

“Healthcare should be prioritized over the Olympic Games”

Opposition erupts in Japan against the Tokyo Olympics

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It has been over a year since Japan proclaimed its first one-month state of emergency back in April 2020. There have been many outbreaks throughout this year as a direct result of the non-existent COVID-19 mitigation measures by the government of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and his successor Yoshihide Suga.

For the entire year of the global pandemic, the Abe and Suga governments focused on downplaying the pandemic, doing everything in their power to ensure the Summer Tokyo Olympics will be held this year in July. This includes covering up the realities in the country's hospitals.

There have been sharp increases in infections in the city of Osaka with a record of 1,262 cases in a single day. Osaka is in a healthcare crisis, with hospitals running over capacity with more than 17,000 COVID patients waiting at home to access care. There are increasing numbers of patients having to wait several hours in an ambulance before they can be admitted into a hospital. The longest wait reported was two whole days.

Despite minimal testing, 12,002,383 people have tested positive (around a tenth of the total population) with a positivity rate of 7 percent. Japan's official cumulative number of deaths from COVID-19 is 11,200 and the number of confirmed cases is at 659,987. However, there is every reason to believe these figures are seriously under reported. Hospital beds are in short supply nationally and the number of COVID-19 patients recuperating at home topped 28,823 as of May 5.

Yet Japan still plans to proceed with the Tokyo Summer Olympic Games. Last month, the Tokyo

Olympics Organizers requested the Japanese Nursing Association to dispatch 500 nurses as medical staff to assist the Games.

This sparked immediate mass opposition among nurses. An online demonstration was initiated with the hashtag ?????????????? (meaning “Dispatching nurses to the Olympics games cannot be done”) with more than 250,000 tweets over the course of four days.

Tweets included: “We are desperately saving patients and assisting the Olympics Games is out of question”; “If a dispatch is possible they should be dispatched to hospitals”; and “Healthcare should be prioritized over the Olympic Games.”

One declared: “This is an emergency, a life-or-death situation. We don't have enough instructors and we cannot educate newly hired nurses. If we want to prevent nurses from leaving their job, better treatment for the nurses and publicly funded mass PCR tests will be needed.”

A physician tweeted: “The first requirement in a hospital is that it should do the sick no harm. The current government is only doing harm to the people”.

Another tweet declared: “I am a nurse. When the pandemic started, I was working in the ward and I was terrified not only for myself but also for my family for the risk of exposing them... I would work for hours and hours wearing a protective suit, lightheaded from the heat. Whenever there was an outbreak in the hospital, I would be terrified thinking I could be next and that I could lose my life. I would be full of regret and sorrow for all the patients who passed away. With all my feelings of fear and sorrow, I am doing my best to withstand them. And this is not for the Olympics. Under this situation, there is no way I can support the

Olympics. It has been over a year. But it is not ending yet and I do not see the end... What is it that this country is trying to protect? Please choose to protect lives.”

In addition to the initial request for 500 nurses, it was revealed that Olympics organizers estimate they will need a total of 10,000 medical staff for the games and plan to have them work without compensation, with the exception of a few officials. In response to widespread opposition, organizers now claim they are considering compensation for medical staff.

In what amounted to a threat, Prime Minister Suga told the media: “I am aware that those opinions (criticisms) exist. We would like to try our best so that there is no trouble.” He claimed that many nurses in the Japanese Nursing Association were taking time off, adding that it should be possible to supply nursing staff for the Olympics.

Suga’s response underscores the government’s determination to minimize and downplay the impact of the pandemic to ensure the economy remains open and the Olympics proceed as planned.

Testing has been made difficult and costly, with the cost of a test ranging between \$US180 to \$400, mostly borne by the individual. Access to tests through nationalized healthcare is discouraged unless the symptoms exactly match the Ministry of Health’s guidelines. A number of people denied access to PCR testing were later revealed to be COVID-19 positive, after dying at home.

The lack of restrictions was highlighted by the government’s “Go Travel” campaign to promote domestic travel and boost the economy last October even as global COVID cases were on the rise. The campaign was suspended at the end of December 2020 after domestic COVID cases accelerated.

In April, however, Liberal Democratic Party secretary general, Toshihiro Nikai, insisted that Japan needed to resume the campaign because of its “positive economic effects.” He brushed aside concerns that the campaign could spread the virus, stating: “If you’re afraid, you won’t be able to do anything. If everyone stays at home and closes the door, then the Japanese economy will stop”.

Opposition continues to emerge to the government’s prioritization of profits over health and lives, particularly over the Olympics. In addition to the nurses, there have been protests on social media and on

the streets saying, “Stop the homicidal Olympics immediately! Human lives are more important than the Olympics”.

The Tokyo Medical Practitioners Association, with more than 6,000 members, wrote an open letter to Prime Minister Suga calling for the Olympics to be cancelled. The letter stated that with the country’s fourth wave of infections spiking they are “facing difficult situations and cannot afford to conduct (the Olympics)”.

Amid a spike in cases of heatstroke expected in July, the physicians warned it will be difficult to differentiate between COVID-19 and heat stroke. As a result, hospitals would need to isolate patients individually to make an assessment, further stretching resources. Healthcare workers are “completely over capacity and they cannot afford to deploy resources, facilities, nor workforce for the games... We believe that the right decision is to cancel the event that has the possibility of increasing infection and deaths.”

With a global pandemic, the fundamental contradiction between the interests of the ruling elites and society has been clearly revealed. While the sole interest of the ruling class lies in capitalist profit, society needs rational measures to contain the COVID-19 virus and save lives. It is only the international working class that can put an end to the murderous ‘herd immunity’ policies of the global financial elite. Healthcare workers in Japan and beyond need to begin building rank-and-file committees to take matters into their own hands and unite with workers across industries and across the globe.



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