

São Paulo's high-rise fire collapse tied to city's homeless crisis

Gabriel Lemos

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In the early morning hours of May 1, a 24-storey building caught fire and collapsed in Paiçandu Square, in downtown São Paulo, the largest city in the Americas. According to the city's security secretary, the fire was started by a short circuit on the fifth floor of the building.

Built in 1966 and abandoned 17 years ago, the building had been occupied in 2013 by one of São Paulo's homeless movements, *Luta por Moradia Digna* (LMD—Movement for Fair Housing). It housed 146 families and 372 people, 25 percent of them immigrants. One resident died when was being rescued by firefighters at the moment the building collapsed. According to São Paulo City Hall, five people are still believed to be buried under the rubble, which is expected to take a month to remove.

The extensive and frenetic coverage of the collapse by the Brazilian corporate media, which attracted record audiences for all network television channels, focused on the attempt to blame the residents of the building for the fire, pointing to the accumulation of flammable materials in the building—garbage and wood that separated the rooms in each floor—and their supposed “neglect” of the building’s electrical system.

After media reports that residents of the building paid up to 500 reais (US\$140) in rent to the coordinators of the homeless movement, the corporate media escalated its efforts to demonize the squatters.

Right-wing columnist Leandro Narloch in daily *Folha de S. Paulo* wrote that “a specialized group in invasions enters an abandoned place, takes possession of it, divides it into small spaces and transfers them to poor people, charging a good rate for the service. This is the way the militias of Rio de Janeiro act... It is also the way of action of the LMD.”

Narloch went on saying, “of course there are

differences between the São Paulo homeless and the Rio militias. One has left-wing marketing, the other does not ... In the real estate branch, however, the business of the militias and the homeless movement is the same: take a property for free and profit from the sale of possession or rent.”

São Paulo’s former right-wing millionaire mayor, João Doria (PSDB), who left office in early April to run in this year’s election for governor in the state of São Paulo, went further, charging that a criminal faction had occupied the building, and it “was a drug distribution center as well, and, unfortunately, a place of shelter for homeless families.” In May of last year, Doria sent 900 armed policemen into São Paulo’s so-called “crackland”, less than 1km from the fire, to beat and expel addicts and workers and demolish tenement buildings supposedly housing drugs and arms caches.

However, reports on the history of the occupied building and data on housing in São Paulo reported by the corporate media itself reveals the real cause of the spectacular fire and collapse of the building: the total negligence of the state in relation to the occupied building and the huge housing deficit in one of the most unequal cities in the world.

In 2015, after a complaint from a neighbor of the building, the public attorney’s office in São Paulo initiated an investigation into the lack of security in the building. Despite finding a series of irregularities, such as obstructed corridors and escape routes and a lot of flammable material, São Paulo’s civil defense and licensing office evaluated that its interdiction was not necessary, which led the public attorney’s office to close the investigation in March of this year.

However, another document released by *G1* news web site, issued by São Paulo’s licensing office in January of last year, showed that “the building does not

meet minimum fire safety requirements”, such as the lack of fire extinguishers, hydrants not working and an irregular electrical installation. This document was also shelved by São Paulo’s public attorney’s office. The state’s disregard for the dangers in the building is aggravated by the fact that it belonged to the federal government, having housed for two decades the São Paulo headquarters of the Federal Police.

The precarious and dangerous situation faced by the residents of the collapsed building is essentially the same as that confronting the other 206 homeless occupations in the city of São Paulo, which comprise more than 45,000 families. However, the number of families facing similar dangers in the city is much higher. Today, 1.2 million families live in a precarious situation in the city, spread mainly among the 1,700 *favelas* (shantytowns) of São Paulo. According to a report from *G1*, the city has a housing deficit of 358,000 homes, while there are almost 1,400 unoccupied properties.

Both the number of occupations and the number of people living on the streets in São Paulo has increased rapidly since the global capitalist crisis began to hit hard in Brazil in 2014, causing the destruction of nearly four million jobs in the formal sector and raising the unemployment rate to 13.1 percent. In São Paulo, the unemployment rate is 16.9 percent.

Official data show that almost 16,000 people live on the streets of São Paulo, a figure that has doubled since 2000. Other São Paulo City Hall estimates put the figure at 25,000.

In São Paulo’s downtown, however, this rise in homelessness and squatting has been driven by a rapid process of gentrification, a consequence of a housing boom in the city which caused a 175 percent increase in real estate values between 2000 and 2010. In the same period, the cost of living in the city of São Paulo – the 43rd most expensive in the world – has doubled, becoming, along with Caracas, Venezuela, the city with the highest increase in the cost of living in the world.

This has been the result, above all, of the collusion between successive governments and major construction conglomerates under so-called “requalification” plans—the same kind of corrupt for-profit operations responsible for the Grenfell Tower fire in downtown London and similar disasters in so many other cities.

While both right-wing and nominally “left” governments have implemented a years-long draconian austerity program, which slashed the housing budget by 51 percent last year and cut it by 34 percent this year, the number of privately built small and medium apartments for affluent upper middle class professionals has increased by 111 percent between 2011 and 2017. A few dozen meters from the building that collapsed, the price of “studios” between 28 and 54 square meters ranges from 190,000 to 300,000 reais (US\$54,000 to US\$85,000), with the most expensive apartments in the area costing up to 1 million reais (US\$ 283,000).

The far-right rage over “protection of criminal squatters” by the nominal “left” notwithstanding, this gentrification process was vastly accelerated under the rule of the Workers Party (PT) in the city during Fernando Haddad’s term in office (2013-2016), while the nationwide property boom has coincided with the Workers Party rule at the federal level (2003-2016).

The enormous number of fires in the *favelas* of São Paulo—202 in 2016—led the São Paulo City Council to open a parliamentary commission of inquiry to determine the causes of the fires in 2012, but it ended up being canceled. News agency *A Pública* published a report in 2016 showing that the *favelas* most affected by fires were located in the richest areas of São Paulo, and the frequency of fires—many suspected to be arson—is also higher in these areas.

The huge money handouts to the construction giants in for-profit housing programs during the PT rule, a major cause of the property boom, and the upper middle class-oriented “lifestyle politics” of Fernando Haddad—a mayor obsessed with a moralistic debate over cycling lanes and Harveyite discussions on the “right to the city”—are not only responsible for these tragedies, but also for the rise of the far-right Doria and his pro-repression politics.



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