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Rio 2016: The “Olympic ideal” and the reality of capitalism

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“The goal of Olympism is to place sport at the service of the harmonious development of humankind, with a view to promoting a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity.” These words, which appear in the Olympic Charter’s “Fundamental Principles of Olympism,” are supposed to sum up what is referred to with sanctimonious reverence as the “Olympic ideal.”

There has never been a golden age of the Olympic games, which have for over a century served as an arena for the promotion of nationalism. The founder of the modern Olympics, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, was candid in acknowledging that he valued sport not only for its potential for advancing mankind’s development, but also for its use in preparing French men to become better soldiers in war.

With the opening of the 2016 games in Rio de Janeiro, however, the contrast could hardly be more stark between the supposed Olympic ideal and the reality of a capitalist system mired in economic crisis and social inequality and hurtling toward another world war.

The opening ceremony of the Rio games, held in the city’s iconic Maracana Stadium, was widely covered by the international news media. Less reported was a brutal attack by the Brazilian police against a demonstration organized a half mile away, called against what the protesters

termed “the exclusion games.” Police used tear gas, pepper spray and stun grenades to drive the demonstrators off the streets, injuring several.

Earlier clashes were seen along the route taken by the Olympic Torch, which in one case was extinguished by a crowd of workers and youth in the coastal town of Angra dos Reis. They had turned out to protest the expenditures on the Olympics under conditions where public employees and teachers are not being paid and transit service and health care are being cut because of the deepening fiscal crisis.

In 2009, when the Brazilian government secured the 2016 games for Rio, then President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva proclaimed, “Our time has arrived.” During the same period, Lula was boasting that Brazil, whose growth rate had rebounded to 5 percent, was immune from the effects of the global financial meltdown of 2008.

Since then, the world capitalist crisis has devastated Brazil’s economy, driving the official unemployment rate to over 11 percent and sending real wages falling. Millions are threatened with being thrown back into extreme poverty in what is already one of the world’s most socially unequal countries.

Even as the games unfold, the Brazilian Senate is moving ahead with the impeachment of ousted President Dilma Rousseff on trumped-up charges of budgetary irregularities. Those moving against the Workers Party (PT) president are, like the PT itself, implicated up to their necks in the multi-billion-dollar Petrobras bribery scandal. Nonetheless, they are backed by both Brazilian and foreign capital, which wants a full change of regime in order to proceed with sweeping austerity policies under interim President Michel Temer, Rousseff’s former vice president and political ally.

In the run-up to the opening of the games, the Brazilian government heavily publicized alleged terror plots that appeared to have little if any substance. In fact, the massive security operation accompanying the Rio games is aimed not at terrorists, but at the Brazilian population itself. An occupation army of some 100,000 troops and police—twice the number mobilized for the already militarized 2012 London games—has been deployed across Rio, many dressed in combat gear, carrying assault rifles and backed by armored cars and even tanks.

This operation has been supplemented by the United States military and intelligence apparatus, which, according to NBC, has “assigned more than 1,000 spies to Olympic security,” hundreds of whom have been sent to Brazil. In addition to the CIA, FBI and NSA spooks, detachments of Marine and Navy commandos from the US Special Operations Command have been deployed on the ground.

This is the culmination of a campaign of repression that has unfolded over the past few years in tandem with preparations first for the 2014 World Cup football tournament and now for the Olympics. Violent police measures have been used to drive tens of thousands from their homes in impoverished districts targeted for development, while thousands more homeless have been swept from the streets in what amounts to an exercise in “social cleansing.” Police have killed

between 40 and 50 people a month in the city over the recent period, while extra-official death squads have murdered many more. So much for the Olympics and “human dignity.”

Against this backdrop, the vast wealth expended on the Olympics, all in pursuit of enrichment and private profit, is obscene. Corporate sponsors, including Coca-Cola, Samsung, Dow Chemical, General Electric, McDonalds and others, have paid hundreds of millions of dollars for exclusive marketing rights and are spending hundreds of millions more to exploit them. TV companies have shelled out \$4 billion to broadcast the 19-day event, while marketing revenues are expected to total \$9.3 billion.

A relative handful of individual professional athletes will make tens of millions more from product endorsements. The days when the Olympics were a celebration of amateur sports are a distant memory.

Within the games themselves, the overriding atmosphere of social inequality is ever present. While poorer teams are dealing with substandard conditions in hastily constructed Olympic villages, the US basketball “dream team” is residing on the luxury cruise ship Silver Cloud, moored in Rio’s harbor and surrounded by police and navy patrol boats.

Meanwhile, the use of the Olympics to promote nationalism and prepare for war is as virulent in the Rio games as at any time since Adolph Hitler convened the 1936 Olympics in Berlin.

On Monday, it was announced that Russian athletes will be banned entirely from the Paralympics to be held next month in Rio in connection with charges of state-sponsored doping of athletes. Earlier, 118 members of the country’s track and field team were banned under a system relegating the decision to the federations of each individual sport.

Washington, the World Anti-Doping Agency, various NGOs and the Western media have waged a virulent campaign to exclude every Russian athlete from the Rio Olympics and prevent the country’s flag from even appearing there, as part of a broader effort to paint Russia as a “rogue” nation that must be stopped by force.

The campaign to bar Russia from the games is inseparably bound up with the growing US-NATO siege of the country’s Western borders, which has been steadily escalated since the US- and German-orchestrated coup that installed an ultra-right, anti-Russian regime in Ukraine in 2014.

The sanctimonious denunciations of Russia for having corrupted an otherwise pristine sporting event reek with bad faith and hypocrisy. The anti-Russian campaign intentionally obscures the wholesale corruption surrounding the entire organization of the games as well as the rampant doping practiced by nearly every country.

The controversy, which has run in tandem with the Democratic Party’s neo-McCarthyite campaign denouncing Vladimir Putin for interfering in the US election, has been pumped up as part of the attempt to prepare public opinion for a military conflict with Russia that could quickly lead to nuclear war.

While this year's Olympic Games will once again provide a display of astounding athletic ability by participants from across the planet, the entire event is overshadowed by a social system that is founded on inequality and exploitation, and threatens the very survival of humanity.