Rio Olympics overshadowed by social crisis

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The 2016 summer Olympic games will open today, Friday August 5, in Rio de Janeiro at 8:00pm (local time), when the Olympic flame will be lit in Rio de Janeiro's prestigious Maracanã Stadium.

Some 11,500 athletes representing 28 sports and 207 nations, are expected to participate; 306 events have been scheduled.

The Rio event is the 29th since the Olympics were reinstituted in 1896. In ancient Greece, the games were meant to symbolize peace. It is said that even ongoing wars were suspended while the games took place. Whatever remains of that earlier symbol is merely superficial. The current games take place under conditions of seemingly unending war in North Africa and the Middle East, and the threat of war in Eastern Europe and the South China Sea.

These games were meant to signal to the world Brazil's entry into the club of wealthy industrialized nations. Former President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva announced his nation's bid to host the games in 2009. "Our time has arrived," declared Lula then, pointing out that Brazil was alone among the 10 largest economies in the world in never having hosted the Olympic games.

The games on Friday open in a completely different climate. This nation of nearly 200 million is in the midst of the worst social crisis since the fall of the military dictatorship in 1985. Lula's successor, Dilma Rousseff, has been suspended from office and is being impeached as a result of a political coup that installed the right-wing, and widely hated, President Michel Temer. The new president, a darling of Wall Street and the financial sector, has imposed "austerity" policies that attack the living standards and social benefits of Brazilian workers, most of whom will not be able to afford to attend either today's opening ceremonies or any of the games.

This week's Olympic games offer a telling contrast between wealth and poverty. The favelas, the impoverished hillside neighborhoods of the city, many of them under police occupation, have been under attack since the city was awarded the Olympic games. Walls were built to keep poor people from tourist destinations, homes were summarily demolished and people relocated to suit the construction plans, affecting some 30,000 people. An additional 6,000 homeless people have been moved away from Río's downtown.

Last Saturday protesters in the coastal city of Angra dos Reis, 100 miles south of Rio de Janeiro, extinguished the Olympic flame as it was carried on its way to the Maracaná stadium, in protest over Temer's austerity policies and the routing of funds away from the town to pay for the Olympics. 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 protest at Angra dos Reis was one of a series of protests in virtually every town along the torch route. On July 27, demonstrators in São Jose dos Campos, an important center of industry northeast of São Paulo, marched alongside the torch with paper torches that read "education," "health" and "housing." As the torch entered Rio de Janeiro—under heavy security—demonstrators pelted it with stones.

A universal complaint in these protests is that funds were siphoned to the Olympics while workers were not getting paid on time.

Three weeks earlier, the Rio police had broken up demonstrations in Rio de Janeiro, also opposing spending on the games. Demonstrators indicated that teachers and public employees were not being paid due to a financial emergency at the state level.

Rio itself has the appearance of a city under siege.

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Eighty-eight thousand police and soldiers are occupying the city, operating under the pretext of insuring the security of athletes and tourists. This includes 47,000 from the military and the military police. At their disposal are 60 ships, 70 armored vehicles and 34 helicopters. Another 1,200 security officers have been assigned to the Rio airport area.

In June, the government of Rio de Janeiro announced conditions of fiscal emergency and asked for state funds to prevent an economic collapse.

As the games open, and while tourists and well-off Brazilians take tourists "selfies" in front of images of the Olympic rings along Copacabana beach, what is revealed with ever more clarity is the existence of two Brazils. Some 100 million Brazilians live in poverty—with per capita incomes of less than $300 a month—making it one of the most socially unequal countries in the world. In 2012, economic statistics indicated that sections of the lower middle class, above the poverty line, have virtually no disposable income above their basic needs.

The worsening economic conditions have gone hand in hand with increasing unemployment and the growth of informal and temporary jobs, particularly for youth.

High rates of poverty are most prevalent in northeastern Brazil, breeding grounds for the mosquito-borne Zika virus, itself a disease of poverty.

Concern over security and the Zika virus may also account for the low estimates of tourist spending this August, $200 million, contrasted to the $900 million spent by visitors during the World Soccer Cup two years ago.

Class tensions are at the breaking point. The most that Brazilian authorities can hope for is a brief period of social peace while the Olympic games take place, a "truce" in the spirit of ancient Greece. Such a lull in the class struggle, if it occurs, is bound to be only temporary, as Brazil enters a period of class war.

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