

Cancel the Tokyo Olympics - epidemics, commercial opportunity, nationalism, imperialist rivalry...

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If you listened only to Olympic officials and governments around the world, there would be no doubt about the Tokyo Olympics, scheduled to begin on 23 July, going ahead.

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) vice-president, Australian John Coates, is typical. "We've never had a postponed Games before, we've never faced a pandemic like this before", he said. "Why are we doing this? We are doing this for the athletes."

Really? The Olympics were cancelled in 1916, 1940 and 1944. Worldwide imperialist wars tend to undermine the Olympic illusion of bringing nations together. But short of an actual shooting war, George Orwell's famous aphorism that competitive sport is "war minus the shooting" remains especially apt when applied to the Olympics. As in shooting wars, those who pay the price of competition are the mass of ordinary people, and the beneficiaries are the bosses.

In Japan during the pandemic, that price could be human lives. For that reason alone, the Tokyo Olympics should be cancelled.

Organisers' oft-repeated mantra that the Olympics will be "safe and secure" has been challenged by local medical specialists and the British Medical Journal. As Spencer Fox, a specialist in infectious disease modelling at the University of Texas, put it in March (before the fourth wave of the pandemic took off in Japan): "Based on the number of people arriving and the prevalence of the disease around the globe, the Olympics absolutely could become a super-spreading event that leads to quite a number of infections, as well as spreading internationally as people return home". About 15,000 athletes and perhaps 90,000 support staff from 200 countries, vaccinated and unvaccinated, are set to enter Japan for the Games.

As well as a site of imperialist rivalry, the Games are revenue raisers for the IOC, and a useful way of papering over the class divisions of capitalism with nationalist fervour for "our" athletes. This time around, however, especially for the mass of the population of Japan, the Olympics Games are laying bare the priorities of capitalism.

While anti-Olympics protests have remained small, opposition among the Japanese public is reaching new heights. In a survey released on 17 May, 83 percent of those polled said they did not want Tokyo to hold the Games now. That was up 14 percentage points from a survey in April. Only 14 percent wanted the Games to be held this summer, half the number from the April poll. A petition ("Cancel the Tokyo Olympics to protect our lives") organised by Kenji Utsunomiya, a lawyer, got 50,000 signatures in the first 24 hours after being launched in May.

The reasons for such widespread opposition are obvious. People think that their health matters more than the Olympics. Added to this is widespread discontent that the government's handling of the

pandemic is already inadequate.

Japan has a soaring rate of infections and deaths, and nine prefectures, including the large metropolitan areas of Tokyo and Osaka, are under a state of emergency as a result. In recent weeks, there have been up to 6,000 cases a day, compared to 1,000 daily in early March. This fourth, and most dangerous, wave of the virus in Japan has resulted in more deaths from COVID-19 in the first four months of 2021 than in all of 2020.

Discontent with the government response to the pandemic also rests on the slow vaccination rate—one of the slowest among developed countries. The number of administered doses is enough to have vaccinated just 4.4 percent of the population. Less than one-third of Japan's nearly 5 million frontline healthcare workers have been fully vaccinated. Efforts to vaccinate the whole population started only in April. To add insult to injury, the official response to municipal vaccine-reservation hotlines being overwhelmed has been to ask that "people refrain from issuing complaints".

Despite the denialism of the Olympics boosters, the Tokyo Olympics have already been directly affected by the pandemic. Eight people working on the torch relay in April tested positive for the virus. Some of them reportedly were infected while holding up signs reminding spectators to socially distance. Not coincidentally, Thomas Bach, the president of the IOC, cancelled his planned visit to the torch relay.

In late May, Dick Pound, a long-serving IOC member, declared that "Only Armageddon can stop the Tokyo Olympics taking place this summer". Apparently, millions dead in a global pandemic is not Armageddon enough.

A clear choice is being made between on the one side, profits and nationalism, and on the other, public health.

The announcement that the government has procured vaccines for the visiting athletes and their entourages has not alleviated popular concerns but fuelled them. What about the safety of the thousands of unvaccinated Japanese volunteers?

Games organisers initially demanded 10,000 health workers to support the Olympics, as well as 500 additional nurses—a request refused by a nurses' federation—and 200 sports medicine specialists. They also wanted support from dozens of hospitals in and around Tokyo. A day after the Tokyo Medical Practitioners Association called for the Games to be cancelled, the IOC offered extra medical personnel as part of national teams flying in to compete.

But the risks associated with staging the world's biggest sports event in a country under a state of emergency are nothing compared to the money to be made, and to the national prestige to be bolstered.

According to the *Economist*, Japan would lose \$20.6 billion if the Olympics were cancelled, in addition to the \$15.4 billion already spent to prepare for them. For the IOC, the Tokyo Olympics are critical because 73 percent of its income comes from selling television rights to the Games.

The Olympics is not just about commercial opportunity but nationalism and imperialist rivalry—especially for the major imperialist powers. So while cancelling the Tokyo Games over health concerns cannot be countenanced, US politicians talk about imposing restrictions on the Beijing Winter Olympics in nine months' time. US House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi has already called for world leaders to boycott those Games.

The arguments of the proponents of Americans competing in Beijing are no better. They claim

simply that the Games would provide a platform for the US, which has a high Winter Olympics medal count, to show its “vitality” on the global stage.

The argument does show one thing, however: that this is the vitality our rulers care about, not human lives.

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P.S.

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