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China

The Bitter Truth about the Olympics

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So the Beijing games are nearly upon us. There is no public event, other than perhaps FIFA's Football World Cup, that is so universally approved of as the Olympic Games. An orgy of TV time and newspaper columns will whip up passions about what are, after all, minority sports.

[https://npa31.org/IMG/jpg/Paris_Palais_Chailot_Beijing_Olympics_boycott_demonstration.jpg]

Paris demonstration for a boycott of the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing

Photo: Andreas Praefcke

How many of the two billion or so people who will watch on TV could – before the event – name the world pole vault champion, the world archery champion or the Tai Kondo champion? About 0.0001 per cent.

But never mind the sheer dreary boredom of it all, it's really all about promoting the 'spirit of the Games', isn't it? The international harmony so evident in the opening and closing ceremonies which seamlessly blends national pride with internationalism, the once-in-a lifetime meeting of thousands of young athletes from around the world and thousands of (mainly well-heeled) spectators from many lands. Who could disapprove of an event that so evidently promotes international harmony and understanding?

Contrary to this fairy story, the truth about every Olympics is that behind the fake internationalism the Games are a vehicle for mobilising officially approved national chauvinism on a mass scale, asserting 'national pride' and above all a mammoth publicity opportunity for transnational corporations, especially 'official partners' of the games (like McDonalds, Omega and Coca Cola) - but also those who are sponsors of national teams.

Part of the cost of the Olympics is paid by the huge fees put up by television companies for the rights and from the sponsorship of the transnational corporations. But a large part is also paid from the local or national taxes of the host country, as Londoners will increasingly experience as we move towards 2012.

In the case of Beijing the whole operation is being conducted in a way that directly victimises and impoverishes large sections of the poor of Beijing and workers from all over China; and is leading to the construction of hyper-expensive facilities that will after the games be mainly privatised and only ever used by the wealthy elite.

Building the Olympics sports facilities and transport facilities has cost a huge sum. The main stadium, the 'birds nest' designed by Swiss architects Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron, cost about half a billion dollars. The National Theatre cost \$350 million; the National Swim Centre \$100m and the Beijing Wukeson Cultural and Sport Centre, incorporating a hotel and shopping mall, another \$543million.

Associated with the holding of the Olympics is the Beijing airport third terminal designed by British architect Norman Foster, coming in at a cool \$1.9bn and the new headquarters for China's central television network, CCTV, that cost another \$600 million. And these are just some of the major projects. [1]

The private sector is involved in the building of these facilities, and despite their public funding, the private builders will become the operators of these new facilities for a 30-year period. In other words, huge amounts of Chinese state funding is being used to guarantee the profits of Chinese companies for years to come.

In order to clear the way for these new prestige projects, that will project Chinese power and influence on a world scale, 1.25 million people have had their neighbourhoods and homes demolished or their land confiscated. The many

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people who have complained or organised protests about this have been silenced by jail sentences or violence – not surprising in a country that has one of the most corrupt, violent and repressive state apparatuses in the world.

A famous case is that of Ye Guogiang, who on China's National Day in October 2003 tried to kill himself by throwing himself off a bridge in the Forbidden City in front of hundreds of onlookers, in protest at the forced demolition of his family's home and restaurant. But he survived and was sentenced to two years in jail for 'disturbing social order'. His family continued to protest and were continually harassed by the Chinese authorities. There are many similar cases.

While the cost of the Olympic-related construction projects is enormous, outside China it would have been vastly more. What China had at its disposal was huge amounts of cheap labour. Construction workers, typically migrant workers unable to find work on the land, were usually housed in barracks on the construction site, paid an average of \$4.7 a day and forced to work seven days a week. Many of these workers are employed by subcontractors and late payment or no payment of wages is common. The Chinese government itself estimated unpaid migrant workers' wages in 2003 at more than \$12bn.

This is then the main pattern of the Beijing games. Endemic features of Chinese state capitalism – land evictions with little or no compensation, ruthless exploitation of migrant workers, and mega corruption by party officials to promote their own companies, families or cronies – have been used to create a spectacle of wealth and power that is designed to impress people across the globe.

This plan of course has had some little local difficulties, not least the pro-Tibet demonstrators' attempts to disrupt the carrying of the Olympic torch in London, Paris and San Francisco. But then came the Szechuan earthquake which mobilised international sympathy for the Chinese government, as it appeared to carry out a speedy and efficient response to the earthquake catastrophe – something that obscured the fact that many of the dead perished under poorly constructed buildings, a direct result of the corruption that has allowed cheapskate jerry-building on a mass scale, in return for appropriately large bribes to local officials from the building companies.

According to Amnesty International human rights in China have got worse because of the Olympics. According to Roseann Rifea [<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/7529453.stm>] deputy programme director for Amnesty International: "We've seen a deterioration in human rights because of the Olympics. Specifically we've seen crackdowns on domestic human rights activists, media censorship and increased use of re-education through labour as a means to clean up Beijing and surrounding areas".

The Olympic Games celebrates not the ascent of a classless abstraction called 'China', but the rise of a vicious and corrupt ruling class that maintains its power by the ruthless use of violence and censorship – and where the state intrudes directly into people's work and family lives on an Orwellian scale.

I won't be watching, I refuse to go to any pub that has it on a TV screen, I don't care how many (actually how few) medals Britain wins and I've never been for a moment glad that the Olympics are coming to London in 2012. Perhaps more than at any time since the 1936 Berlin Olympics, these games are designed to promote the image of a truly despicable regime. The left and the social justice movement shouldn't fall for it for a single moment.

[1] See *Delirious Beijing in Evil Paradises*, edited by Mike Davis and Daniel Bertrand Monk, Verso, 2006