
International Olympic Resistance:

Thinking Globally, Acting Locally

Helen Jefferson Lenskyj*

In keeping with the theme of this conference, *The Global Nexus Engaged*, this paper will examine Olympic resistance, paying particular attention to two related premises:

1. that resistance to the Olympic industry is global; and
2. that anti-globalization and anti-Olympic protesters are working together to target corporate sponsors and organizers of the Olympic Games.

Olympic resistance

Despite the suppression of political dissent required by Rule 61 of the *Olympic Charter* and the host city contract, and despite the necessary illusion of unqualified local support on the part of bid and host cities, various forms of Olympic resistance can be found in every recent bid city, as well as numerous past, present, and future host cities (with the possible exception of Beijing, where suppression of dissent appears to be the norm).

With the terms of debate firmly established by Olympic boosters and their public relations consultants in the early days of the bid process, community-based critics have often found themselves in a "David vs. Goliath" predicament in terms of media exposure and public response. Despite the obstacles, grassroots organizations, such as the Toronto Bread Not Circuses Coalition, which opposed Toronto's bids for the 1996 and the 2008 Olympics, and the Berlin group, which opposed that city's 2000 bid, were able to focus some public debate on the potentially negative economic and social impact issues and played an important role in the defeat of these three bids.

Contrary to most official reports and media coverage, there was also significant protest activity in Sydney before and during the 2000 Olympics, as the following discussion will show. The paper will conclude with a review of current anti-Olympic and anti-globalization organizing in Vancouver and Whistler, co-bidders for the 2010 Winter Olympics.

Background to the Sydney 2000 protests

Legislation passed in 1997 and 1998 in New South Wales marked the beginning of a new wave of police power over public behavior and peaceful protest. These trends were part of a global pattern directed largely at the mass anti-globalization protests that followed the 1999 Seattle model. For example, legislation in many North American cities now bans marching without a permit, hanging banners, blocking traffic, altering billboards, carrying plastic tubing (to protect protesters' linked arms during direct action blockades), and the wearing of satirical face masks or balaclavas (Mackinnon, 2000).

For more than a year before the Sydney Olympics, protesters were increasingly experiencing the impact of state power over public assemblies. Examples included the New South Wales police commissioner's refusal to authorize several weekday protests in 1999, and, in March 2000, the unprecedented rejection of a route that had been taken by the International Women's Day marchers for decades (Rhiannon, 2000).

In June 1999, protesters were the targets of police "practice exercises" for the Olympics, when 400 officers forcibly closed down a relatively small anti-corporate demonstration. The June 18 organizing collective had been under surveillance earlier that year, with undercover police infiltrating its meetings in a Sydney cafe (Boon-Kuo, 2000). This cafe was also used for publicly

* Helen Jefferson Lenskyj is Professor at The University of Toronto, in Toronto, Canada.

advertised meetings of anti-Olympic and Olympic watchdog groups in 2000, and participants again suspected police surveillance.⁽¹⁾ (In the same vein, it was recently reported that American law enforcement agencies spent years on intelligence operations targeting anti-Olympic protest groups heading for Salt Lake City. In a bizarre twist on the Sydney model, American officials sent out "educational pamphlets" to the ten or so groups that had received official "protest permits" warning them to watch out for "radical activists" who might infiltrate their ranks. Approved "peaceful" groups included homeless activists, Falun Gong supporters, and, disturbingly, a church group critical of gay rights (Olympics officials, 2002).)

Protest in the Olympic year

As the Olympics approached, the climate for protest in Sydney became more hostile. In May, 2000, sixteen mounted police and dozens of officers on foot dispersed a May Day protest against global corporate power. One of the targets of this protest, Westpac Bank, was selected because of its involvement in financing the Jabiluka uranium mine, a controversial project that threatened environmentally vulnerable areas of the Northern Territory. Westpac, an official sponsor of Sydney's so-called "Green Games," was criticized for allegedly breaching its own and international environmental policies. As well, Westpac aggressively targeted Australian school children as part of its extensive "Olympic branding" campaign (see Lenskyj, 2002).

In August, 2000, the NSW Police Service issued a statement that it "would not tolerate violent or unlawful activity and will take all appropriate measures to ensure the Olympics are as safe and enjoyable as possible for everyone concerned;" it claimed, however, that "peaceful and law-abiding demonstrations in public areas" would not be impeded. In reality, the raft of draconian Olympic legislation that had been enacted in the preceding years made it impossible to conduct a "law-abiding" demonstration in almost every part of the central business district, as well as in a number of areas in Sydney's western and eastern suburbs.

Anti-globalization protests

The World Economic Forum (WEF) held its Asia-Pacific Economic Summit at Melbourne's Crown Casino on September 11-13, 2000. The timing was convenient for its 800 delegates, who were encouraged to attend the Olympic Games in Sydney the next week. Within the WEF membership, numerous transnational corporations were implicated in environmental destruction, human rights infringements, and/or bad labor practices: Nike, Coca Cola, Monsanto, Rio Tinto, Dupont, Western Mining, and Exxon-Mobil, for example. Many of these corporations were also Sydney Olympic sponsors.

The WEF event was targeted by the S11 Alliance, a network of groups and individuals concerned about corporate power and globalization. They organized a blockade of the Casino and daily protest rallies, as well as a program of forums and workshops aimed at strengthening the international anti-globalization movement. S11 organizers concluded that, despite allegations (later substantiated) of police brutality, they were successful in "taking a stand against the right of global capital to rule the world" (Earthworker, 2000). Many of the groups involved in these actions, ranging from the Green Party (a recognized political party in Australia with elected representatives at all levels of government) to Greenpeace, were also active participants in anti-Olympic organizing in Sydney.

(Greenpeace activists later mounted one of the most creative protests in Sydney's anti-Olympic campaign, by planting a "crop circle" in a field under Sydney airport's flight path: the word TOXIC was visible in the field, along with an arrow pointing to the Olympic site, where soil, sediment, and water were still not fully remediated, despite the much-vaunted "Green Games" promises (see Lenskyj, 2000; Lenskyj, 2002).)

Anti-Olympic protests

Member-groups of Sydney's Olympic Impact Coalition, formed in February 2000 and later renamed the Anti-Olympic Alliance, succeeded in raising public and media awareness about global as well as local issues through their independent media websites, protest marches, and direct actions.

One such group, CACTUS (Campaign Against Corporate Tyranny with Unity and Solidarity), based at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS), was formed in early 2000 to organize May Day protests. It subsequently held protests against Olympic sponsors Shell, Nike, McDonalds, and Westpac, as well as the Sydney Organizing Committee for the Olympic Games (SOCOG) and the World Economic Forum. Meeting weekly, CACTUS sought "to support a cross-section of people, unions and issues in combating the common foe of corporate power," as its brochure explained. A teach-in held on July 29 included sessions on the WEF and the Olympics, globalization and women, and racism and imperialism.

Like CACTUS, most anti-Olympic groups had well-developed analyses of the links between Olympic sport and global capitalism, most notably the complicity of Olympic corporate sponsors in environmental destruction and human rights abuses, and the problem of the widening gap between rich and poor countries. Such messages were hardly welcome in a city saturated with "feel-good" Olympic rhetoric, and in a country where groups that protested against environmental destruction, global capitalism, nuclear

testing, and other urgent social issues could expect to be dismissed as "ratbags" and "unAustralian" by the mainstream. Indeed, SOCOG's president, Michael Knight (who also served as the NSW Minister for Sport and the Olympics), called member-groups of the Olympic Impact Coalition "ratbags" when they first announced plans to protest during the Olympics (Ratbags, 2000). Ironically, members of this coalition ranged from radical direct action groups like Reclaim the Streets and Critical Mass, to the mainstream groups like the Salvation Army and the Red Cross, the latter hardly deserving of the "ratbag" label.

Seizing the moment: September protests

Like many activist organizations, Nikewatch, a campaign associated with Community Aid Abroad/Oxfam Australia, recognized that the Olympics represented "the best chance we'll every have to put pressure on Nike to lift their game." Its pre-Olympic actions began in Sydney in early September with the release of a new Oxfam report on conditions in Indonesian Nike factories, as well as a public debate on the question, "Do conditions in Nike factories meet the Olympic ideal of respect for human dignity?" at the NSW Parliament House; Nike declined the request to send a representative to the debate. On September 11, the same day as the WEF protest in Melbourne, Nikewatch held an alternative Olympic opening ceremony in Victoria Park, Sydney (Robinson, 2000).

On September 1, the Socialist youth group Resistance held a protest against the Olympics and its corporate sponsors, followed by a march to a Nike warehouse and a local McDonald's outlet. And on September 27, members of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy and the Aboriginal Walk for Peace, together with their non-Aboriginal allies, marched to the Sydney Town Hall. The same day, CACTUS and other protesters assembled at a downtown Nike store and marched through rush hour traffic to Martin Place, where they again protested outside Westpac Bank.

About 120 protesters later gathered in a harbourside park in solidarity with the September 26 global day of action against the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, which was meeting in Prague that week. Marching through the city to Parliament House, this "unauthorized assembly" was "moved on" by a large contingent of often aggressive police and security guards.

On September 17, Anti-Olympic Alliance members challenged the new Olympic initiative at Martin Place, an area designated Olympic "live site" where giant video screens showed Olympic events. The protesters displayed banners, made speeches on a microphone, and handed out leaflets to the crowds, warning them:

DANGER! You have just been handed an illegal LEAFLET containing unAustralian sentiments, from an Olympics criminal . . . fulfil your national duty as a patriotic citizen - dob in an Olympic criminal today . . . The Olympics - keeping Sydney safe for global capital.

In front of the lunchtime crowds, dozens of security guards and police reportedly harassed the protesters, who were threatened with arrest and fines despite the fact that state legislation (the *Police and Public Safety Act*) specifically exempted public protest and assembly. Undeterred, they mounted a second "illegal" action, watched by police, security, and journalists, the following Friday at Circular Quay, another Olympic live site. On September 29, Critical Mass invited Olympic athletes to join cyclists and skaters in a ride over the Harbor Bridge, as part of Critical Mass's "global celebration of non-motorized transport" that takes place on the last Friday of every month in over 100 cities around the world. About 1,000 cyclists stopped traffic for about 30 minutes in a peaceful demonstration.

International solidarity

Toronto's Bread Not Circuses Coalition organized an international press conference on September 13, 2000, with activists and journalists from Sydney, Atlanta, and Toronto linked by telephone. Two Sydney activists, Beth Jewell and Louise Boon-Kuo, discussed rent increases, boarding house closures, harassment of homeless people, and the suppression of public protest, while Dominic WYkanak, a member of a local Sydney council and an Indigenous activist, spoke of SOCOG's neglect of Indigenous issues. Speaking from Atlanta, Anita Beaty, director of the Atlanta Task Force for the Homeless, described what Atlanta's so-called Olympic legacy really looked like: laws that continued to criminalize poverty and homelessness, and the almost complete privatization of urban public space. For example, a downtown park, formerly a haven for homeless people, had been taken over by Georgia State University, and aggressively patrolled by security staff who ticketed van drivers distributing food to the homeless.

Vancouver/Whistler resistance

Since 2001, two Vancouver/Whistler Olympic watchdog groups - the Impact of the Olympics on Community (IOC) coalition and the Association of Whistler Area Residents for the Environment (AWARE) have been raising critical questions about the region's bid for the 2010 Winter Games, as well as challenging the secrecy and lack of accountability that characterizes this and

most other cities' bids. Unfortunately, their activities have attracted little mainstream media interest outside of British Columbia.

What is particularly significant about the Whistler-based activism is the fact that many of the same individuals were involved in two global campaigns. Early in 2002, Whistler residents Van Powel and Troy Assaly were instrumental in setting up www.whistlerolympicinfo, a website which provided critiques of the Olympic industry and the Vancouver/Whistler bid, and gave residents an electronic forum for questions and comments.

In March 2002, it came to light that, for more than a year, Whistler Council had been secretly negotiating a deal to host the 2004 World Economic Forum. Powel and Assaly then set up a second website to provide residents with the real story behind the WEF deal, drawing attention to the lack of democratic decision-making. Of particular concern was a deceptive telephone survey, which failed to mention the WEF, and instead, asked questions about Whistler as a "venue for high-profile conferences" and stated that "the conference is not a political meeting" (Who is the WEF? 2002).

A petition opposing the deal, with over 1,300 signatures, was presented at the April 22 special meeting of Whistler Council. In a victory for the community critics, the council passed a set of stringent conditions to be met before Whistler would host the WEF. They rejected WEF's preferred winter date in favor of a late spring or autumn meeting, required the Canadian government to pay for all security, and demanded that environmental sustainability be incorporated into the agenda. Most significantly, one condition stated that if violent protest occurred at the G-8 Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Whistler or at the G-8 meeting in Kananaskis in June, 2002, or at the WEF meeting in Davos in January, 2003, the decision would be revisited by the council, provincial and federal governments. This might explain why officials in Calgary, Vancouver, and Ottawa kept riot police well away from protesters during the G-8 meetings of June 26-27, so that no "riots" would jeopardize the Whistler venue for the 2004 WEF.

Conclusion

Activists recognize the important linkages between the Olympic industry and global capitalism. These examples represent a groundswell of opposition to many of the major corporate sponsors of the Olympics, as well as criticism of governments that commit public money to Olympic budgets while neglecting the urgent social problems of the host city, province, or country.

Endnotes

1. Information on protests in 2000 was gathered from my own participation in the Anti-Olympic Alliance (February to June), and from the Sydney Independent Media Centre website <www.sydney.indymedia.org>.

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