

Scotland: Demolition to open Commonwealth Games provokes anger

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The organising committee for the 2014 Commonwealth Games, to be held in Glasgow in August, have announced their intention to demolish five of the city's Red Road tower blocks as the centrepiece of the games' opening ceremony. The decision, overseen by Labour-controlled Glasgow City Council and the Scottish National Party government in Edinburgh, is one of stunning callousness.

It is often the case that opening ceremonies for large sporting events are inane and forgettable, choreographed celebrations of nationalist kitsch and pop music. They create a woozy optimism to cover over the fortunes being made out of building sales and TV rights.

The ceremonies hide the large scale disruption and clearance of working class areas to clear the way for huge athletics stadia. They ignore the immense security operations designed to ensure that only paying ticket holders appear on TV screens around the world.

All this applies in the case of the Commonwealth Games, the opening ceremony of which is to be held in the city's Celtic Park. The venue is at the centre of a swathe of Glasgow's impoverished east end, which has been sliced by new roads, forbidding new venues, and an athletes' village. The working class area of Dalmarnock has been razed over the last years with only isolated and pockets of housing remaining.

Unusually for such events, however, some of those present in Celtic Park and a fair proportion of the city's population will find the violent destruction of their former homes being beamed into the opening ceremony and to up to one billion viewers around the world.

Over the last two decades many of the Glasgow's large stock of high rise flats have been stripped, emptied and blown up. A product of slum clearance efforts in the 1960s, hundreds of tower blocks of up to

31 floors were built over a period of less than a decade. The blocks offered a vastly improved quality of life from the crumbling tenements they replaced. Many still stand, and the best provide relatively adequate and airy living spaces in a city where private rented accommodation is prohibitively expensive.

But poor maintenance, lack of facilities and the city council's policy of dumping the most needy and troubled tenants in concentrated areas meant that blocks in the poorest and most isolated areas became unpopular. Such was the fate of Red Road. With their innovative construction method, the steel framed flats near Springburn were the highest flats in the city and for a while the highest in Europe, but they quickly became places that people sought to leave as soon as possible.

Nevertheless, over the years, the eight—now six—dramatically bleak blocks which dominated the city's northern skyline offered homes to tens of thousands of working class families, single people, students and, latterly, asylum seekers. The scheme has also featured in films and novels and has, over the years, become almost iconic.

The plan for the flats' public destruction emerged initially from cost cutting. When the games' head of ceremonies was appointed in 2012, David Zolkwer, who has been involved in a number of major games' events before, warned “even in comparison with recent Commonwealth games, it is a modest budget.” Zolkwer promised to “completely change the vibe of the experience.”

In the hands of the games organising committee, chaired by financier and chair of electricity company SSE plc, Lord Smith of Kelvin, the Labour council, and the Scottish National Party's Sports Minister Shona Robinson, Zolkwer's event “vibe” has turned into

something peculiarly horrible. The proposed mass demolition expresses precisely the contempt with which the city's ruling layers view Glasgow's working population.

It also sharply expresses Labour and the SNP's view of Red Road's remaining residents—some hundreds of asylum seekers in the one block not slated for demolition until 2017.

The block's occupants, fleeing poverty and oppression all over the world, are to be temporarily evacuated. The hostel is already notorious for suicide attempts as many residents are at the end of the asylum process and in imminent danger of deportation. In 2010 Sergei Serykh, his wife Tatiana and their 21-year-old son jumped from the 15th floor of one of the tower blocks.

The impact of the demolition, and the apocalyptic immediate neighbourhood it will produce, on the mental health of already extremely vulnerable people can be imagined.

The decision has produced considerable outrage. A petition demanding the blocks be “demolished with dignity” has quickly garnered over 4,000 signatures.

Alison Irvine, author of a novel set in the flat, “The Road is Red,” complained, “I thought it was an April fool's joke... it shows a complete lack of understanding of the people who lived, and still live there.”

Len Bunton, whose father designed the flats, and who worked on them himself as a surveyor, told the *Herald*, “If people are making decisions like this, they are not fit to govern this country... The more I think about it the angrier I become.”

How is the extraordinary callousness, an extreme example of the stupidity and arrogance in which the Scottish bourgeoisie specialise, to be explained?

The Labour Party and the Scottish National Party must be indicted. Both stand to gain enormously from the games. The building boom has undoubtedly made fortunes for a layer of local developers close to the city council. For the SNP and their financial backers, the games coming only a month before the referendum on Scottish independence are viewed as a platform for Scottish nationalism and a “Yes” vote.

But underlying the brutal disregard is something more.

In the 1960s, when the Red Road flats were built, Glasgow was still a hugely productive industrial city,

hosting large steel works, a large but outdated shipbuilding industry, vehicle plants, and a substantial railway and textile industry. Hundreds of thousands of workers laboured in these and supporting industries.

Over the intervening decades, almost all of these industries have been destroyed. Most of the electronic assembly industries that briefly replaced them have gone too. Every struggle put up by workers to defend themselves was betrayed by the joint efforts of the Labour Party and the trade unions. Whole areas once famed for their large industrial plants—Clydebank, Linwood, Parkhead, Govan to name only a few—are now known mostly for shopping centres and profound social problems.

In their stead, the financial services industry has carved out a large zone in the heart of the city for itself—the International Financial Services District (IFSD). Glasgow is now around the 40th largest financial centre in the world, hosting many of the world's major players, including JP Morgan, Morgan Stanley, Barclays, Ernst & Young and BNP Paribas. The IFSD, organised by the city council and various Scottish business and development agencies, offers relatively cheap office space and tax breaks.

But these “industries” produce nothing but money for the super-rich, and employ far less workers than the productive enterprises they have replaced. They have also spawned a layer of political lackeys—well represented in Labour and the SNP—who view attracting operations based on speculation and swindling as “regeneration” and who view the working population, particularly its most oppressed layers as so much unnecessary surplus.



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