Qatar Football World Cup being played on the bones of thousands of construction workers

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The 2022 World Cup, which begins in Qatar on November 20, will go down in history as the tournament in which profit interests completely triumphed over sport. Thousands of construction workers had to forfeit their lives so that the total of 64 matches could be played in twelve newly built stadiums.

Britain's *Guardian* newspaper published a report in February 2021, according to which 6,751 workers from India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Pakistan had died in the ten years since the World Cup was awarded to the Gulf state. The newspaper did not have figures on workers from countries outside south Asia, such as the Philippines and Kenya, who are also employed in large numbers in Qatar.

> "Qatar's grim death toll is revealed in long spreadsheets of official data listing the causes of death: multiple blunt injuries due to a fall from height; asphyxia due to hanging; undetermined cause of death due to decomposition.
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> "But among the causes, the most common by far is so-called 'natural deaths', often attributed to acute heart or respiratory failure." (*The Guardian*, 23 February 2021)

In August 2021, based on official government data, Amnesty International calculated more than 15,000 non-Qataris of all ages had died in the Gulf state between 2010 and 2019. In 70 percent of these cases, the cause of death was not determined. Autopsies are banned in the Islamic country. "Death certificates usually report the deaths as 'natural causes' or 'cardiac arrest,'" the study says, without linking them to working conditions.

The human rights organization uses several individual examples to show how young workers who had no previous health problems fell victim to inhumane working conditions. 30- or 40-year-olds lost consciousness and died after twelve-hour shifts in sweltering heat of more than 40 degrees Celsius (104° Fahrenheit). In some cases, they had been working seven days a week.

Since the release of these figures, which the Qatar government does not refute, a fierce dispute has erupted over how many deaths are directly linked to the construction of the soccer stadiums, new airport, subway, roads, 100 hotels and other projects being built for the World Cup at a cost of $185 billion.

World soccer's governing body FIFA—which hawked the World Cup to Qatar 12 years ago in exchange for millions in alleged bribes—the World Cup organizing committee and the Qatari government are trying to downplay the figures. But the more details that come to light, the more terrible the picture that emerges. It is a picture of a class society in which a fabulously wealthy upper class towers over a prosperous middle class, while a working class without rights is exploited to the hilt and a human life is worth next to nothing.

As if magnified through a looking glass, the social conditions that increasingly characterize all capitalist societies become clearly visible here. This is why the topic is becoming more explosive the closer the kick-off of the first game approaches on November 20. Many soccer fans find they can no longer separate their enthusiasm for their sport from politics.

Governments are reacting with corresponding nervousness. They defend their lucrative economic and political ties to Qatar and seek to channel outrage over the brutal exploitation of workers there into less explosive channels, such as LGBT rights, and in an anti-Islamic direction.

An absolute monarchy rules over non-citizens

Qatar is an authoritarian dictatorship. The Emir and his family exercise unrestrained rule and control the country's wealth. Although a Consultative Assembly was elected for the first time last year (two-thirds by public vote and one-third chosen by the Emir), it has only advisory and no legislative powers. There are no political parties, and trade union activities as well as freedom of speech and of the press are subject to strict restrictions.

Of the country's 2.2 million inhabitants, only about 330,000 have Qatari citizenship, of whom about 70,000 work in well-paid jobs (mostly for the state). The remaining 88 percent are migrants. Of them, a minority—mostly from Europe or other Arab countries—work as well-paid professionals. The vast majority—mostly from Asia and Africa—carry out hard physical labour and are ruthlessly exploited. In addition, there are more than 170,000 migrant women who work as domestic helpers and

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are often subjected to abuse and sexual assault.

Meanwhile, the Qatari government boasts that it has improved workers' situation through reforms implemented in the summer of 2020. But a look at these "reforms" only shows how intolerable conditions are. For example, a statutory minimum wage of 1,000 riyals was introduced for foreign workers for the first time. That is 230 euros a month—and in one of the richest and most expensive countries in the world!

The reforms also formally abolished the so-called *kafala* system, which kept foreign workers in a kind of serfdom. Their passports were confiscated, they could change jobs only with the employer's consent and often received no wages for months.

However, the reforms only exist on paper. In practice, little has changed. When asked, Amnesty International confirmed to news weekly *Der Spiegel* late last year that for the majority of foreign workers, "exploitation, unpaid or late wages, lack of access to labour courts, in some cases catastrophic living conditions, withheld passports and much more continue to be the order of the day."

This was also reported by a group of affected workers who toured Germany in September.

According to Malcolm Bidali from Kenya, who worked for four and a half years as a security guard at stadiums in Qatar, six to eight workers must usually share a room. He reported a lack of privacy, bed bugs in the mattresses, terrible food, and poor sanitation. When Bidali spoke out on the Internet for better conditions, he was arrested and placed in solitary confinement for a month.

A Nepalese worker described how sometimes fifty or even a hundred workers had to share one kitchen, with corresponding hygiene problems. Despite the heat and high humidity, there was not enough germ-free drinking water available, which often led to illness, he said.

Meanwhile, workers are being made to leave these miserable dwellings. As Reuters reported, thousands of workers in central Doha have been recently ordered to vacate their accommodation so it can be remodelled for expected World Cup visitors. Many were given only two hours to pack their belongings and are now on the streets.

Political hypocrisy in Europe

The exploitation of workers in Doha is met with outrage by numerous soccer fans, many of whom are workers themselves. As early as last January, FC Bayern fans had protested in their home stadium with a huge banner against the club's close ties to the Emirate of Qatar, which is one of its main sponsors. Above a caricature of club chairman Oliver Kahn and president Herbert Hainer putting a blood-stained shirt in a washing machine, the banner read, "For money, we wash everything clean."

When the club's honorary president Uli Hoeness, who served several months in prison for tax evasion, was asked about this at the recent annual general meeting, he angrily retorted, "This is the Bayern Munich soccer club, not the Amnesty International general assembly."

Meanwhile, numerous cities in Germany and France have cancelled the broadcast of the World Cup in public places. The criticism of European politicians of the conditions in Qatar, however, can hardly be surpassed in hypocrisy. The terrible circumstances in Qatar have been known since the World Cup was awarded twelve years ago. And the European Union's treatment of refugees, thousands of whom it lets drown in the Mediterranean or crams into inhumane camps, is even worse than the treatment of construction workers in Qatar.

Above all, there are huge financial interests at play. This is true not only for FIFA, which earns more than a billion euros in sponsorship money from the World Cup; European and, above all, German companies are making a lot of money in Qatar, and the emirate is one of the biggest investors in Europe.

Qatar's state investment fund has invested more than 350 billion euros in dozens of countries, a quarter of it in Britain, the USA and France. It holds substantial stakes in the London Stock Exchange and in the Barclays and Crédit Suisse banks. In Germany, Qatar has invested 25 billion euros, including in Volkswagen, Deutsche Bank, Hapag-Lloyd, and energy corporation RWE. Around two billion euros in Qatari money has flowed into European soccer clubs over the past ten years.

European and German corporations, including Deutsche Bahn, Siemens, software company SAP and the construction industry, are involved in major Qatari projects and earn a share in the exploitation of workers. In 2018, German Chancellor Angela Merkel received Emir al-Thani in Berlin to deepen economic ties. Qatar has also been courted as a gas and oil supplier since sanctions against Russia began. Both Economics Minister Robert Habeck (Greens) and Chancellor Olaf Scholz (Social Democrat, SPD) therefore paid their respects to the Emir in Doha this year.

While European politicians ceaselessly invoke "human rights" in calling for the boycott of sporting events by political opponents in Russia and China, or the exclusion of their teams, different standards are applied to Qatar.

Not everyone goes as far as former SPD leader and German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel, who responded to criticism of Qatar by tweeting, "German arrogance toward Qatar stinks!" But his party colleague, German Interior Minister Nancy Faeser, travelled to Doha this week specifically to mend fences after provoking the emir's ire with barely audible criticism.

Faeser met behind closed doors with Prime Minister Khalid bin Khalifa Al-Thani and FIFA chief Gianni Infantino, who has since moved his residence to Qatar, only to play the whole matter down afterwards. She would "travel there for the World Cup," she declared. Chancellor Scholz is now also likely to attend—if the German team makes it to the final.

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