.

Contained within these statements are ignorance and cruelty on one hand, particularly towards the athletes themselves, and naked class interests on the other.

There is, of course, an immense amount of money invested in the games, some \$15 billion. The IOC also has broadcasting and sponsorship contracts that it is seeking to protect, which are worth an estimated \$5.7 billion.

But there is an even more sinister motive at work. Among the world's ruling classes, the Olympics are seen as a great experiment on whether it is possible, citing the games' motto, to "move forward" with resuming economic activity even as cases, hospitalizations, and deaths soar.

The world is, in the words of the *Wall Street Journal*, carrying out a “test case” for whether it is possible to “enjoy something approaching pre-pandemic life in the face of fast transmitting versions of the virus.”

“The experiment should give a strong signal of whether Covid-19 can be relegated to the status of a manageable, seasonal menace such as influenza and whether lockdowns and social distancing can be consigned to the past.”

The Olympics, too, are such a cruel experiment, in which the athletes, staff, and the population of Japan are to be test subjects for “whether lockdowns and social distancing can be consigned to the past.”

The logic of such an “experiment” is turning the entire planet into a Petri dish for the coronavirus, almost inevitably producing a variant that goes “faster, higher, stronger” than even the virulent Delta variant responsible for the most recent global surge, placing the lives of every person on the planet in the balance.

In 1936, the Berlin Olympics were used by the fascist Nazi party to advance its ideological conceptions of racial supremacy and antisemitism. So, too, the 2020 Olympics are designed to send an ideological message from the capitalist class to the world’s population: No measures will be taken to save human lives, no matter the cost.

Every effort must be made to fight against such murderous policies. The popular outrage over the reckless endangerment of human life that has manifested in Japan, as well as elsewhere in the world, must be directed along independent political lines against the capitalist social order and its subordination of human life to the profit interests of the financial oligarchy.

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