

Argentine football star Diego Maradona mourned worldwide

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Argentine football star Diego Armando Maradona, considered along with Pelé to be the greatest player of all time, died on November 25 at the early age of 60 from heart failure.

On top of many underlying health issues, Maradona was recovering on the outskirts of Buenos Aires from the removal of a blood clot on his brain and undergoing alcohol withdrawal treatment.

His death shocked the public in Argentina and worldwide. Tributes and gatherings to mourn him began immediately across Argentina and in cities all over the world. Hundreds gathered in Naples, Italy, where Maradona played between 1984 and 1991 at the apex of his career.

The following day in Buenos Aires, tens of thousands of mask-wearing fans waited for hours in lines that extended ten blocks to pay respects to Maradona at the presidential palace, Casa Rosada, where his closed casket was put on display.

The event was an unvarnished attempt by Argentina's Peronist government of President Alberto Fernández to exploit popular grief to extract political capital and foment nationalism. Fernández is facing growing unrest against his austerity-driven response to the crisis exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The country, while 31st in terms of population, has the ninth-highest number of coronavirus cases in the world.

Many legitimately took to Fernández's social media accounts to point out that they had sacrificed giving proper wakes and burials to their own loved ones to help contain the virus, and that a safer commemoration was possible.

In the afternoon, the ceremony ended when anti-riot police violently attacked the thousands still in line and those gathering at the Plaza de Mayo with rubber bullets, water cannon and beatings. The incident occurred after those waiting became restive in the face of constant harassment and pushing by the security forces.

The coffin was later wheeled out, and thousands accompanied the hearse to the cemetery chanting "Diego is not Dead, Diego lives with the people."

Over the weekend, professional football games across the world were halted for minutes of silence, the show of videos of Maradona and commemorations, with scenes of deeply saddened players, coaches and staff.

In England, players and coaches applauded emotionally ahead of a Manchester City and Burnley football match as the Maradona's goal against England during the 1986 World Cup was shown on a big screen. Maradona dribbled through five players and left the goalie behind to score what is considered the best goal in the history of the World Cup (see it here).

Ahead of a rugby match with Argentina on Saturday, the All Blacks New Zealand team laid down a replica of their national uniform with the name of Maradona on the back, before performing the traditional Maori dance, Haka.

Maradona played a critical role in winning the 1979 World Youth Cup and the 1986 World Cup for Argentina, as well as winning the premiere leagues in Argentina (Boca Juniors, 1981), Italy (Napoli, 1986-87, 1989-90), and the European-level UEFA Cup (Napoli, 1988-89).

His impeccable ball control—dribbling, passing and receiving at full throttle and with pace changes—and audacity on the offense marked a before and after in the evolution of football itself. His subsequent stints in coaching, however, were unremarkable.

After retiring as a player in 1997, the last two decades of his life were marked by a media fixation with his drug abuse problems, affairs and feuds over money. At the same time, Maradona's outspoken opinions against inequality and imperialism, albeit politically confused, won him the sympathy of wide layers of workers and youth internationally.

He became politically oriented to Peronism in Argentina, Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Fidel Castro in Cuba and other populist forces of the so-called "pink tide" in Latin America that pretended to be champions of the oppressed, while defending the class interests of the national ruling classes. As opposed to these forces, the sentiments against inequality of Maradona, who never ran for office or sought personal

credit in politics, had a genuine character.

Before, and especially after his death, a crowd of middle class moral crusaders in the print and social media have been spurred into action, denouncing the left sentiments expressed by Maradona. Seeking to disparage his every step outside the field, they have portrayed him as a misogynistic drug abuser, an evaluation lacking any sobriety.

Maradona was born in 1960 and raised with eight siblings in Villa Fiorito, a marginalized working class slum outside of Buenos Aires. His family, from northwestern Chaco province, was part of a massive wave of rural migrants, pushed by impoverishment in rural areas into Buenos Aires' suburbs and forced to work for poverty wages, as the Argentine economy collapsed from its post-Peronist "golden age."

The national media began to take note of his talents when he was only 10 years old, while playing for neighborhood team "Red Star," managed by his father. He didn't finish seventh grade. By 1976, having just turned 16, he first played professionally for Argentinos Juniors, where he distinguished himself as a top goal-scorer.

The beginning of his career coincided with the seizure of power by a fascist military dictatorship, which overthrew the Peronist government in March 1976 and killed 30,000 workers, youth and intellectuals.

Seeking to divert attention from the brutal repression, the military junta briefly conscripted Maradona—already one of the most popular figures in the country—and placed him at the Central Command for photo-ops. Dictator Jorge Videla took the opportunity once to personally congratulate Maradona. Years later, he recalled the incident saying, "Even though we had won the youth world cup in 1979, the police goon Videla used us as an example. He made us cut our hair and do military service."

Throughout his career, he was surrounded by figures seeking to exploit his popularity as much as his scandals. Surrounded by fame, injuries and immense expectations, he was introduced into drugs at the age of 24 while playing for Barcelona, resulting in a life-long struggle with addiction.

Most football leagues hire players and coaches from all over the world, and many from poor backgrounds like Maradona, whose life story came to symbolize the hope of countless youth to escape economic misery through sport.

He then joined Naples in Italy. According to ESPN, he said he wanted to play there "because it's a poor city, and I want to be the idol of the poor children there." Nearly 80,000 people gathered to welcome him to Naples. There is no question that his talent and performance drew much from his connection to the fans, especially the oppressed.

In one incident, Maradona convinced his teammates in Naples to play a game at a muddy field in a poor

neighborhood to raise money for a woman to pay for an expensive medical treatment. Management had ordered him not to play for fears of an injury.

In 2000, he condemned Pope Benedict XVI for his wealth: "He lives in a place with roofs of gold, while so many are hungry." While coaching the Sinaloa Dorados in Mexico, he also famously said, "The man who leaves to work at 4 am and can't bring back 100 pesos. That is someone who faces pressure because he has to feed his children. My pot is full."

He was also an outspoken opponent of the Israeli oppression against the Palestinians and of imperialist war. Amid mass protests internationally against the US war against Iraq, he marched in Argentina with a shirt that said "Stop Bush," with the S in Bush changed to a swastika, and called the US president "human trash."

Interviews with fellow players and family make clear that his fame and addictions led to enormous physical and emotional stress. He repeatedly lamented the pain this caused to his loved ones. In more recent months, he was also undoubtedly aware of the inhumane policies of austerity and "herd immunity" imposed by the Peronists.

His manager, Stefano Ceci, indicated that he had become greatly isolated. "Recently, he was letting himself go, physically and mentally. I think he was tired and let himself die, he no longer really wanted to live."

The popular grief over the tragic fate of Maradona is largely a measure of the simmering anger over social inequality and imperialist war that is shared by workers and youth all over the world. These sentiments can find a progressive outlet only through the formation of a politically conscious socialist and internationalist leadership in the working class.



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