Tokyo pushes ahead with Olympics despite growing demands to cancel

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With the Tokyo Summer Olympic Games scheduled to start on July 23, broad opposition to holding the event continues to grow in Japan as the COVID-19 pandemic worsens throughout the country. Despite this, the government of Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga, backed by the International Olympic Committee (IOC), is pushing ahead with the event despite the strong possibility that the Games will be held under a state of emergency.

Protests against the Olympics have taken place on social media with small, in-person demonstrations also occurring in Tokyo and other cities. Organizers are now holding weekly protests on Friday evenings in Tokyo. While many are understandably cautious of attending these demonstrations, online petitions demanding a halt to the Games have garnered hundreds of thousands of signatures.

The concerns that people have are well founded. The Suga government on Friday extended the state of emergency until June 20 for nine prefectures and cities, including Tokyo. As of Sunday, there have been 741,674 confirmed COVID-19 cases and 12,920 deaths. This included 3,599 new cases from the previous day. The official figures are certainly an undercounting as people find it difficult to receive tests or treatment. In addition, only 2.4 percent of the population is fully vaccinated.

Last Thursday, Naoto Ueyama, the head of the Japan Doctors Union, warned that holding the Games could lead to a new "Olympic" strain of the COVID-19 virus. "All of the different mutated strains of the virus that exist in different places will be concentrated and gathering here in Tokyo. We cannot deny the possibility of even a new strain of the virus potentially emerging after the Olympics," he stated at a news conference.

Underscoring this, health officials in Vietnam on Saturday announced that they had detected a new hybrid variant of the virus, a combination of the UK and Indian strains. Health Minister Nguyen Thanh Long stated that the new hybrid strain spreads quickly through the air and is "very dangerous."

Healthcare workers have been at the forefront of opposition to the Olympics, particularly as the government attempted to enlist some 500 nurses to work at the event. A nurse from Nagoya told the BBC last week, "They want 500 nurses to volunteer at the Olympics. That means more COVID patients won't get the care they need." In a May 14 open letter, the Tokyo Medical Practitioners Association, comprising around 6,000 doctors, called for the Games to be cancelled.

The major concern of the Japanese establishment is not for the lives of people around the world, but on the economic impact to big business of cancelling the Olympics. *Bloomberg* warned, for example, that cancelling the Games could wipe out much of Japan's 2021 economic growth, with a direct loss of up to 1.8 trillion yen ($16.4 billion dollars). This is just a fraction of the amount Tokyo spends on its military. Despite the pandemic, Tokyo approved another record-high military budget of 5.34 trillion yen ($51.7 billion) in December.

The IOC is also adamant about pushing forward with the Games. Approximately 91 percent of the IOC's income comes from selling broadcasting rights and from sponsors—73 percent and 18 percent respectively. Financial considerations, not concern for the athletes, is what led to IOC President Thomas Bach to call for "sacrifices" from the Japanese people.

Among working people in Japan, there is widespread discontent over the government's handling of the pandemic and its economic impact. The country's

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official unemployment rate rose to 2.8 percent in April, the first increase in six months. This is a gross undercounting as anyone who worked in a given week and furloughed workers are counted as employed. Non-regular workers, many in the service industry, have borne the brunt of layoffs.

With 83 percent of Japanese people in favour of calling off or postponing the Olympics, there is clearly concern in the ruling class of social unrest. Support for Prime Minister Suga has fallen to 32.2 percent, while the ruling Liberal Democratic Party and the main opposition Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP) stand at just 21.4 percent and 4.4 percent respectively.

Seeking to head off this anger, last Wednesday, the influential *Asahi Shimbun*, an official sponsor of the Olympics, published an editorial calling for the cancellation of the Games. “Cancelling the Olympics is certainly best avoided, not only for the sake of athletes who have trained hard for the Games, but also for the many people who have made all sorts of preparations for the event,” it stated.

“But the foremost priority must lie on maintaining a basic structure that protects the lives, health and livelihoods of citizens. The Olympics must never be allowed to invite a situation that threatens this structure.” The editorial added, “The present situation is nowhere close to making anyone feel safe, and that's the unfortunate reality.”

The opposition parties, including the Japanese Communist Party (JCP), do not emphatically call for the Olympics to be called off, but suggest that the current conditions do not allow them to go forward. The implication is that if a suitable veneer of safety measures were implemented, the Olympics could go ahead, and, more broadly, the limited restrictions on businesses could be lifted before the end of the pandemic.

CDP policy chief Kenta Izumi said earlier in May, “We need to be serious about considering options including cancelling the events to protect the lives of the people.” Although unstated, the comment suggests that other options still exist.

As for the JCP, it has officially called for the Games to be cancelled, as it attempts to posture as a voice for popular opposition. JCP Secretariat Head Akira Koike declared on May 17, “An overwhelming majority of the public think that the Olympics should not be held,” then added the caveat “given the present circumstances.”

Of course, if circumstances change the JCP can do an about-face. Koike even suggested how the government could proceed as a means of dealing with public opposition. “The Suga government should take these survey results seriously and properly organize a smooth vaccine drive,” he added.

Whatever their claims, the positions of the CDP and JCP represent a section of the ruling class that fears the growth of social opposition in Japan but at the same time lines up with the government seeking to limit the damage to big business and profits.

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