

Brazil: Workers Struggle Trumps Sports Spectacle

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For decades social critics have bemoaned the influence of sports and entertainment spectacles in 'distracting' workers from struggling for their class interests. According to these analysts, 'class consciousness' was replaced by 'mass'consciousness. They argued that atomized individuals, manipulated by the mass media, were converted into passive consumers who identified with millionaire sports heroes, soap opera protagonists and film celebrities.

The culmination of this 'mystification' - mass distraction -were the 'world championships' watched by billions around the world and sponsored and financed by billionaire corporations: the World Series (baseball), the World Cup (soccer/futbol), and the Super Bowl (American football).

Today, Brazil is the living refutation of this line of cultural-political analysis. Brazilians have been described as 'football crazy'. Its teams have won the most number of World Cups. Its players are coveted by the owners of the most important teams in Europe. Its fans are said to "live and die with football" . . . Or so we are told.

Yet it is in Brazil where the biggest protests in the history of the World Cup have taken place. As early as a year before the Games, scheduled for June 2014, there have been mass demonstrations of up to a million Brazilians. In just the last few weeks, strikes by teachers, police, construction workers and municipal employees have proliferated. The myth of the mass media spectacles mesmerizing the masses has been refuted - at least in present-day Brazil.

To understand why the mass spectacle has been a propaganda bust it is essential to understand the political and economic context in which it was launched, as well as the costs and benefits and the tactical planning of popular movements.

The Political and Economic Context: The World Cup and the Olympics

In 2002, the Brazilian Workers Party candidate Lula DaSilva won the presidential elections. His two terms in office (2003 - 2010) were characterized by a warm embrace of free market capitalism together with populist poverty programs. Aided by large scale in-flows of speculative capital, attracted by high interest rates, and high commodity prices for its agro-mineral exports, Lula launched a massive poverty program providing about \$60 a month to 40 million poor Brazilians, who formed part of Lula's mass electoral base. The Workers Party reduced unemployment, increased wages and supported low-interest consumer loans, stimulating a 'consumer boom' that drove the economy forward.

To Lula and his advisers, Brazil was becoming a global power, attracting world-class investors and incorporating the poor into the domestic market.

Lula was hailed as a '*pragmatic leftist*' by Wall Street and a '*brilliant statesman*' by the Left!

In line with this grandiose vision (and in response to hoards of presidential flatterers North and South), Lula believed that Brazil's rise to world prominence required it to 'host' the World Cup and the Olympics and he embarked on an aggressive campaign. . . Brazil was chosen.

Lula preened and pontificated: Brazil, as host, would achieve the symbolic recognition and material rewards a global power deserved.

The Rise and Fall of Grand Illusions

The ascent of Brazil was based on foreign flows of capital conditioned by differential (favorable) interest rates. And when rates shifted, the capital flowed out. Brazil's dependence on high demand for its agro-mineral exports was based on sustained double-digit economic growth in Asia. When China's economy slowed down, demand and prices fell, and so did Brazil's export earnings.

The Workers Party's 'pragmatism' meant accepting the existing political, administrative and regulatory structures inherited from the previous neo-liberal regimes. These institutions were permeated by corrupt officials linked to building contractors notorious for cost overruns and long delays on state contracts.

Moreover, the Workers Party's '*pragmatic*' electoral machine was built on kick-backs and bribes. Vast sums were siphoned from public services into private pockets.

Puffed up on his own rhetoric, Lula believed Brazil's economic emergence on the world stage was a 'done deal'. He proclaimed that his pharaonic sports complexes - the billions of public money spent on dozens of stadiums and costly infrastructure - would "*pay for themselves*".

The Deadly 'Demonstration Effect': Social Reality Defeats Global Grandeur

Brazil's new president, Dilma Rousseff, Lula's protégé, has allocated billions of reales to finance her predecessor's massive building projects: stadiums, hotels, highways and airports to accommodate an anticipated flood of overseas soccer fans.

The contrast between the immediate availability of massive amounts of public funds for the World Cup and the perennial lack of money for deteriorating essential public services (transport, schools, hospitals and clinics) has been a huge shock to Brazilians and a provocation to mass action in the streets.

For decades, the majority of Brazilians, who depended on public services for transport, education and medical care, (the upper middle classes can afford private services), were told that "there were no funds", that "budgets had to be balanced", that a "budget surplus was needed to meet IMF agreements and to service the debt".

For years public funds had been siphoned away by corrupt political appointees to pay for electoral campaigns, leading to filthy, overcrowded transport, frequently breaking down, and commuter delays in sweltering buses and long lines at the stations. For decades, schools were in shambles, teachers rushed from school to school to make-up for their

miserable minimum-wage salaries leading to low quality education and neglect. Public hospitals were dirty, dangerous and crowded; under-paid doctors frequently took on private patients on the side, and essential medications were scarce in the public hospitals and overpriced in the pharmacies.

The public was outraged by the obscene contrast between the reality of dilapidated clinics with broken windows, overcrowded schools with leaking roofs and unreliable mass transport for the average Brazilian and the huge new stadiums, luxury hotels and airports for wealthy foreign sports fans and visitors.

The public was outraged by the obvious official lies: the claim that there were 'no funds' for teachers when billions of Reales were instantly available to construct luxury hotels and fancy stadium box seats for wealthy soccer fans.

The final detonator for mass street protest was the increase in bus and train fares to 'cover losses' – after public airports and highways had been sold cheaply to private investors who raised tolls and fees.

The protestors marching against the increased bus and train fares were joined by tens of thousands Brazilians broadly denouncing the Government's priorities: Billions for the World Cup and crumbs for public health, education, housing and transport!

Oblivious to the popular demands, the government pushed ahead intent on finishing its 'prestige projects'. Nevertheless, construction of stadiums fell behind schedule because of corruption, incompetence and mismanagement. Building contractors, who were pressured, lowered safety standards and pushed workers harder, leading to an increase in workplace deaths and injury. Construction workers walked out protesting the speed-ups and deterioration of work safety.

The Rousseff regime's grandiose schemes have provoked a new chain of protests. The Homeless Peoples Movement occupied urban lots near a new World Cup stadium demanding 'social housing' for the people instead of new five-star hotels for affluent foreign sports aficionados.

Escalating costs for the sports complexes and increased government expenditures have ignited a wave of trade union strikes to demand higher wages beyond the regime's targets. Teachers and health workers were joined by factory workers and salaried employees striking in strategic sectors, such as the transport and security services, capable of seriously disrupting the World Cup.

The PTs embrace of the grandiose sports spectacle, instead of highlighting Brazil's '*debut as a global power*', has spotlighted the vast contrast between the affluent and secure ten percent in their luxury condos in Brazil, Miami and Manhattan, with access to high quality private clinics and exclusive private and overseas schools for their offspring, with the mass of average Brazilians, stuck for hours sweating in overcrowded buses, in dingy emergency rooms waiting for mere aspirins from non-existent doctors and in wasting their children's futures in dilapidated classrooms without adequate, full-time teachers.

The political elite, especially the entourage around the Lula-Rousseff Presidency have fallen victim to their own delusions of popular support. They believed that subsistence pay-offs (food baskets) to the very poor would allow them to spend billions of public money on sports

spectacles to entertain and impress the global elite. They believed that the mass of workers would be so enthralled by the prestige of holding the World Cup in Brazil, that they would overlook the great disparity between government expenditures for elite grand spectacles and the absence of support to meet the everyday needs of Brazilian workers.

Even trade unions, seemingly tied to Lula, who bragged of his past leadership of the metal workers, broke ranks when they realized that the *'money was out there'* – and that the regime, pressured by construction deadlines, could be pressured to raise wages to get the job done.

Make no mistake, Brazilians are sports minded. They avidly follow and cheer their national team. But they are also conscious of their needs. They are not content to passively accept the great social disparities exposed by the current mad scramble to stage the World Cup and Olympics in Brazil. The government's vast expenditure on the Games has made it clear that Brazil is a rich country with a multitude of social inequalities. They have learned that vast sums are available to improve the basic services of everyday life. They realized that, despite its rhetoric, the 'Workers Party' was playing a wasteful prestige game to impress an international capitalist audience. They realized that they have strategic leverage to pressure the government and address some of the inequalities in housing and salaries through mass action. And they have struck. They realize they deserve to enjoy the World Cup in affordable, adequate public housing and travel to work (or to an occasional game) in decent buses and trains. Class consciousness, in the case of Brazil, has trumped the mass spectacle. 'Bread and circuses' have given way to mass protests.

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