

# DIGITAL DEVELOPMENT DEBATES

Protesting the Games, Protesting Globalisation:  
Campaigns for sustainable sourcing and responsible employment at London  
2012

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**The Olympic Games have long been used to promote specific causes. Historically protests have often concerned disputed national interests and identities. However with commercial interests and global finance becoming ever more important in the world of sport, such mega-events have become particular targets for those critical of the practices and ideology of globalising capitalism. This article offers a case study of the Play Fair campaign for the rights of workers making Olympic merchandise and supplies – such as mascots, souvenirs and sportswear. This is a noteworthy campaign, as despite limited resources, it has pressurised Olympic officials and sportswear brands to adopt specific initiatives to raise standards in ethical procurement and the employment conditions of workers in many parts of the world.**

Play Fair has particularly drawn on the promises made by London 2012 to deliver a ‘sustainable’ Olympics. This was a selling point from the time of the bid, including a ‘commitment to ethical business transactions’ ([One Planet Living, 2005: 4](#)). This led to the establishment of the first ever official but independent assurance body for an Olympics, or any other sporting event. The Commission for a Sustainable London 2012 (CSL) exists to monitor and evaluation the delivery of sustainability standards by the London Organising Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games (LOCOG). An early commitment to behaving responsibly to the local community was also demonstrated, when the bid team signed a ‘Peoples Guarantee for an Ethical Olympics’ in 2005, including pledges on affordable housing, local facilities, jobs and a living wage ([Citizens UK, 2011](#)). Activist groups, including PlayFair 2012, have since worked to hold Olympic officials to their promises, to ensure that corporate interests are not prioritised above those of everyone else.

## **Corporatisation and sport**

The Olympic Games provide a useful example of how commercial interests grow ever more important in the world of global sport, and as a result become a target for protests. The increasing importance of financing from sponsorship, licensing and broadcasting rights, and the resulting sport-business-media alliance, is well documented (for example: [Forster & Pope, 2004: 51-56](#); [Horne & Manzenreiter, 2006: 3-8](#)). The more valuable the Olympic global brand becomes though, the more dangerous groups who seek to exploit it are deemed - including Play Fair. As a consequence, corporate interests are increasingly protected through heightened security, legal controls, and PR efforts ([Lenskyj, 2000](#); [Price, 2008: 89](#); [Sugden, 2012](#)). For example, Vancouver passed a by-law for the 2010 Winter Games to criminalise anti-Olympic placards, with Boykoff describing a visit to Olympic areas as 'like entering some sort of immaculate repression zone' ([2011: 41](#)). Therefore, Lenskyji uses the concept 'Olympic industry' to 'draw attention to the characteristics it shares with other global corporations', whereas the more benign labels fa-

voured by officials of Olympic 'movement' or 'family' serve to 'promote mystique and elitism whilst obscuring the power and profit motives that underlie Olympic-related ventures' (2008: 1-2).

### **An evolving tradition of anti-Olympics and Olympic watchdog campaigning**

A review of recent Olympic Games shows that anti-Olympic campaigns and grassroots watchdogs often focus on impacts in host or bid cities, such as: threats to civil rights and press freedom, housing crises such as the criminalisation of homelessness, forced evictions and rising prices, and environmental degradation – all costs disproportionately borne by the least advantaged. For example, campaigns focused on the Vancouver Olympics included: No Games 2010, Olympic Resistance Network, and No 2010 Winter Olympics on Stolen Native Land; and for Beijing included: Free Tibet groups, Falun Gong supporters, a Global Human Rights Torch Relay, freedom of the press activists, and those working to highlight human rights abuses in Darfur and China's involvement with the Sudanese regime. Campaigns that focus beyond one Olympic event have been more limited to date, such as the International Network Against the Olympic Games, and the Anti-Olympics People's Network - which initially focused on 1998 Nagano Winter Games but continued; as well as examples on specific issues, such as Play Fair and labour rights. In addition, some local coalitions in bid and host cities draw in transnational civil society organisations, such as Greenpeace in Sydney and Amnesty International in China.

At a local level, Olympics campaigning can reinvigorate activism in bid and host cities, creating new communities of resistance (Boykoff, 2011: 58-9). Indeed, the groups campaigning around London 2012 are diverse. These include: Games Monitor, No London 2012 (protesting the original bid), Free Hackney, No to Greenwich Park Equestrian Events (NOGOE), The East London Communities Organisation (TELCO), Manor Garden Allotments (evicted for construction), No Olympic Levy for Londoners, Counter Olympics Network (CON) and of course Play-Fair 2012.

### **PlayFair 2012: Campaigning for a 'sweat-free' Olympics**

The Economist described Play Fair as 'perhaps the biggest-ever crusade against sweatshops' (19 August, 2004). It attempts to mobilise global public interest in the Olympics to draw attention to and improve the rights of workers making official goods. Putting on an Olympics involves systems of licensing for merchandise, suppliers, and sponsors, and Play Fair claim officials could meaningfully impact working conditions if contracts were only granted to companies meeting internationally agreed labour standards.

The Play Fair alliance was launched in March 2004 by Oxfam, the Clean Clothes Campaign and two Global Union Federations: the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) and the International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers Federation (ITGLWF). Each founding organisation represents a host of others, involving a transnational network of labour activists in Play Fair. This reflects the growing importance of new strategic relationships between trade unions and wider civil society groups (Waterman & Timms, 2004).

Play Fair evolved into an international coordinating body, with a particular campaign chapter developed for each Olympic Games. Building on experiences from Athens 2004, with some campaigning at the 2006 Turin Winter Olympics, the PlayFair 2008 chapter focused on the Beijing Games. This presented an important opportunity due to China's poor human and labour rights

record, and the region's influential role in the growth of global outsourcing. Play Fair was less visible at Vancouver in 2010, although a specific initiative was a 'Clearing the Hurdles' website to score companies on their response to labour policy demands ([www.clearingthehurdles.org](http://www.clearingthehurdles.org)). The PlayFair 2012 chapter was then created to target the London Games. This has been run by the Trade Union Congress (TUC) and Labour Behind the Label, with many other supporters ([see: PlayFair 2012, 2010](#)). The campaign brings together these labour rights groups to:

“use the hook, unashamedly, of the biggest sporting event in the world” (interview with Sam Guerny, International Policy Officer, TUC)

PlayFair 2012 has built on the alliance's established tactic of highlighting the gap between official Olympic rhetoric and the reality experienced by workers, and have particularly targeted the London 2012 agenda of corporate social responsibility (CSR). For example, the ideal of universal ethical principles in the Charter is compared to the exhaustion of a worker making Olympic bags, and the world record attempts of Olympic athletes are compared to a race for cheap labour to supply the Games:

*The ideal...* “Olympism seeks to create a way of life based on ... respect for universal fundamental ethical principles.” (The Olympic Charter, 2007)

*The reality...* “We are so exhausted trying to get the Olympic bags done in time! Every one of us works till very late. And the following day we still go to work at 7.30am! What sort of life is this?” (Worker at a factory producing merchandise for the 2008 Olympics) ([PlayFair 2012, 2010](#))

As athletes put in long hours of training and battle it out to beat world records in their respective sports, workers around the world are forced into a race to the bottom on wages and conditions. ([Play Fair, 2012: 5](#))

Strategically, PlayFair 2012 adopted a parallel approach of public campaigning and private negotiations. The first includes press releases, reports, speaker tours, factory investigations and protests. PlayFair 2012's website resources also targeted students, including a Fair's Fair teaching pack and student's toolkit containing. For example, a Unfair Factory Game involves players putting together sportswear goods repetitively, under increasing pressure from the boss. These efforts can be seen as what Lenskyj terms 'radical Olympic education', challenging official narratives of the Games ([2008: 127-128](#)). Then in private negotiations, PlayFair 2012 used LOCOG's own focus on ethical business as leverage to create opportunities for meeting with brands and Olympic bodies, and then as leverage within negotiations. This involved highlighting IOC and London 2012 commitments to ethical practice, as well as questioning the claimed CSR policies of corporations sponsoring and supplying the Games.

Despite some tensions over balance, these two strategies often complemented each other. For example, a protest using a giant deodorant can to call for a 'sweat free London 2012' held outside the IOC's hotel on their visit to the London in April 2011, was followed by a meeting inside the hotel between the IOC and Play Fair later the same day.

## Olympic ‘firsts’ and PlayFair 2012 achievements

### *The Commission for a Sustainable London 2012*

Early campaign efforts at the bid stage were seen to contribute to the initial emphasis placed on ethical and sustainable business in the London 2012 proposal, leading to the development of the first ever assurance body – CSL.

### *The Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI) Base Code, Sustainability Sourcing, and Sedex*

Pressure from PlayFair 2012 contributed to the adoption of the ETI Base Code as compulsory for Olympic suppliers, as part of LOCOG’s Sustainability Sourcing Code. This includes minimal labour standards on pay, safety, freedom of association and child labour (see: [www.ethicaltrade.org/eti-base-code](http://www.ethicaltrade.org/eti-base-code)). Some contractors were also required to use the Supplier Ethical Data Exchange (Sedex) for audit results, including labour standards, with LOCOG themselves becoming members. However, limitations were acknowledged, and not only by campaigners, as signing up to the ETI and Sedex in itself does not guarantee any actual change or enforcement of standards.

PlayFair 2012 set out a number of specific problems with using the ETI Code to raise labour standard. Briefly, transparency is a huge issue as without knowing factory locations verification is impossible. Secondly, it is unclear how suppliers can use the Code for producing Olympic goods when their usual lower standards are active in the same production chains. Thirdly, even when a supplier’s factory has satisfactory conditions, there is little protection for workers supplying that factory, just one step back in the chain. Then most importantly, there was no complaints system for violations to be dealt with.

### *Complaints mechanism for labour rights violations*

After prolonged campaigning LOCOG did agree to a complaints system and PlayFair had some input. However towards the end of 2011, neither suppliers nor workers had been informed of its existence or how to make a complaint, so LOCOG could report zero complaints. A 2011 CSL report on merchandising did acknowledge some of the problems, but the report and press release mainly praised the cutting edge ethical approach being taken, highlighting the unique legacy for sustainability and CSR London 2012 is creating ([CSL, 2011a](#), [2011b](#)).

### *Joint LOCOG and PlayFair 2012 agreement*

Play Fair released its own report, ‘Toying with the rights of workers’ ([2012](#)), based on research within two Chinese factories - one producing Olympic pins and the other mascots. The report takes every element of the ETI Base Code and offers evidence to show how each is being violated. Significantly, at the same time the report was released LOCOG signed what has been described as a ‘ground breaking agreement’ with PlayFair 2012, to immediately address its main concerns ([PlayFair 2012, 2012](#)). This includes promises to publish factory locations, training for workers in China and the UK about their rights and how to complain, a telephone helpline for complaints, and a commitment to work with the IOC and future Games to ensure lessons are learnt. In addition, funding commitments and deadlines were specified, so workers still making merchandise for 2012 benefited ([LOCOG & PlayFair 2012, 2012](#)).

### ***Sportswear industry agreement: The Indonesian Protocol***

Additionally, the international Play Fair campaign has secured an agreement with key Olympic sportswear brands. Pressure from Play Fair, particularly from the Beijing 2008 Games, led to several brands agreeing to talks about production in one country - as a pilot scheme. Subsequently the Indonesian Protocol was signed by those involved, committing them to securing freedom of association in all the suppliers they use in Indonesia (ITUC-Play Fair, 2011). The campaign is now working with these brands to roll this scheme out, so promoting industry-wide changes in business practice.

### **Telling the story of an ethical business legacy**

London 2012 provides a contemporary example of how positive impacts on business norms and practices formed part of the planned social and economic legacy of an Olympic Games, set within a context of growing sensitivity to commercialisation and corporate responsibility. Olympic officials and brands have made significant efforts to present the developments outlined above as part of this CSR legacy - to benefit the UK, the business community, and future Olympic events. Copious documents on the websites of LOCOG and CLS contribute to a 'learning legacy'; officials have toured meetings of professional associations to highlight achievements, and skills workshops have promoted business engagement with ethical delivery (Timms, 2012). These efforts attempt to secure the reputation of London 2012 as the 'ethical' Games and suggest corporate attempts to capture the victories campaigners claim, promoting the bodies and companies involved in London 2012 as at the forefront of a responsible business movement. However it was recognised explicitly by the Chair of CSL that his Commission, the responsible procurement policies, and worker complaint mechanism were unlikely to exist without PlayFair 2012 and campaigns at previous Olympics:

“The very fact that I am doing this [working as Chair of CSL] means that Play Fair has been effective. “ (interview with Shaun McCarthy, CSL)

It is clear London 2012 and involved businesses recognise substantial benefits from seeking to control CSR agendas relating to the Games; true of individuals too, as the Olympic experience could provide future CSR opportunities.

There are real applications in the corporate world... I've been talking to fund managers in the city, and there are lots of opportunities to replicate the type of model that we've invented. (interview with Shaun McCarthy, CSL)

Much is at stake then, in how the business legacy is portrayed, and in trying to tell its own narrative PlayFair 2012 has faced significant challenges from aggressive protection of the valued Olympic brand and vast imbalances in access to resources and the media. The achievements of Play Fair are also limited by the current organisational structures of the Olympics, as at present the IOC bears little responsibility for procurement policies and related supply chain, sustainability and employment standards. These are the responsibility of host nations, so the gains made by Play Fair at one Olympics, need to be fought for again for each Games. The campaign is vigorously lobbying the IOC to commit to internationally accepted labour standards at an institutional level, so defining what is required of business regardless of place.

### **Play Fair in the future – Protesting for all workers, at all sporting mega-events**

Despite the challenges faced, targeting global sporting events has been rewarding for Play Fair. To capitalise on these and develop work in the longer term, Play Fair has recently made changes to its structure and scope. The campaign will in the future include other mega-events beyond the Olympics - so now also targeting the World Cup, and importantly will campaign for all workers who contribute to these – those onsite as well as in supply chains. PlayFair Brazil has already been launched and plans are being made to target the specific labour rights issues relevant to Russia and Qatar, hosts of future events. An umbrella website has also been developed to facilitate connections between the campaign efforts, providing updates, history and contacts ([www.play-fair.org](http://www.play-fair.org)).

In conclusion, in common with other mega sports events, the Olympics is now 'fuelled by the global reach of capital' (Tomlinson, 2005: 60). Contemporary anti-Olympic and Olympic watchdog campaigns reflect concerns with this corporatisation of the Olympic industry, which itself reflects and contributes to processes of globalising capitalism (Timms, 2012). Therefore, protesting the Olympic Games can involve protesting globalisation. The Play Fair campaign provides an interesting example of this, as the Olympic platform is being used to link the rights of workers involved in the production of the Games, with wider issues of global inequality and structural problems in transnational labour markets. Given the benefits reaped from this, mega sports events will continue to be a target for activists as the global arena provided becomes ever more valuable to all.

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