

Urgent Action

In Focus

An insight into the stories behind UAs

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"I want to thank you for my house": the campaign for the Prestes Maia building



Children who live in the Prestes Maia building with copies of appeals written on their behalf by the UA network. © AI

On 3 November 2003, hundreds of homeless families occupied an abandoned clothes factory in downtown São Paulo, Brazil, the 22-storey Prestes Maia building. It had been empty for over 12 years, and had become known for

drug-dealing and prostitution. Working with a local NGO, the *Movimento Sem-Teto do Centro* (MSTC), Homeless Movement of Central São Paulo, the families cleaned out the building, removing 300 truckloads of rubbish and

large quantities of sewage. They pooled money and organised repairs and services including a library, a cinema, an art gallery and regular cultural events.

Lawyers from the homeless movement managed to stave off several eviction orders, while the MSTC tried to negotiate with the municipal authorities. In the face of intense pressure from protestors and international expressions of concern, the municipal government signed an agreement with the residents in February 2007 which provided some with homes and others with rent assistance while homes were found. (See UA 288/06, AMR 19/036/2006, 30 October 2006; UA 35/07, AMR 19/004/2007, 09 February 2007, and follow-up.)

In May 2007 an Amnesty delegation visited the Prestes Maia building as it was emptying out and talked to representatives of MSTC and families who had been living there.



AI's Brazil researcher (pictured right) walks through the basement of the Prestes Maia building, accompanied by lawyer Manoel Del Rio (centre) and a resident of Prestes Maia © AI

Community leader Jomarina thanked Amnesty International on behalf of the Prestes Maia families. "We were not

expecting this victory, but Amnesty's involvement suddenly gave the campaign visibility."

"I want to thank you today for my house," said another woman. "I lived in a shack without a bathroom with my disabled child. I was a street girl, treated like rubbish, I lost my mother to violence, I was alone. Housing helped not just me, but my child."

"The homeless are thrown into a hole without any way out; they are exposed to police violence, sexual abuse," said Manoel Del Rio, a lawyer working with the MSTC. "Housing is the most complete social project. We see them when they arrive and we see them when they move on. They arrive hungry, with lives in disarray; slowly they rebuild not just their own lives, but those of their families. Housing gives them autonomy, eliminates dependency. It gives them a chance to find a job, have an income. It's a base from which people can begin to fight for other rights."

"It was very important the support you gave," concluded Manoel. "The homeless movement had been neglected by human rights groups. Amnesty International gave the right to housing credibility as a human rights issue. The struggle continues even stronger today."

MSTC coordinator Ivaneti de Araujo, who lived on the street before joining the movement, expressed her enormous gratitude to Amnesty International. She testified to the direct impact of the letters on the São Paulo authorities: she had heard an official in the mayoral office saying, "Let's sort this out to stop the foreigners hassling us."

Please see <http://web.amnesty.org/pages/pov-erty-index-eng> for more information on AI's work on poverty and human rights.