2026 World Cup overshadowed by war, repression and sky-high ticket prices

Cesar Uco
4 June 2026

With the first match just days away, the 2026 FIFA World Cup is shaping up to be the most expensive and politically charged sporting events in history. Unfolding across the United States, Mexico and Canada from June 11 to July 19, it is the largest tournament ever staged—48 teams, 104 matches, 16 host cities. Corporate sponsors have poured hundreds of millions into it. FIFA expects to generate over $11 billion in revenue across the four-year cycle. Promotional videos speak of “unity,” “passion” and the universal language of football. The message is relentless: for one glorious month, the world comes together.

But one need not look too far beneath the surface to uncover the grotesque reality behind the spectacle. The 2026 World Cup opens as the United States wages an active war of aggression against Iran, prepares for war against Cuba and continues both its material support for the genocide in Gaza and its missile murder spree against fishermen off the waters of South America. At home, it is conducting mass arrests and deportations of immigrant workers at a pace unprecedented in US history as part of a drive to consolidate a dictatorial regime against the working class.

To hold the world’s premier football tournament in this environment—co-hosted by the very state machinery driving these catastrophes—invites an obvious comparison: Argentina’s blood-soaked military dictatorship hosting the 1978 World Cup, where political prisoners in the infamous Navy Mechanics School (ESMA) could hear the roar of the stadium crowds from the dungeons where they were being tortured.

A tournament under police-state conditions

US officials have warned that ICE immigration enforcement agents will be deployed at every stadium and every match. While acting-Secretary of Homeland Security Markwayne Mullin claimed that this anti-immigrant gestapo would not be conducting mass roundups, he insisted: “ICE always does immigration enforcement—but we’re not there solely for that purpose. We’re in there to do our job.” ICE will operate in coordination with the FBI and the Secret Service.

Meanwhile, Trump’s travel bans, which by mid-2025 covered 19 countries affecting over 400 million people, have created an obstacle course for fans from Muslim-majority nations, from African nations with high rates of visa denial and from Latin America. The “world coming together” in 2026 will be a carefully screened world.

Workers at SoFi Stadium in Los Angeles have threatened to strike if ICE agents are deployed there during World Cup matches. “ICE should have no role in these games,” declared stadium cook Isaac Martinez at a protest outside the venue. His concern is well-founded: FIFA’s requirement that stadium employees submit personal data before the tournament creates a direct pipeline to an agency with a documented record of detaining anyone deemed a potential “alien,” with legal status a secondary concern.

In addition to these workers, residents of the heavily immigrant LA suburb of Inglewood, where the SoFi Stadium is located, as well as the tens of thousands of fans arriving from Latin America and elsewhere for the tournament, will be squarely in the crosshairs of a militarized immigration apparatus operating under emergency authority and in defiance of the law.

Amnesty International joined with scores of other human rights and immigrant advocacy groups in issuing a “2026 World Cup Travel Advisory” warning prospective attendees that they face arbitrary denial of entry, arrest, detention and deportation; invasive searches of phones and social media; racial profiling; and, in the worst cases, cruel or degrading treatment in immigration detention facilities.

Concerns over the threat of abuse at the hands of US immigration authorities is a driving factor in what has already a massive fall-off in overall international tourism to the US. April 2026 visitor numbers were down 14.1 percent year over year, and four million fewer foreign visitors arrived in 2025 compared to 2024.

Iran, Congo and the politics of exclusion

Iran qualified for the tournament and has announced its intention to participate. As of this writing, however, its delegation has not been granted visas to enter the United States, where its three initial matches are scheduled, and has been forced to relocate its training camp across the border in Tijuana, Mexico. Trump warned on social media that “the Iran National Soccer Team is welcome to the World Cup, but I really don’t believe it is appropriate that they be there, for their own life and safety”—a statement widely read as a veiled death threat directed at a delegation attempting to compete in an international sporting event.

The Democratic Republic of Congo has been targeted through a different mechanism. Congo qualified for its second World Cup after 52 years—a historic achievement. US authorities demanded a 21-day quarantine for the Congolese delegation, citing an Ebola outbreak, even though every member of Congo’s squad plays professionally in Europe and none have visited the country since the outbreak began. Congolese fans are barred under a US entry ban imposed against the DRC over Ebola. The United States—which recorded over 103 million COVID-19 cases and 1.2 million deaths, the worst pandemic record of any nation on earth—invoked public health as pretext for an exercise in humiliation rooted in what can only be described as imperial contempt for the African continent.

Priced out: The class character of the 2026 tournament

Beyond the police-state apparatus and geopolitical provocations, the economic structure of the 2026 World Cup makes its class character unmistakable. For the first time in the tournament's 23-edition history, ticket prices are governed not by fixed tiers but by "dynamic pricing"—the market mechanism previously confined to American domestic sports and stadium concerts, where prices fluctuate to whatever wealthy bidders are prepared to pay.

A comparison with Russia 2018 is instructive. At that tournament, the most expensive final ticket cost $1,100; the cheapest was $110. These were steep figures, but within reach of a dedicated fan. The 2026 figures are of an entirely different order. On the secondary market, tickets for the opening match at the Estadio Azteca have already reached $2,500, with none available below $1,000. For the final, official resale platforms list tickets starting at $10,990, with offers exceeding $32,000. FIFA itself—not scalpers—has put premium final tickets on sale at $32,970 each. One ticket has reportedly been listed at $2.3 million.

The state attorneys general of New York and New Jersey have opened an investigation against FIFA charging that its ticket scheme combined the creation of "fake scarcity" with outright "price-gouging." The attorney general of California has also initiated a probe into FIFA's "dynamic pricing" model.

Hotel prices in host cities have already surged. A train journey from New York City to MetLife Stadium—roughly 15 kilometers, about 22 minutes—starts at $98 per trip. The stadium itself, named after a health insurance conglomerate worth $51.4 billion, will host the July 19 final. FIFA has compelled a temporary change at it and a number of other stadiums to generic city and state names. This peculiar action has been taken in line with FIFA's "brand protection policy," which guarantees its sponsors exclusive rights to have their names plastered at the match locations. Nothing could provide a better illustration of the corporate takeover of a sport with a predominantly working-class global audience.

Total tournament revenue is projected at $665 million—a 34 percent increase over the previous edition. FIFA's stated goal is to "support positive social change," but as University of Notre Dame economist Professor Richard Sheehan, author of *Keeping Score: The Economics of Big Time Sports*, notes, that claim is "belied by a track record of corruption and lack of transparency."

The clubs themselves are owned by the global oligarchs. Chelsea FC belongs to Todd Boehly ($9.3 billion). Paris Saint-Germain belongs to the Qatari royal family. According to Forbes, 3,428 billionaires exist worldwide alongside nearly 30,000 individuals with fortunes exceeding $100 million. To this social layer, listing a World Cup final ticket at $2.3 million is not an outrage—it is a rational business decision.

The insatiable drive for profit

The commercialization of the sport has extracted other costs less visible than ticket prices. Elite footballers once played around 50 matches per year; today it has climbed to 70, driven by FIFA's tournament expansion and relentless commercial pressure. Scientific assessments show this increase fundamentally disrupts cellular recovery, triples the probability of serious joint injury, and may reduce elite careers by three to five years. Meanwhile, the athletes' extraordinary gifts—Messi's uncanny ability to navigate defenders, Mbappé's explosive acceleration—have been meticulously cultivated by sports corporations and transformed into brand assets generating hundreds of millions annually from merchandise, endorsements and broadcast rights. The players bear the cost in shortened careers and broken bodies. The owners collect the revenues.

FIFA boss Gianni Infantino set the tone for the tournament last December, awarding Trump the "inaugural FIFA Peace Prize"—an attempt to appeal to Trump's bitter resentment at being passed over for the better known prize awarded by the Nobel Committee. Aside from providing another gold-plated ornament for the Oval Office, the prize symbolized the subordination of the Cup to the would-be American fuhrer and the fusion of the corrupt aims of FIFA and the Trump administration. It speaks volumes about the moral bankruptcy of football's governing body.

Trump responded by appointing himself chair of the World Cup organizing taskforce, conveniently headquartered in Trump Tower in Manhattan, signaling the intent to turn the tournament into one more crooked money stream for the Trump family. The tournament's structure reflects the same hierarchy of power: the opening match is scheduled for the Estadio Azteca in Mexico City, but the quarterfinals, semifinals and the final are all assigned to US venues, along with seven of the eight round-of-sixteen matches. The geography of the tournament tracks precisely with the geography of imperial power.

The attempt to use the World Cup as an instrument of wealth extraction does not go unanswered. The threatened strike by SoFi Stadium workers is one expression of a broader pattern of resistance. In Mexico, teachers organized in the CNTE union have vowed to bring their protests and strikes over wages and pensions to the gates of the Azteca Stadium. Teachers demonstrated in Mexico City on Tuesday, blocking main roads through the capital and setting soccer balls alight as they faced repression from security forces using tear gas, rubber bullets and batons.

And the tournament's own audience tells a more complicated story than its organizers intend: 75 percent of Americans know the US is hosting the World Cup, and roughly half plan to watch—but nearly a third are rooting for another country alongside or instead of the US, a testament to immigrant roots that no amount of nationalist demagogy can erase.

Socialists do not share the ruling class's contempt for sport. Football, at its most elemental level, is a magnificent expression of collective human creativity—skill, movement, cooperation, drama. The working class invented the game in its modern form; it is the working class that fills the lower tiers of stadiums and has driven the culture of the sport for more than a century.

What the 2026 World Cup represents, hosted under conditions of accelerating war and repression, is the attempt by a ruling class in crisis to paper over the class antagonisms tearing its society apart with 104 matches of carefully branded nationalism. Workers in the United States are told to cheer for "their" team—an affinity that supposedly unites them with a ruling class and its government that are filling detention camps with their neighbors, raising their food and fuel costs to pay for wars, and deploying armed thugs against citizens demanding democratic rights. The antidote to that nationalist appeal is not indifference to the sport, but political class consciousness: the recognition that a Mexican worker, an American worker and an Iranian worker share common class interests that no flag-waving can dissolve.

The game will be played. The well-healed crowds will roar. The television rights holders will profit magnificently. But the social contradictions this spectacle is designed to suppress—the inequality, the repression, the wars—will be resolved not on a football pitch, but in the intensifying global class struggle.