

Brazil: A World Soccer Cup for Corporations

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Global Research, June 14, 2014

[Waging Nonviolence](#) 12 June 2014

Region: [Latin America & Caribbean](#)

Theme: [Global Economy](#), [Poverty & Social Inequality](#)

A political cartoon by Carlos Latuff depicting FIFA's destruction of neighborhoods in Brazil. (Carlos Latuff)

The World Cup 2014 is set to begin today in São Paulo and end on July 13 in Rio de Janeiro. For this much-anticipated month of soccer, Brazilian citizens have paid a very high price, including the 10 billion reais (\$4.47 billion) that FIFA, the Fédération Internationale de Football Association, headquartered in Switzerland, will pocket, which is as much as the two last World Cups put together.

In Brazil there's always room for soccer. Anywhere. On the street, on the beach, on improvised fields. It is played barefoot, with shoes, in stadiums, as part of a team or among friends. Even the great players, Pelé, Ronaldo, Ronaldinho, or Neymar began playing this way. A visitor to Brazil can find goals in the most inhospitable places, in the countryside, in cities, in the jungle, in indigenous villages or in *favelas*. But as the sport has turned into an industry, that playful, collective game, with its beauty born of the joy of playing for the sake of playing, has begun to disappear.

The World Cup 2014, which will be the privilege of a few and a headache for many, has sparked unprecedented organizing against FIFA. In 11 of the 12 cities that will host one of the games, social movements have united under the banner of the People's Committees to demand that citizens' human rights stop being violated for the sake of an event in which few will be able to participate. Members from all sectors of society and many existing social movements have joined in the organizing, including the São Paulo metro workers, who yesterday, on the eve of the cup, declared a strike to demand higher wages and protest the firing of fellow employees.

A terrible house guest

Brazilian amateur soccer player Danilo Cajazeira is a fan of the Corinthians Paulista (from São Paulo), and he is passionate about the sport. He plays for the Autonomus F.C., an amateur team, and is part of the World Cup People's Committee of São Paulo. Yet, despite his love for soccer, he is not a fan of what the World Cup and FIFA has meant for Brazilians.

"Imagine your father invites someone to your house," said Cajazeira, "and the guest says, 'I'm going to kick your son out of his room. Build an office for me, fill the refrigerator with only drinks and food of the brands I chose, ask your grandmother to leave because I don't like her, hire security so I can be there, kick your neighbors out to build a parking lot for my cars, and make sure your 14-year-old daughter dances half-naked during my entire stay.' This is exactly what's happening here."

The World Cup has already caused the death of eight people during the construction of the new stadiums and three people in other stadiums; evicted a quarter of a million people from their homes; banned independent merchants and artists from working; and led to an increase of sexual exploitation of women, children and teenagers, and an increase of violence against the homeless. Additionally, the rights to several public spaces were granted to private companies without concessions. In addition to these legacies, Brazil has invested 1.5 billion *reals* in weapons for the police and other security measures, passed laws to criminalize social protest, and saddled the country with an immense and questionable debt that Brazilian citizens will have to pay.

“The World Cup is not for the people,” he said. “It’s for corporations, construction companies, tourists, but not for Brazilian people.”

The preview games

There was a time in Brazil when soccer played a role in political and social movements. During the dictatorship, for example, it was in the stadium stands where people displayed the first banners against the regime. But in the mid-1990s, soccer shifted to become a game for elites — both in the stands and on the field itself. There were fewer and fewer players from lower-class origins, and mega-events began setting a politics of exclusion, rather than inclusion, for the sport.

In 2007, when Brazil was in full economic growth, it was chosen to host the World Cup 2014. At that time, the Pan-American Games were under way in Rio de Janeiro, and the event offered a preview of what could happen with a mega-event like the World Cup, complete with people being evicted, street vendors excluded and women sexually traded and exploited.

“This was one of the first experiments to see how exclusive a mega-event like this one could be, and what its effects on the territories before, during, and after are,” said Vanessa Santos, a member of the World Cup People’s Committee of São Paulo. Today, the infrastructure built specifically for those games is abandoned.

In 2010, shortly after the Pan-American Games, the People’s Committees began organizing street demonstrations, soccer games between social movements — which they call “Rebel World Cups” — and meetings with all the collectives affected by the World Cup, as well as social movements that have, for years, mobilized for housing and decent transportation.

The People’s Committees themselves grew out of earlier movements fighting for the right to decent housing. Other movements and civil society groups started joining, including street vendors, women’s rights groups, students, autonomous collectives, anarchists and recyclable material collectors. Each committee, which is organized through assemblies attended by participants from various social movements, is autonomous and has the right to coordinate actions in its city. All these diverse movements and people saw the World Cup as furthering segregation, exclusivity, privatization and a model of cities where corporations come to buy and sell spaces and the people are increasingly left out of decisions.

“Many people are being violently evicted from the streets — forcefully and without respect for their dignity — and are being taken to shelters that are veritable concentration camps,” said Santos. These repressions aren’t new, Cajazeira explains. Brazil’s cities were already exclusive, repressive and militarized. But with the World Cup, he said, everything has gotten

worse.

One of the central concerns has been the way public money is being funneled toward private companies, even as millions in Brazil need basic services like transportation and energy. Private expenses for building the stadiums represent less than one percent of the work. The remaining 99 percent is being financed with loans from the National Development Bank, even though private companies are building the stadiums. For example, the entire Corinthians stadium was built with government funds, an expense that people calculate will take 1,146 years to pay back with entrance tickets.

In contrast, according to the Ministry of Energy, 960,000 Brazilians don't even have access to electricity. It's highly unlikely, as many have noted, that these families will participate in the most expensive World Cup in history, with an estimated official cost of 25.7 billion reais according to the Portal da Transparencia website.

The World Cup, extended

According to Cajazeira, Brazil began intimidating activists and social movement organizers in 2013, a whole year in advance of the World Cup. "The police go directly to the houses of the people who are organizing the demonstrations, to their mothers' or relatives' houses, to preventively detain them in order to keep them from doing something during the World Cup," he said.

The official discourse is that the police are only detaining vandals, but he said that in practice they are going to the homes of people who have long been involved in social movements. "It's like being back at the times of the dictatorship," he said. The General World Cup Law, which went into effect in 2012, mandates the creation of new courts to judge crimes that may occur around the fields. Those accused of committing crimes can be judged in these "exception courts," where they face high penalties and lack the right to a thorough defense, including the right to a defense attorney. The General World Cup Law also allow for the creation of exclusion zones stretching two kilometers (1.24 miles) around the stadiums in public spaces, which are essentially military enclosures, and tax exemptions of about 10 billion reais to guarantee profits for FIFA and sponsoring companies.

According to Santos, Brazil should have drafted its own laws to address the issues of sexual exploitation and human trafficking when it was chosen as the site of the World Cup. But that did not happen, and there are already reports of an increase in brothels in the areas surrounding the stadiums, as well as sex workers being threatened by the police. Brazil has invested 1.5 billion reais in these types of security measures, such as added police and militarized weapons.

"We are donating, not even renting, our own territory to FIFA for a month," said Cajazeira.

But, in fact, it will be more than a month, since the General World Cup Law will be in effect until December 31, 2014, which coincidentally includes the Brazilian elections in October. Many believe that the extraordinary World Cup restrictions will be used this fall to allow the Brazilian government to pass repressive legislation, especially against indigenous peoples, that is entirely unrelated to the sporting event.

"They will take advantage of the World Cup period to decide and vote on many things, such as the PEC 215 law, which will modify the demarcation procedures for indigenous lands and

which, if approved, would harm them even more,” said Santos.

The struggle continues

The country’s rage over the astronomical amount of money that is being pocketed by corporations has inspired thousands to organize themselves in the streets. These protests are built on both last June’s massive grassroots outcry against raising the cost of transportation and people’s movements that have been struggling for years for public transportation and decent housing. In fact, in many ways Brazil is undergoing a new moment in which, for the first time, people are gathering on the streets with a single demand: the right to the city, with spaces for people and not for corporations.

It’s a powerful moment, especially for an election year, in which people are making a great effort both to self-organize and to create new ways of doing politics. “The struggle didn’t start in 2013 and it’s not going to end in 2014,” said Cajazeira. “It’s a moment to gain visibility and join forces, so that when the World Cup leaves, the struggle continues.”

Marta Molina is an independent journalist from Barcelona, Catalunya. She has written about cultural resistance in Brazil and nonviolent resistance in Palestine. Now she is based in Mexico following the steps of the Movement for Peace, Justice and Dignity (MPJD) against the war on drugs, and the movement Yosoy132 for the democratization of media and an authentic democracy in the country. She also reports about movements on defense of the land and struggles for autonomy in the South of México and Guatemala. You can follow Marta on Twitter at @martamoli_RR

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