



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Sex workers strike for rights in El Alto, Bolivia

17 October

2007

to: 27 October

2007

Country: Bolivia

Location City/State/Province: *El Alto, Bolivia*

Location Description: *This campaign centered in an impoverished district of El Alto called the "Red Lights" district or "zona 12 de Octubre."*

Goals:

(1)To reopen the closed brothels and bars and (2)To demand rights and respect for sex workers

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 057. Lysistratic nonaction
- 063. Social disobedience
- 149. Quasi-legal evasions and delays

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 057. Lysistratic nonaction
- 063. Social disobedience
- 149. Quasi-legal evasions and delays

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 057. Lysistratic nonaction
- 063. Social disobedience
- 149. Quasi-legal evasions and delays

Methods in 4th segment:

- 057. Lysistratic nonaction
- 063. Social disobedience
- 149. Quasi-legal evasions and delays
- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast)

Methods in 5th segment:

- 057. Lysistratic nonaction
- 063. Social disobedience
- 149. Quasi-legal evasions and delays

- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast)
- 178. Guerrilla theatre

Methods in 6th segment:

- 057. Lysistratic nonaction
- 063. Social disobedience
- 149. Quasi-legal evasions and delays
- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast)
- 178. Guerrilla theatre

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Defense

Cluster:

Economic Justice

Human Rights

Group characterization:

- Sex workers

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Lily Cortéz

Partners:

Bolivian sex workers

External allies:

El Alto legislator Guillermo Mendoza, Global Network of Sex Work Projects

Involvement of social elites:

Legislator Guillermo Mendoza

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- El Alto Association of Night Workers

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

- Global Network of Sex Work Projects

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: *about a day and a half*

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

(1) Parents and students opposed to El Alto brothels, bars, and sex workers

(2) The El Alto municipal government

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Parents and students began a hunger strike in response to make sure that the El Alto government did not take action to reopen the brothels and bars.

Campaigner violence:

not known

Repressive Violence:

The nonviolent campaign of the El Alto sex workers was catalyzed by a violent rampage of El Alto brothels and bars.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

1 point out of 6 points

Survival:

0.5 points out of 1 point

Growth:

2 points out of 3 points

On 14 October 2007, citizens of El Alto, Bolivia demanded that all bars and brothels facilitating sex work be located at least 3,200 feet away from schools, because they believed that the establishments were facilitating crime in the area. They then began a three-day rampage of the bars and brothels in the impoverished red-lights district of El Alto. These El Alto citizens, primarily parents and students, burned or destroyed at least 50 brothels, burned sex workers' belongings, and beat sex workers. The police monitored the events but did not take action to stop the violence or reprimand the citizens who had attacked the sex workers.

In response to the mobs, the El Alto Mayor Fanor Nava and the El Alto municipal government closed all brothels within 1,600 feet of schools. In the week following the closing of these brothels, prostitutes were forced to seek work on the streets rather than inside of establishments. On the streets, police harassed sex workers both physically and verbally, threatening to arrest them.

The El Alto Association of Night Workers led by Lily Cortéz demanded that the mayor reopen the closed brothels and bars. Starting on 17 October 2007 35,000 sex workers went on strike across the country of Bolivia by refusing to attend medical checkups. The strike began with a core group of about 30 sex workers in El Alto and then spread across the nation. The Bolivian government required prostitutes to report for these medical checkups every 20 days in order to legally perform their work. The sex workers continued their work without health certification, however, which raised public health risks for sexually transmitted diseases.

On 22 October 2007, over fifty sex workers occupied an alteño medical center and began a hunger strike to demand rights and respect for sex workers. On 24 October 2007, at least 10 prostitutes had sewn their lips together with thread to raise awareness of the hunger strike and the need to protect sex workers' rights. They were successful in drawing the attention of multiple area

news sources, including La Republica, as well as more widespread ones like Reuters, The New York Times, The Sydney Morning Herald, and the BBC.

Cortez and the sex workers of El Alto used the publicity to announce two more threats of action if the El Alto government did not re-open the brothels or allow sex workers more rights by the following day - marching nude down the streets of El Alto and burying themselves alive. "We are fighting for the right to work and for our families' survival," said Cortez. "Tomorrow we will bury ourselves alive if we are not immediately heard. The mayor will have his conscience to answer to if there are any grave consequences, such as the death of my comrades."

On 27 October 2007 legislator Guillermo Mendoza intervened with the El Alto municipal government on behalf of the sex workers, and the sex workers suspended their strikes and the threats of further action. On 29 October 2007 the El Alto government agreed to work on legislation that would protect the rights of sex workers, forming a mediation committee on the issues in the El Alto House of Representatives. On 15 December 2008 the Federación Iboamericana del Ombudsman, a Latin American human rights defense organization, filed a report on Bolivian prostitution with the government in La Paz, further asking for specific reform in the Bolivian sex industry. No documentation showed that this report was received favorably by the La Paz government.

Research Notes

Influences:

Influenced later Bolivian sex workers strikes for sex workers' rights.

Sources:

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Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:

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