

MASSACRES AND PROFITS: A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE OLYMPICS

by Maryann Abbs

Those who promote the Olympics are interested in power, prestige and profit. Developers, and construction companies stand to benefit from the public money spent on road construction and new sports facilities. Politicians get to preside over a large-scale spectacle. But what will the rest of us get from the lead up to the Olympics? What will be the real legacy of the Olympic games?

Politicians and business leaders are quick to promise that the Olympics will not lose money, and that people will not be pushed out of their homes by rent increases, but we can see from the experience of other cities that these promises have not panned out — they are simply a strategy to try to co-opt those opposed to the Games.

In searching the historical record, it is hard to find anything good to say about the Olympics. There are, however, some very good reasons to oppose the Games:

1. Massacres and Concentration Camps: The Bloody History of the Games

The modern Olympics have walked hand-in-hand with political repression and violence.

The 1936 Olympics in Berlin (held despite a call from the Jewish community to boycott the games) actively promoted the Nazi regime. IOC members who opposed holding the Games in Berlin were dropped from the organization. Witnesses reported that there were more swastikas on stage at the opening ceremony than Olympic flags. And, by the time the Games opened, a concentration camp was operating just half an hour's journey from the Olympic site. As well, the Nazi regime initiated the modern Olympic torch relay as a way of promoting fascism throughout Europe.

Hundreds of people (mostly students) were massacred by a special forces unit called the Olympia Brigade in the Tlatelolco Plaza in Mexico City ten days before the Olympics began in August 1968. A recently declassified document written to President Lyndon Johnson reported that "... the current tensions in Mexico City point toward the possibility that the Olympic games will be used as a focal point for demonstrations and actively favoring leftist, subversive, and militant radical elements." Other documents show how the US Government directed the FBI to actively investigate any Americans planning to go to Mexico to protest the Olympics. These documents show that there was active pressure on Mexican President Diaz Ordaz to quell any student rebellion before the start of the Games.

"It's got to do with land swaps, exchanging worthless land for valuable land, wealthy developers, and the enrichment of billionaires."

— Senator John McCain, Rep. AZ.

Repressive laws and security build-ups are hallmarks of recent Olympic Games. The Games have been used as a convenient cover for permanent repressive laws and to create new police and military units. In Sydney, there were four cops for each athlete at the Games for a total of 35,000 police and security guards, 4000 troops and elite commando units, and Black Hawk helicopters.

The Sydney Olympics were also used as a pretext to allow the Australian government to introduce permanent legislation that allows the military to be called out to quell domestic unrest. Steve Martin, the Labour Party's Defense Critic, called the Olympics the "catalyst" for the bill. The Olympics Arrangements Act was passed giving the police the unfettered use of cameras and recording devices, and the powers to prevent the distribution of materials, and the powers to search and detain people in both Olympic and public spaces.

2. Racism and Racial Profiling

Increased Olympic security has also led to the increased racial profiling of immigrants and people of colour by both police and immigration authorities. During the 1984 Games in Los Angeles, police cordoned off the mostly black neighborhood surrounding the Olympic Village and required identification from everyone entering or leaving the area. There was a similar lock-down of the Black community in Atlanta during the 1996 games.

During the 2004 Athens Olympics, Islamic communities in Greece were subjected to state surveillance of places of worship, and mass document checks and inspections. A spokesman for the Greek branch of Amnesty International warned that "security for the 2004 Olympics is used in Greece as a pretext to systematically break international treaties on the right to refugees."

3. Grandstands not Homes: The Olympics Create Homelessness

In Salt Lake City the government planned to create 2500 new units of affordable housing — only 150 units were created, and there was a 300 per cent rent increase in some residential hotels. In the year before the Sydney Olympics, there was a 400 per cent increase in tenant evictions. In Atlanta, Project Homeward Bound gave Atlanta's homeless a one way ticket out of town before the Olympics began. In Calgary, the government promised to create low-income housing. None was created—only a few new university residences were built.

In B.C., Jack Poole has promised social housing and no displacement. But, Poole's track record is not exactly stellar—former Vancouver mayor, Gordon Campbell gave Poole land, virtually free, for the creation of affordable housing. No affordable housing has been created.

4. Skyrocketing Public Costs

The B.C. Olympics will have a costly price tag of more than six billion dollars — money much better spent on housing and healthcare. The Olympics shouldn't be a spending priority at time when the provincial government is slashing funding to social supports, and refusing to provide low-cost housing.

No modern games have ever made money when all costs are included: public money, land transfer, infrastructure and security. The current costs include \$790 million for the Sea to Sky Highway upgrade and RAV line costs of at least 1.7 billion. Staging the games themselves will cost \$1.5 billion dollars. As well, the current estimate for security costs is \$175 Million, and the RCMP has flagged that this budget is probably too low.

Host cities have taken on huge debts to stage the games. The debt for the 1976 Montreal Olympics was finally paid off in 2002. Calgary took on a \$910 million debt, Barcelona a \$1.4 billion deficit, and Sydney, billed as self-financing, had a \$2.3 billion deficit. The Nagano games are described as being paid off by future generations.

In the original 2004 Athens Olympic bid, Greece estimated that the Olympics would cost \$1 billion dollars. They ended up costing at least \$9 billion.

The claim that there are long-term economic benefits doesn't ring true. In the state of Utah, the average job growth for the Olympic impact period was 37 per cent less than the pre-Olympic period. And Professor Frank Atkins, University of Calgary economist stated that the Calgary Olympics "did not present a measurable long-term [economic] impact."

5. The Olympics: Privatize the Profits; Socialize the Losses

Senator John McCain, Republican Senator from the State of Arizona, said, "It's (the Olympics) got to do with land swaps, exchanging worthless land for valuable land, wealthy developers, and the enrichment of billionaires."

In 1900 and 1904, the games were attached to trade fairs. Governments saw sports as an avenue for commercial gain. And more recently, prior to the Sydney Olympics, the World Economic Forum was held in Melbourne.

Corporatization of the Olympics accelerated after 1983. Professional athletes were allowed to compete, and the Olympic logo was allowed to be associated with corporations. This change in Olympic policy opened the market floodgates. As a result selling the corporate sponsorship rights to the Games has become big business. At the Sydney Olympics, fifty student lawyers were hired as "T-shirt police" to ensure that only corporate logos bought and paid for were displayed in venues. In 2002, the IOC came under fire because uniforms for torchbearers were made in Burma — a country known for routinely using forced labour in factories. The Olympics are frequently sponsored by multi-nationals like Nike and Shell, companies with terrible environmental and human rights records.

Locally, the Olympics are strongly supported by developers and construction companies. Both Jack Poole and the former-chair of the VOTE YES plebiscite committee are prominent local developers — the people who will profit from the real estate booms, and increase in housing and rental costs that will surround the Games. Public money will undoubtedly be spent on costly highway upgrades and the rapid transit line to the airport.

As an Olympic host city, we are one of the fronts of the opposition movement. We must join our sister Olympic cities in the spirit of international solidarity and cooperation and oppose the Olympics. We must be part of a broader international movement, called for by The Anti-Olympic Alliance in Sydney, to expose the role of the Olympics industry in urban displacement, privatization of public space, displacement of indigenous peoples, and increasing profits for the rich.

Saying NO! to the Olympics means saying no to nationalism and militarism, to political repression, to racism, to corporate greed, and to the suppression of indigenous rights.

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