
Why you should root for the World Cup protesters

11/06/2014



The [World Cup](#) launches in Brazil on Thursday, but there's no need to wait for dramatic action – the festival of dissent has already begun.

In the past week alone, activists from the Homeless Workers Movement [marched on the São Paulo stadium](#) where host Brazil will square off against Croatia in the tournament's opening match. In Brasília, indigenous dissidents [clashed with tear-gas-happy riot police](#). The hacktivist group Anonymous [vowed to level cyber-attacks](#) against World Cup corporate sponsors. Public transport workers in São Paulo leveraged their Cup-induced advantage, [carrying out a strike that gridlocked the city](#) before [suspending it on Monday night](#).

These telegenic interventions deserve our genuine attention, but long-distance solidarity only goes so far. For the millions of us watching the World Cup – and the attendant protests – from afar, it's time to focus our attention on the plutocratic puppet-master behind the entire process: Fifa.

The world's governing body for soccer inhabits the land of caviar and stretch limousines. Fifa is the 1% of the global 1%, the apple of Thomas Piketty's ire. And for a non-profit organization, it sure is a profitable one: the Zurich-based group stands to [rake in \\$4.5bn](#) from this World Cup alone, far above its initial expectations. Its modus operandi is to helicopter into a country, enjoy tax-exempt status, wrack up revenue from corporate sponsors and broadcasters, then take off to the next destination.

And with Brazil preparing to host the 2016 Olympic Games, we can't let Fifa set an example for sports extravaganzas turned into loathsome economic and social disasters. If we can force reform inside one powerful body this month, perhaps we'll stop rigging our international celebrations as lopsided parties for the rich at the expense of everyone else. There have already been calls to [abolish Fifa altogether](#), but the protesters are right: sure, the world would be a better place without Fifa – now would a little democracy hurt?

As someone who played for the US Olympic soccer team on the world stage, I find Fifa's actions galling. President

Sepp Blatter has run the "Fifa family" – as insiders are prone to call it – as its mafia-don-in-chief since 1998, and he absolutely needs to go. On his watch, we've seen scandal after scandal – last week, allegations of vote-purchasing for the Qatar 2022 World Cup [rocked the organization](#) – yet the 78-year-old Blatter [announced](#) he's keen to serve another term at the helm, and on Monday bemoaned ["a great deal of discrimination and racism"](#).

Furthermore, Fifa should compensate communities across Brazil that are negatively affected by the World Cup. After protests rippled across Brazil during last year's Confederation Cup, Fifa [forked over \\$100m](#), as if trying to impose omertà on the entire population with a payment that, for them, is a relative pittance. Fifa is not generous – after all, the World Cup champion's federation will [only win \\$35m](#) – but if properly pressured, it will pony up. And with [\\$1.4bn in reserves](#), it has plenty to spare.

Turns out, protesters in Brazil have plenty of the local population on their side – [a Pew Research poll found](#) that 61% of Brazilians see the World Cup as a kind of glitzy vortex gobbling up resources that would better spent on education, health care and social services. But with public support of soccer around the world [falling flat](#), Fifa has insisted on [spending \\$14bn](#) – and counting – on the World Cup, even at the expense of crucial social programs.

Demonstrators have countered demands on Fifa-quality stadiums – even Pele said the cost ["in some cases was more than it should have been"](#) – with demands for Fifa-quality schools and hospitals. And to say Fifa has been dismayed by this burst of democratic dissent is an understatement. At Fifa, a dearth of democracy is actually a plus. As the organization's secretary general, Jérôme Valcke, [proclaimed last year](#):

I will say something which is crazy, but less democracy is sometimes better for organizing a World Cup. ... When you have a very strong head of state who can decide, as maybe Putin can do in 2018 ... that is easier for us organizers.

When you're looking to Vladimir Putin to lead by example, you know you've reached the end of the democratic process.

Yes, many will deride the protesters as spoilsports. Worse yet, some will demand they be violently squelched, as Brazilian soccer great Ronaldo did when he suggested that police crack down on masked vandals: ["I think they have to bring down the clubs, get them off the street."](#)

But we need not devote ourselves to the death of complexity. We need to look to the pitch and to the streets, to marvel at Lionel Messi while calling attention to Fifa's worldwide disgrace.

So listen to the main chant of dissent – *nao vai ter copa* ("There will be no World Cup") – while allowing yourself to enjoy the games. Just don't ignore the straightforward slogan of the streets – *na copa vai ter luta* ("The World Cup will have protests") – and don't forget that the protesters, too, make up a team worth rooting for.
