

Brazil suffers World Cup rout amid mounting social tensions

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Germany's crushing 7-1 defeat of the *Seleção*, as Brazil's national football team is known, has unleashed a wave of bitter recriminations within the World Cup's host country, long regarded as the world capital of football. Major dailies carried blaring headlines Wednesday reading "Humiliation," "Shame" and "Disgrace," while one bluntly instructed the Brazilian team's coach to "Go to Hell."

Amid all of the denunciations and breast-beating, one cannot help but feel deep sympathy for the Brazilian players, who comprised one of the youngest teams ever fielded by the country. They went into the semifinal match deprived of their internationally acclaimed striker, Neymar, whose back was broken in the quarter-final match with Colombia, as well as their captain, Thiago Silva, who was suspended in the same match.

Many sports writers have questioned whether the presence of either or both in the Mineirão Stadium in Belo Horizonte Tuesday would have made any difference, given the relentless drubbing delivered by the German side—scoring four goals in the space of six minutes. They have also noted that the weaknesses in the Brazilian team performance were evident in earlier matches.

There were other disturbing signs, however. The team's psychologist was called in to help Brazilian players who were crying on the sidelines of games, some of them sobbing uncontrollably.

The immense psychological pressures placed on team members had to have played a major role in their collapse before the German onslaught. It had been made abundantly clear that victory was required by a government that had invested massive resources in a bid to use the World Cup—watched by 1.6 billion people worldwide—as a showcase for the rise of Brazilian capitalism on the world stage.

The exploitation of the World Cup and other sporting events for such political purposes is hardly new. Among

the most infamous examples was the 1978 World Cup, hosted by the Argentine dictatorship of Gen. Jorge Videla, when political prisoners held in torture centers could hear the crowds cheering an Argentine victory that was used to legitimize the blood-soaked regime.

However, the importance—and money—invested in this contest by Brazil's PT (Workers' Party) government were virtually unprecedented. In 2007, when international football's ruling body, FIFA, granted the country the right to host the Cup, then-President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva declared: "At its core, what we're assuming here is a responsibility as a nation, as a government, to prove to the world that we're a growing stable economy, that we're one of the countries that has conquered stability."

To that end, the government doled out over \$11 billion in public funds to private companies to build stadiums and infrastructure that have nothing to do with the glaring social needs of Brazil's 200 million people. Cost overruns on the stadiums alone ran to 300 percent, while the proposed infrastructure investments, including a high-speed train linking Rio and Sao Paulo, never materialized.

To create the "stability" spoken of by Lula—and demanded by FIFA—a quarter of a million people were forced to relocate, with thousands of families rendered homeless. Brazil's militarized police occupied the *favela* shantytowns, and virtual martial law was imposed in the areas surrounding the games, with protests ruthlessly repressed. There were reports of street children and homeless individuals being killed by police death squads.

Also undoubtedly troubling for the young Brazilian players was the fact that the majority of their countrymen—despite the nation's historic identification with football—opposed holding the World Cup in Brazil. A poll conducted in the run-up to the games found that 61 percent of the population believed the event was bad for the country.

The games became the target of the massive nationwide

protests that brought millions into the streets last year, in the first instance over hikes in transit fares. Slogans were raised demanding that money be spent on education, health care and housing rather than on FIFA stadiums.

While these protests petered out, in large measure due to their diffuse class character and lack of any clear leadership or program—but also as a consequence of violent repression—hostility to the Cup continued to build, finding its sharpest expression in the working class.

Only weeks before the beginning of the tournament, the Brazilian team's bus was blocked en route to its training camp. Hundreds of striking teachers occupied the roadway and banged on the side of the vehicle, chanting slogans denouncing spending on the World Cup and demanding money for the country's underpaid educators and poorly funded schools instead.

Behind this rising discontent, the Brazilian economy has stalled, with growth anticipated at barely 1.0 percent this year, even as inflation is steadily rising. And while the PT government boasts of pulling 20 million out of poverty with minimal social assistance programs such as “Bolsa Familia” and “Brasil sem Miséria,” the gulf of inequality between the masses of working people and the thin layer that monopolizes economic and political power is wider than ever. And many millions of those whom the media now sanguinely refers to as “middle class” are on the brink of falling back into extreme poverty.

The political implications of the World Cup defeat are being carefully weighed from Brasilia to Wall Street. All of the major presidential candidates—including the incumbent, Workers' Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores) President Dilma Rousseff—issued statements of condolence to the Brazilian people, and the country's political right is salivating over prospects that the World Cup defeat can be exploited to bring an end to the PT's decade in power following October's national elections.

Large contingents of riot-equipped military police took to the streets of Belo Horizonte, Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and other Brazilian cities in the aftermath of the defeat, and a massive police escort was provided for the winning German team to get out of the stadium.

There was little in the way of protest, however. Within the stadium itself, well-heeled fans directed obscene chants against President Rousseff, much as they had done at the opening of the World Cup last month. This is of political concern to the PT, expressing its repudiation by the privileged classes whose interests it really serves, even as it faces growing opposition from below—among those whom it purports to represent.

In Sao Paulo, a number of buses were burned and there was looting at an electronics store, along with a few fistfights in bars where fans had gathered to watch the game.

The absence of an immediate popular upheaval in response to the World Cup loss is not surprising, given that the last mass protests were carried out in the name of repudiating the tournament. Nonetheless, there is a sense of growing anger over the entire experience. The World Cup will finally end on Sunday, but its reverberations are likely to be felt in the social and political evolution of Latin America's largest country for some time to come.

In an emotional statement to the media following the crushing defeat, the Brazilian team's captain for Tuesday's match, David Luis, apologized “to all Brazilians,” saying, “All I wanted was to see everyone smiling. God knows how much I wanted the whole of Brazil to be happy for the football.”

He added, “I hope fans, the Brazilian people, use the national team and our closeness to reach out for other things in life, not just things related to football.”

While the 27-year-old footballer did not spell out what he meant, there is no doubt that the masses of Brazilian working people will be coming into struggle in the coming period for the “other things in life” that are denied them by the profit system and the existing political setup that defends it.



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