

Project 'Reurbanizacao' VS "Occupies the Whores"

Mass crackdown on Sex Workers in Niterói, Rio de Janeiro

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On the 23th of May 2014, police from the 76th Police Precinct in Niterói, a city across Guanabara Bay from Rio de Janeiro, illegally without judicial authorisation invaded a building named Caixa Economica occupied by 300 sex workers and other residents. The police crackdown operation named, 'Project Reurbanizacao' involved the removal of around 300 sex workers, taken for investigation at police stations. The operation is believed to be a part of the mass hygienisation (social cleansing) in the city centre of Niterói, with reference to the FIFA World Cup 2014 beginning on the 12th of June until the 13 of July (two weeks today).

"FIFA garbage cleaners are in town helping the government bastards". (Local resident)

Sex workers, people living in the apartment and surrounding residents of the area faced displacement and closed businesses, now without work and no homes. These businesses included shops and hairdressers who survived for servicing the local sex work community were blown up and sealed closed.

"We will not be quiet, we're going to occupy the building and express until society understands that these people established business to survive and that it is not illegal". (Sex worker activist).

One sex workers on site described a woman with her daughter of 6 or 8 years scared of not knowing what to do and fear that the police will return to them for more punishment from selling perfumes, hair accessories and other small items to sex workers. There is no doubt that the community of Caixa Economica was close in many aspects of living; friends, relatives, neighbours and service providers.

"I saw women with their children without knowing what to do, others slept on the street that are now exposed to all kinds of violence. I saw women breastfeeding their children on the streets without a home". (Witness)

"I saw the misery that the armed wing of the State caused". (Sex worker activist)

There have been online discussions about the mass police raid, with reports of rape (women claim they were forced to perform oral sex on the police), theft, bodily and moral violence with those claiming that the police planted evidence of false crimes in the sex workers belongings to purposely make matters worse for them.

"They broke the doors of the apartment, leaving it totally exposed".

"A policeman who assaulted one of the women screamed: 'I hit! She was cursing the f-word'- as if that were a reason for assaulting a woman". (Witnesses)

The police forced the removal of people, with little consideration for those who may have problems leaving without the use of the apartment lift.

"The elderly are trapped in the apartment because they cannot descend and ascend stairs and the police have closed the lift."

Transgender/transvestites faced foul discrimination from the invading officers.

"We see a lack of respect by the police towards transvestites - seeing how the police mock by saying out loud Dyke ... or the FAG."

After returning to the apartment complex from their release, sex workers and non-sex workers went back to their rooms to find little left or nothing at all. Windows and doors were smashed. Personal items and money were taken, leaving only one assumption. The illegal escort of people to the police stations was a venomous motive to take everything to and to shame sex workers and allies, reminding everyone the power of the law police have on side that paves the way for countless acts of corruption against the sex working community. Project 'Reurbanizacao' makes a strong and important case (added to the long list of many) for explicit revisions of policies in Brazil regarding the health and safety of sex workers.

A major plea has been sent out to activist lawyers in Niterói and Rio de Janeiro to go Niteroi and witness through direct sight these crimes committed by public authorities. The ordeal is not over as of yet and the police have returned to occupy the building once again.

One of the sex workers who have been present at the scene since Friday expressed her emotional distress at the situation at hand: "I wanted to cry several times with them. I am very tired physically, mentally, but ready if they need me for tomorrow's demonstration, because we want the houses of these women back..

More updates to follow.