

Will Qatar's World Cup be built on a graveyard?

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Unless Qatar allows foreign workers to form unions, Sepp Blatter must prevent it from hosting the World Cup.

There is a lot to be said for keeping politics out of sport. Only totalitarian states or people with authoritarian personalities politicise everything: whom they love and whom they befriend; what they eat, drink, read, watch and play.

That Qatar is an absolute monarchy is not a good enough reason to stop it holding the World Cup. China is a nominally communist dictatorship. But after muttering many objections, I accepted that there was no direct connection between the Beijing Olympics and the one-party state. You could enjoy the one without endorsing the other.

But in Qatar 2022, the connection between oppression and sport will be glaring. The world's finest footballers will be running over the bones of the faceless men who died that they might play. Their fans will travel on trains and stay in luxury hotels built by migrant workers who, in their desperation to escape poverty, trapped themselves in a racist serf system, which left them defenceless before avaricious employers.

Since I wrote about the rising piles of corpses in Qatar two weeks ago, Robert Booth of the *Guardian* published a fine investigation, which claimed that the World Cup could cost 4,000 lives if nothing is done. David Cameron, not noted as a champion of workers' rights, was so moved he said Qatar must do better and, as if in response, last Friday Fifa's president, Sepp Blatter, who looks more like a well-fed toad with each passing year, promised that he would try harder.

He would visit the Emir and tell him he wanted Qatar to change. The ruling al-Thani clan had already told him that it was ready to meet his requests.

Fifa and Qatar have much in common. They are both unaccountable. They both cut deals in secret and know the value of PR. The Qatari royal family controls al-Jazeera, the world's most subtle and effective propaganda channel. It appears like a home for respectable journalists, while never challenging its masters' interests. Fifa also understands how many people you can fool in the modern world if you look concerned and mouth compassionate platitudes.

If Blatter and the al-Thanis were serious, they would accept that the global sports competition will become a global human rights disaster unless they change course. The hundreds of thousands of migrants for the \$150bn construction programme will come from Africa, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and the Philippines. The firms that exploit them are as global in their reach. Meanwhile, surely 4,000 deaths ought to register on the Richter scale of global outrage. I know these comparisons always feel trite, but for the record, the highest estimates from the Syrian opposition claim that 1,300 died in Bashar al-Assad's chemical weapons attack on the outlying suburbs of Damascus.

The tireless activists at the International Trade Union Confederation explain how poverty and neglect feed corporate manslaughter. Native Qataris have an average per capita income of \$102,000, the highest in the world. The migrants, who make up 80% of the population, subsist on an average of around \$2,500. As well as being on the receiving end of a class war from above, the migrants also suffer from racial disadvantage. Undercover reporters took Nepalis to Arab shopping malls where the security guards refused to let them in because they could not “read” their foreign faces and discern whether they were thieves. Qataris have labour rights, where migrants working 60 to 100 hour weeks have none. I’ve made the comparison with apartheid South Africa before and won’t do it again. The point that needs emphasising is that once migrants are caught they stay caught.

One of the few groups who have talked about their captivity are the marble workers building the bathrooms that will one day be graced by the toiletries and backsides of Fifa bureaucrats, elite players and the football reporters’ pack. They told union activists how employers lured them to Qatar with promises of an eight-hour working day, then made them work 13 hours without overtime.

Marble cutting is exceptionally dangerous if you don’t have protective clothes; shards can fly off and injure you; if a slab falls on you it will break your back or kill you. The Qatari marble workers do not have protective gear and their employers do not compensate them if they are injured either.

They cannot escape because the “kafala” sponsorship system based on Islamic law – and, yes, alongside race and class, we have religion making up the last of Qatar’s oppressive trinity – puts them in their employers’ power. They cannot change jobs without their sponsoring employer’s consent. If they flee abuse, their employer can order the police to arrest them, and even if they escape the cops and make it to the airport, they cannot board a flight because their employers have their passports.

What is so repulsive about the promises of action from Blatter and Qatar is that they speak as if the scandal has only just been exposed. As Tim Noonan from the International Trade Union Confederation says, Fifa has known about the exploitation of labour in the name of the greater glory of the World Cup for years and done nothing. “It is 600 days since we first talked to Fifa. On average, one worker died on every one of those days. A visit from Blatter and vague promises from Qatar won’t change a thing.”

In case you think I am only talking to leftists with a perverse prejudice against rapacious, plutocratic and dictatorial monarchies, David Arkless agrees with the unions. He is the vice-president of Ciett, which represents nearly all the world’s big private sector recruitment agencies. He told me that he offered to help the Qataris “do the right thing” before the gaze of the world fell upon it. They made it very clear that “we were not welcome there”.

As things stand, sports desks are more concerned about the disruption to domestic schedules moving the Qatar World Cup from summer to winter will bring than they are with the dead. But even if I were as cynical as Blatter, I would not count on the indifference lasting. If Qatar does not repeal kafala and allow migrants the right to form trade unions within weeks, I’d cut my losses if I were Blatter and get out while I still could.

Better that than playing a “festival of football” on a graveyard and hoping that no one will notice.

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P.S.

* The Observer, Saturday 5 October 2013 18.30 BST:

<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/oct/05/fifa-qatar-migrants-world-cup>