

Olympics: Beijing's Festival of Reaction

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The Beijing Olympic Games will showcase many feats of athletic achievement and physical prowess - but that is not their main purpose. Less than 20 years ago, the same city echoed to the sound of tanks as the Chinese Communist Party massacred its student and worker opponents. The capitalist powers were united in their condemnation and threatened sanctions and penalties, to bring the dictators down. But as soon as those dictators began to dismantle the planned economy and open the country to overseas capital, the criticism turned to praise.

At root, the Games are a celebration of the survival of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Far from presiding over a socialist state, the CCP has reintroduced capitalism in China and its dictatorship rules on behalf of the exploitative bosses, not the workers. This year's games resemble nothing so much as the Berlin Games of 1936 when the Great Powers signalled their acceptance of the Nazis. Like then, the demonstration of wealth and sporting prowess, and the barrage of chauvinist propaganda, is intended to hide a reality of dictatorship and increasing economic inequality.

Unlike Germany in 1936 however, China is not living under a newly imposed dictatorship whose opponents are still reeling from defeat. The speed of social change, with hundreds of millions moving to new cities in little more than a decade, has weakened the Party's social control. Although illegal, strikes are an everyday occurrence in China. Such is the pressure from the workers that in the huge industrial centre of Shenzhen, near Hong Kong, a new legal code covering workplace disputes virtually recognises the right to strike.

Against this background, the regime needs to reinforce its own prestige and divert attention away from conflicts by presenting a spectacle of patriotic fervour and national superiority. Since the turn of the year, Beijing has been buffeted by bad news. Inflation hit new highs in January as domestic food shortages and international energy prices combined to push the official price index up to 6.5 %, the highest for a decade. And it has carried on climbing since, hitting 8% in May.

In February, heavy snowstorms brought transport chaos and revealed sub-standard materials and construction in the electricity supply system. March saw overt political opposition in Tibet that rapidly spread into China's western provinces with large ethnic Tibetan communities. Direct repression of the demonstrators was combined with a concerted media campaign that presented opposition as treachery aimed at destroying the unity of the "Chinese nation".

Internationally, Beijing's reputation was even tarnished by the typhoon that hit Myanmar in April, because of its failure to criticise the military junta's handling of the crisis.

The subsequent earthquake in the Chinese province of Sichuan came at an opportune time for China's rulers. When the earthquake struck on 12 May, Premier Wen Jiabao saw the opportunity to revive the regime's image. As the full scale of the disaster became clear so did changes in Beijing's political strategy. In 1976, when an even more powerful earthquake destroyed the city of Tangshan, killing 250,000, news of the catastrophe was virtually a state secret - but this year even foreign news media were allowed virtually

unlimited access.

A newly established emergency control system swung into action. State media were full of pictures of "Grandfather Wen" visiting the scene, encouraging the soldiers and comforting the bereaved. However, free access did not last long. Within days, the obvious fact that many of the 70,000 victims were schoolchildren and teachers, crushed as shoddily built schools collapsed, brought increasing accusations of corruption in the building industry. In China, that can only mean corruption in the party.

As victims and commentators began to raise demands for an inquiry, media access was closed down. Attention shifted to the spontaneous solidarity of people throughout China which was equated with the government's mobilisation of resources and the often heroic efforts of military rescue teams. Suddenly, the government was the hero of the hour and China was once again a 'people united in the face of adversity'.

The Olympics are designed as a showcase to prove exactly that. But, although there has been a widespread crackdown on known dissidents, there is every chance that opposition to the CCP, whether from oppressed nationalities, democracy activists, trade unionists or even reactionary religious movements such as Falun Gong will make itself felt during the Games.

We don't know whether such protests, or the regime's response to them, will open a new chapter in China's political history, but we do know that long-term realities will. The impact of the credit crunch and the likely recession in the US, the slowdown in other major economies and the effects of China's own unfolding economic cycle will inevitably heighten social tensions and fuel political conflict. The regime's increasing reliance on a xenophobic nationalism is a calculated preparation not for foreign adventures but for internal conflict.

When the games are over, the underlying tensions and conflicts will remain. Not the least of them will be the aftermath of the earthquake and the demands for an investigation into the corruption that was the real cause of so many deaths. Across China, millions have been displaced from their homes and cheated out of compensation by the same corruption in the same party. Even more millions work for breadline wages without security or even the legal right of abode in China's new cities.

The task for revolutionaries in China is to give a voice to all those millions, to take the lead in mobilising them against the one-party dictatorship, to educate them against the xenophobic chauvinism of the Maoists and to organise them in independent trade unions, workers' and peasants' councils and their own self-defence forces. For that, the revolutionaries themselves must be organised as a political party committed to the overthrow of the party's rule, self-determination for national minorities, the expropriation of the capitalists, workers' control of production and a real socialist republic.

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