

The dubious politics behind the Beijing Olympics protests

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Significant protests in London, Paris and now San Francisco have threatened to disrupt the Olympic torch relay as it makes its way through cities on five continents preliminary to the summer games in Beijing in August.

At the center of the protests is the Chinese regime's repression in Tibet and its overall human rights record. In addition to pro-Tibetan activists, a coalition of groups, including opponents of China's policies in Darfur and Burma, as well as persecuted religious sect Falun Gong supporters and animal rights movements, have organized the events.

In London and Paris, demonstrators attempted to snuff out the Olympic flame—succeeding several times—as it was carried through city streets.

In San Francisco several hundred protesters gathered Tuesday afternoon and a larger crowd assembled at a vigil that evening in the city's UN Plaza. They were addressed by actor Richard Gere, Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa and Richard Blum, multimillionaire financier husband of Sen. Dianne Feinstein (Democrat from California), among others. A bigger protest was planned for Wednesday when the torch was to be actually conveyed along San Francisco's waterfront.

The anti-Chinese protests, which, while vociferous, have not mobilized massive numbers of participants, have received wide coverage in the US media. It should simply be noted that vast worldwide demonstrations against American intervention in Iraq in February 2003, which numbered in the millions, did not garner one-tenth the airtime or column space.

An effort is under way to organize a campaign against the Beijing Olympics along the same general lines as the boycott of the Moscow games in 1980 engineered by the Carter administration as a propaganda weapon, supposedly in response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan the year before. Sixty-two countries bowed out of the 1980 games. Four years later, in retaliation, the Stalinist bloc countries boycotted the Los Angeles Olympic games.

The American ruling elite is torn about the present

campaign. Powerful elements certainly appreciate the economic and financial significance of China to world capitalism and are reluctant to throw the full support of the state behind this. The Bush administration has not joined the current effort wholeheartedly, at least not in public. The Democrats in Congress, led by Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, are making more noise about the issue. Pelosi has called on George W. Bush to consider avoiding the opening ceremony in Beijing; New York Sen. Hillary Clinton, desperate to make waves in an effort to keep her presidential hopes alive, has appealed to Bush not to attend the opening. The Democrats are attempting to stir up both the pots of anticommunism and anti-Chinese chauvinism.

For the moment, Bush has indicated his intention to be at the ceremony. Gordon Brown, British prime minister, says he will not be at the opening, but not as a protest; he plans to attend the closing ceremony. German Chancellor Angela Merkel will stay away from the opening and France's Nicolas Sarkozy has threatened to do the same.

The campaign against the Beijing summer games, predictably, has become a political football, used for generally reactionary purposes. The long-standing links between Tibetan nationalist forces and the Central Intelligence Agency, which financed, armed and helped instigate the 1959 uprising against Chinese rule, are common knowledge. In the more recent period, CIA conduits like the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), set up by the Reagan administration in 1984, have provided funds to Tibetan separatist movements.

Having said that, there is no reason whatsoever to express solidarity with Chinese repression in Tibet. The Beijing regime has nothing to do with socialism or communism. It has made the country available to predatory foreign and domestic corporate interests, who now exploit Chinese workers by the tens of millions at miserable wages. This systematic rape by the 'free market' has made China home to one of the fastest-growing collections of billionaires in the world. The Beijing government is deservedly hated by the population and responds to every serious protest with

repression and violence.

The Chinese regime tramples on the democratic and social rights of the Tibetans as it does on the rights of the population as a whole.

The answer to that is not Tibetan nationalism; separation, advocated by the Tibetan Youth Congress and other groups, would simply turn the newly 'independent' nation into an impotent pawn of this or that imperialist power and solve none of the democratic or social questions. That the Dalai Lama, a symbol of feudal reaction and superstition, remains the spiritual leader of the nationalist movement speaks volumes about its social and class character.

No doubt genuine revulsion against Beijing's policies motivates some of the demonstrators in San Francisco and elsewhere. However, an amorphous clamor about 'human rights' and 'atrocities' sweeps up a great many muddleheads, who never notice that their protests coincide with the general line of Great Power policy. In the absence of an internationalist and socialist perspective, such a campaign can feed into maneuverings and interests that have nothing in common with human rights in Tibet.

We saw this play itself out in a tragic fashion in the Balkans in the 1990s, where a considerable section of the 'left' aligned itself with the anti-Serbian campaign. This became an instrument for the carve-up of the Balkans in the interests of US and German imperialism.

Large historical questions are involved in the Tibet crisis, which may have quite unexpected and explosive consequences. The same kind of operation, conducted by the US government in particular, has taken place in relation to Taiwan over the decades. However legitimate the democratic strivings, the politics and perspective of the Taiwan independence movement are quite reactionary and play into the hands of reactionary elements. In the long-term, such playing with fire by the Great Powers leads to war and mass suffering. The only progressive response is a socialist policy, and the unification of the working population against imperialism and all its agencies.

The sort of politics behind the current campaign emerge in a statement from the International Committee for Tibet, one of those organizations that has received funding from the NED. In an appeal for its April 8 vigil in San Francisco, the ICT urges Bush not to attend the opening ceremony, which "will be used by the Chinese Communist Party as evidence of its legitimacy on the world stage and that the world is turning a blind eye to systematic human rights abuses throughout all of China. President Bush, who considers himself to be 'the human rights President' should not associate himself with a political regime that systematically abuses the rights of its citizens."

One rubs one's eyes. Bush, a major war criminal ("the

human rights president"!), is being called on to disassociate himself from a regime that "systematically abuses" human rights. He is the leading figure of such a regime.

The hypocrisy of US politicians over the Beijing Olympics is monumental. In her statement, Hillary Clinton declared, "I encourage the Chinese to take advantage of this moment as an opportunity to live up to universal human aspirations of respect for human rights and unity, ideals that the Olympic games have come to represent."

Pelosi added her two cents: "Freedom-loving people around the world are vigorously protesting because of the crackdown in Tibet and Beijing's support for the regime in Sudan and the military junta in Burma. The people are making a significant statement that the Olympic ideals of peace and harmony should apply to all people, including those in Tibet and Darfur."

For all their brutality and ruthlessness, the Chinese actions in Tibet don't begin to approach the horrors committed by the US government and military in Iraq. More than one million Iraqis dead, millions more driven into exile, a country destroyed, four thousand US military personnel killed and tens of thousands physically or mentally maimed—at an estimated eventual cost of several trillion dollars.

American politicians, up to their elbows in blood, are in no position to lecture anyone about the "universal human aspirations of respect for human rights and unity" and "the Olympic ideals of peace and harmony."

Democrats like Clinton and Pelosi have been complicit in the Iraqi sociocide from the beginning, and as the prostration of their party's representatives before Gen. David Petraeus this week demonstrated, they continue to accept as legitimate the US drive for world domination, euphemistically known as the 'global war on terror.'

See Also:

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