

A week before Rio games, protesters extinguish Olympic flame

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Protesting workers and youth in Angra dos Reis, a coastal town about 100 miles south of Rio de Janeiro, blocked an Olympic procession Wednesday night, seizing and extinguishing the Olympic torch before being driven back by police firing teargas and rubber bullets.

The protest, coming barely a week before the August 5 opening of Rio Olympics, is emblematic of the conditions of extreme economic and political crisis, as well as rising social unrest, that are wracking Brazil as it prepares to host the first Olympic Games ever held in Latin America.

The protests in Angra dos Reis were provoked by the failure to pay municipal employees along with the cutting of bus service and the shutting down of an urgent care health center. These are part of the cuts being implemented on a far wider scale as the state of Rio de Janeiro teeters on the edge of bankruptcy and the right-wing government of “Interim President” Michel Temer embarks on an agenda of sweeping austerity and privatization measures.

Protesters carried banners reading: “Workers of Angra dos Reis will not pay for the crisis” and “Torch of shame.” They blocked streets with barricades of burning trash.

Hostility to the Olympics was triggered by the report that the town was paying for an Olympic celebration while failing to pay its workers and teachers.

Angra dos Reis is a coastal gateway to expensive resorts and beach mansions of the wealthy from Brazil and around the world. It is also the site of a Petrobras oil refinery and nuclear power plant. The majority of its residents are working class and poor, living in precarious housing on hillsides that have seen repeated disastrous mudslides.

The hostility to the Olympic Games, however, is not

unique to this one town. A recent poll showed that more than half of the Brazilian population is opposed to the games and 63 percent believe they will do more harm to the country than good.

A government report issued earlier this week underscored the continued deepening of Brazil’s economic crisis—the worst since the Great Depression of the 1930s. The official unemployment rate for the second quarter of 2016 rose to 11.3 percent, a 38.7 percent increase compared to the same period last year. Meanwhile, average wages have also fallen sharply, down 4.2 percent since last year.

Growing working class anger over these conditions may impinge on the Olympics themselves. Rio de Janeiro public transport workers have threatened to go on strike on the eve of the games if their demand for a nearly 10 percent wage hike is not met.

Rio de Janeiro has been turned into an armed camp in advance of the games, with 88,000 armed troops, military police and other security personnel deployed in its streets.

The efficacy of such security measures was called into question with the announcement that a New Zealand ju jitsu athlete had fled the country after being kidnapped and forced to withdraw the equivalent of over \$600 from different banks to secure his freedom. His captors, it emerged, were members of the military police.

In the run-up to the games, the government has announced a series of “terror” arrests of individuals charged with links to foreign terrorist organizations. The substance of these allegations appears flimsy in the extreme, in some cases consisting of nothing more than having visited a web site. The targets of what have been described as “preemptive” arrests were apparently selected from lists provided by the American FBI and

the Israeli Mossad.

This phony anti-terror campaign has provided the Temer government the opportunity to implement a recently passed draconian anti-terror law.

The games are being held under the shadow of Brazil's impeachment crisis. President Dilma Rousseff, who was removed from office in May by a congressional vote to proceed with her impeachment, announced this week that she would not attend the opening of the games after Temer made it clear she would be excluded from the VIP box that he will occupy. Also skipping the opening for the same reason is Rousseff's predecessor and Workers Party (PT) founder Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, whose administration's bid secured the Olympics for Brazil seven years ago.

The Brazilian Senate's Special Committee on Impeachment is likely to vote to bring the PT president to trial during the same week as the Olympic Games begin. The full Senate is expected to render its final verdict by the end of August. According to surveys, the vote is expected to permanently remove Rousseff, handing the last two years of her term to her former vice president, Michel Temer.

The trumped-up character of the impeachment drive was further exposed earlier this month with the issuing of a report by federal prosecutor Ivan Marx, who told the Senate that one of the principal charges, that Rousseff had engaged in budgetary manipulations that delayed payments to banks in order to cover up a deficit, failed to constitute a crime.

Carried out by a cabal of corrupt politicians who are themselves up to their necks in the multibillion-dollar Petrobras bribery scandal, the impeachment of Rousseff is aimed first and foremost at removing an elected president with the aim of introducing radical austerity measures designed to place the full burden of the crisis onto the backs of the working class.

While Rousseff and the PT had already begun to initiate such policies and insisted that they were the best suited for continuing them, both Brazilian and foreign capital demanded a change of regime.



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