

"In the name of a world without prisons" — interviews with activists from the Front of Decarceration from the state of Paraná

The importance of collective movements in the daily struggle for disengagement

by Layra Rodrigues and Jhey Rodrigues

| Brazil |

The reality of the prison system is well known to be less a failure in management than constitutive of its character. The realities and character of the movements that confront it, not so much. Layra Rodrigues and Jhey Rodrigues, both students participating in the *Direito à Poesia* ("Right to Poetry") project by the Federal University for Latin American Integration, sought to get an insight into these realities through the interviews they conducted during the *1st State Conference of the Paraná Decarceration Front*.

Among other things, the event is meant to celebrate the efforts that resulted in the creation of the Paraná Decarceration Front, following the example of several other State Fronts inspired by the publishing of a National Agenda for Decarceration in 2013. Reverting mass incarceration is the axis around which the ten guidelines making up the Agenda organize, and the end goal guiding prison abolitionist collectives and initiatives that took up this space of articulation between March 26 and April 22, 2022.

Throughout that four-week period, Layra and Jhey heard Coordinator of the Curitiba Prison Pastoral Ministry Lucas Duarte, a militant for the Paraná Decarceration Front and one of

the Conference's organizers; catering cook and member of the Foz do Iguacu and Surroundings Arrested Persons' Family and Friends Collective Márcia Tillmann, a former inmate and family member of a person deprived of liberty; and journalist Raissa Melo, also a militant for the Paraná Decarceration Front and one of the Conference's organizers, as well as former inmate. In the interviews transcribed below, all three of them share portions of the collective history of the movements in which they participate and their own particular history within those movements.

Lucas Duarte

Coordinator of the Curitiba Prison Pastoral Ministry

Layra Rodrigues and Jhey Rodrigues: How did the Decarceration Front come into being? What has been achieved through this articulation?

The Paraná Front is a recent development. Perhaps, before addressing that, we need to talk about the National Agenda for Decarceration, which had been in the making at least since 2013, based on the work of the Prison Pastoral Ministry and movements such as the Mothers of May.

It is not just a question of saying that we need education, but of diagnosing that prison is a useless evil leading to useless suffering, and with that diagnosis, devising ten actions that could mitigate that suffering and, perhaps, put a stop to it.

With the Agenda, the organizations that formed it started to realize how important it was to also get organized within the territories (states, cities, neighborhoods) where they acted. That was when the Decarceration Fronts came about, first in Rio de Janeiro, then in São Paulo, Minas Gerais. Articulating the Front required several organizations that had been working with human rights to come together and join forces: Universities, Public Defenders' offices, church movements, pastoral ministries, prisoners', and prisoner's families' movements.

During the pandemic, we built the Decarceration Front in Paraná, starting with family members. We launched the agenda on October 02, 2020, a symbolic day marking the Carandiru massacre, where at least 111 people were killed by the state.

Even though they are barred from accessing the system, information, family members themselves understood that they needed to organize in some way. It was only then that our pastoral ministry, as is typical in our actions to support civil organizations, showed them what had been done in the other Fronts. And several people started joining us. Most importantly, from that, we gained the engagement of family members in drawing up complaints and in dialogue with authorities. We tried to create that: no one is representing anyone in this space, each collective needs to organize to expose its claims and demand solutions.

We have perhaps reached the current state of affairs because of paternalistic policies where things are done for, not with the people. Father Júlio Lancellotti, from São Paulo, often stresses how we cannot work for the families, for the prisoners. We work with them, we build together, we share. It is a slower project, it takes longer, especially in the pandemic, since we were unable to have "face-to-face" interactions.

In people's presence, we can build deeper. But we need to understand that each person has their own time, as does politics. Sometimes it's an emergency thing, something we can't stop, because we don't have enough muscle to fight it head-on.

How do you perceive the relevance of the Friends and Family Collective in Foz do Iguaçu?

I am close with the collective, I have engaged with it, while still letting people speak for themselves, and I am very glad to have even three people from Foz do Iguaçu here with us, which is a win for us. I wish there were people from Londrina, Maringa... But I think it is important for the people in this struggle that family members organize collectively, and when we say 'collectives', it does not have to mean bureaucracy, becoming a corporation -

no. It means people who want to join because they realize how much useless suffering is caused by the prison system, and that is what it is: the University and the Public Defender's office doing what must be done, joining forces with family members, to let them know that this exists.

I mean, we always say that institutions are bankrupt, but we can create institutions, participate in institutions in a way that will get them to serve us. Since people say this is the democratic rule of law, I think it is very important that families - and not only them, but also anyone who is outraged by this - need to mobilize and to get involved.

One of the problems that I see, and I do not want to be controversial or ramble too much, but one of the problems with the idea of "place of speech" is this: instead of mobilizing people, it demobilizes them. "I have no place in this discussion, so I cannot participate"; people silence themselves and stay in their own world, with their subjective problems. We need to not steal anyone's problems, but to perceive the pain of others as our own.

I always think of it as a matter of solidarity because you may not be directly affected by it, but, indirectly, it is a problem common to all of us. You can empathize with the pain of those who are different, because, in one way or another, we are all going through something, whether as women, as poor people, as men, as black people... There is always something. The pastoral ministry recently released the report *For a world without prisons: the urgency of decarceration*. What can you share about it?

Prison is not a world apart from ours; there is no such thing as the world of crime, there is no such thing as the world of prisons. It is the same world that we have here.

This collective publication by the Prison Pastoral Ministry addresses this issue that we insist on: it is not enough to talk about abolitionism, we need to re-captivate our imagination. This has nothing to do with superheroes or fantasy, no. It is possible, there are different practices today that demonstrate how superfluous the police and incarceration are.

The text I wrote in this publication is about how a community destroyed a prison — destroyed it with their hands, sledgehammers, they torn it down. In practical terms, we do not need that... "Rebellious violence". These institutions can be made obsolete, as Angela Davis's text says. What may have served other generations no longer serves ours. We need a different structure, another way, another mediation, because what we have is taking away a lot of people's lives. This publication conveys a bit of this movement where we show that it can be done, either through data, academic debate, or through the political aspect of social movements. We try not to detach debate from construction and political practice...

My master's degree was about incarceration, our struggle, and how theology can contribute to re-captivate people's imagination, not least because most religious discourse endorses punitivism, an idea of a guilty subject, a criminal subject. Even Liberation Theology, the current which I adhere to, has not addressed incarceration; this is a recent movement. We spoke about torture, about tortured political prisoners, many songs were sung in communities about incarceration. But no one got so far as thinking that we do not need prison.

I often say that the theory of liberation holds the maxim of preferential option for the poor, and I have been thinking of the preferential option for the rebellion of the poor.

Sometimes, scholars, pastoral agents, or even we, once we reach a position of some relevance in civil society, take the stance of mediators of conflicts. Families are outraged, and we ask for patience, but you never ask the prosecutor's office for patience, or ask the police for patience. I began to opt for their rebelliousness, for understanding them and for making something new emerge from this rebelliousness. This is where the creativity of social movements comes from: from rebellion, from indignation.

interview with Marcia Tillmann catering cook,
member of the *Foz do Iguaçu and Surroundings*
Arrested Persons' Family and Friends Collective

What is your relationship with prison and the Decarceration Front?

I've been in prison too. I am a former inmate, and now I visit my husband, who has been in prison for 11 years. I found the Front through a friend who is also a former inmate. It was right at the time of the pandemic. In Foz, we struggled through a lot, with no news from family members, not knowing anything. There were no online visits, no face-to-face visits, no nothing. A colleague of mine knew the people from the Curitiba Front, she was already one of the articulators, and she put me in touch with the group. They helped us get the online visits, get news from our families. They are also very supportive when you suffer abuse of authority, aggression... They give you the right guidelines, show you where to seek help.

In your opinion, how important is the articulation of the Foz do Iguaçu Arrested Persons' Family and Friends Collective?

When we started, it was very important, because got very close. All the families that were there in the families' collective, we began to chase after and fight for our rights. So, we got meetings where the director himself met with us, to give us an explanation. Then he ran away.

Then we tried to get another meeting with him again, but we couldn't. But the collective is good, since we are family too, because there is always someone who does not know what to wear, when to visit, because the information from the penitentiary, too, is the same as with the letters: there is a single social worker to handle everything.

So, often, she supplies the whole family there, all their demands. Then, we are family members who pass on the right guidelines regarding visitation days, what goes in the bag, what does not, what you can wear to get in. We have to tell each other all of that, because there is always someone who goes and gets the information and passes it on, all through the collective.

We find a lot of support there. Like on my cell phone: there are so many audios from desperate mothers because their child is sick. There was one lady, Mrs. Madalena, whose

son has tuberculosis. So, she is always texting us, asking for help. Mothers who cannot get news, then we talk to this and that person until we know where their son is. Sometimes we even email to schedule visits for women who have not seen their families in a year, because they do not know how.

We have to tell each other all of that, because there is always someone who goes and gets the information and passes it on, all through the collective.

One person asks the other for help, and they eventually come to us, and we put them in the chat groups, and so it goes. Like, a person comes to you and asks for help, maybe sometimes you do not know how to answer, so you come to me and ask me to put them in the group. Then we put them in, and there, they can get their questions answered.

In your experience, how does incarceration affect a person deprived of their freedom? What about their family members?

I always say that families suffer even more than prisoners. When you know that a family member is getting beaten, that they are not eating, that they are in the hole [solitary], you want to do something and you cannot, you are prevented from doing something. And inside, too, it's pretty tricky.

The media preaches that prisoners can study, that prisoners can work. Prisoners can't study, prisoners can't work. There are some jobs, but they are very few, for a high number of prisoners. There should be more work. There should be a way to resocialize. As I said before, you walk away from there full of hate. Either you are very strong in the head and focus on what you want, on changing your life, or...

They always say, " You just left and you're back? You must've liked it". It's not that we like it... If you start really studying prison, you will see that many there are drug addicts who should not be in jail, but in rehab. But where is there rehab, in Paraná? They send you to jail. And in jail, in fact, you will never stop doing the drug...

After I got out of jail, I had a hearing with the judge, I said to him, "you want to know where smoked my first cigarette? In jail. You want to know where I snorted my first line of coke? In jail. You want to know where I smoked my first joint? In jail". He said, "How? How did it get there?", and I replied: "Ask your employees" - because, to me, they are his employees. "Ask them, because you claim that it is family members taking it in when they get turned inside out before visiting? Who has free access?"

From your perspective, why do letters from prisoners not reach their families? Does it depend on what they write?

No, because all inmates know more or less what they can write, and their families, too. We write about how the family is doing, what are they doing. As for me, I write mostly love notes, I am a romantic. My husband writes more openly about what goes on in there, with him, but he always takes care what words he uses. I understand more or less what he writes, but he is always telling what happens inside, what his day to day is like, how he is. But, in this case, he can never write that he has suffered an aggression in a letter, because if he does, that letter will not leave prison, and there is retaliation.

interview with Raissa Melo journalist, militant for *the Paraná Decarceration Front*

What is your relationship with prison and the Decarceration Front?

I am a former prisoner, I was arrested in 2010, and I left the enclosed system in 2012 for semi-freedom, where I had to wear an electronic ankle tag. I got it off in 2014. I found the Decarceration Front on social media, in 2019.

First, I found the Agenda for Decarceration. Then, I went looking for an initiative in Paraná and ended up in the Front. I met many prisoner family members there, but few survivors of the prison system. Finding the Front was very cool for me, because before, for a while I wanted to forget, to be a new Raissa. It just was not like that.

It leaves a mark, a gap. How could I explain certain moments in my life? Sometimes I would say that I was on an exchange program, or that I was hospitalized, depressed... I would make up excuses like that. Lying is very difficult, because you have to remember the lie you told, or change the subject. A lot of things like that bothered me. I think it would be cool to also tell you that I went to a private college, the Pontifical Catholic University, with the electronic tag. It was a different thing at the PUC.

Did the staff look at me sideways?

They did. I had two teachers who actually made a petition so they would not have to teach me. It hurt a lot, they felt in danger around me. Imagine that: someone in an electronic tag, who, in their first year at the PUC, would return to Piraquara to sleep in prison, would come in and out surrounded by an escort; how could that person be dangerous? At the time, I was very skinny, I would walk around in a shrivel, not wanting to draw attention, and even depressed, like a struggle, half wanting to die there, barely speaking.

It was very heavy, then, because I felt very guilty. I had the privilege of being one of the women contemplated by the PUC project, but I knew many others who, in my head, were more deserving than me. I thought, "Am I not taking up someone's place? Do I deserve this?", and prison is like that: "You did it, you are guilty, now you are paying and not enough. You should be thankful because it could be worse." It was too heavy.

Today, I can laugh, thinking about the drama; I felt guilty for breathing too much, for taking too much of the world's air. And I always had this cough before prison, but since I had tuberculosis there, it got worse. As much as I knew it was his job, I thought of the corrections officer standing in front of the PUC, waiting for me to finish class, and of me just getting in the way of him living his life. I really felt like a burden to society. At the PUC, that happened repeatedly.

At the time, I only knew two types of stories: the church story - "My God, I have survived and now I am light, I am good, and I founded an NGO" - and another that was a lot of rage, a lot of pain. I knew few women who had survived prison, but I had many male friends who

spoke of that pain, of that anger against the system. I am not saying that's not fair, but I couldn't relate to either. And there, in the Front, and through the points in the Agenda, I was amazed: "My life would have been much better... This is what I want to do". So, I started studying public security.

What are relations between people who are deprived of their freedom like? In the women's workshop, many of them say that they found there a relationship of affection that they never had in life or in childhood, a type of sisterhood. But also, of course, there are disputes, fears, rages.

Man, it was very difficult for me, because I come from a family that have me all that. So, at first, I felt the absence, like, "where is my mom? where is my grandmother? where are my aunts? who am I going to run to?". In my mind I had every possible stereotype of women in prison, like, "oh my god, they're going to kill me." But I was welcomed, as far as possible, because I arrived there all shriveled up, crying all night, and a woman came and looked at me and said: "how old are you sweetheart?", "I am 19 years old", "what are you doing here?", "I am doomed [said crying]". I was afraid to say it, because with all the negative stereotypes... My idea of prison came from soap operas, movies and teachers who would threaten us, "then, if you fail you will end up in jail".

I cried all night, but a 58-year-old woman came and said that she did not know what I had done, but here we all had already been judged. She said, "If you cry every day it is going to be harder, you need to sleep, because tomorrow will not be easy either." So, you establish those relationships. And one thing that was tough was that I was 19 when I got to Piraquara II, and the first cells, the first interactions I had were with women much older than me, I think they were 40, 50. Until the first time I went to the patio, then I saw some younger people.

But I was always like, "Oh my god, I went wrong too soon, because they went wrong later." Today I talk about that with a sense of humor because I have been through enough therapy, enough care. But still, relationships were also difficult; but then it became something like sharing dreams about when we got out, sharing things, exchanging experiences, because they were people from very different places, of different ages, some were already mothers. I

even understood my mother a lot more by hanging out with other mothers, you know, I would hear this a lot, "you're my daughter's age." Wow, I would hear a lot that "you are physically similar to my daughter".

Because they get attached, of course, they must see you as their own daughter.

There was even a woman who had been in there for 20 years and left a 4-year-old daughter [outside of prison]. It was one of the conversations that really made a mark on me, she would say: "But what did you enjoy doing?", I said "I went out with my friends, drank in front of the house", "what music do you like?". She kept imagining what her daughter would be like, you know. And then, her parents were from the coast, her mother was very harsh, like "I am not going to subject your child to visiting you, to growing up seeing prison". And she hadn't seen her daughter since she was 4.

Her daughter's name was Mariana, and she would say, "she had curly hair just like you, she was a brunette just like you", and she would say, "my daughter would also talk to everyone, she never shut up, just like you". And it was very sad, because shortly after I left, almost a year later, I went to Paranaguá, I looked for her family and I could not find them. I searched a lot, because I wanted to meet Mariana and say "look, your mother has thought of you all these 20 years. Your mother used to braid my hair in jail, so I could look neat and pretty." I wanted to tell her, I don't know, to write a letter, or, if she did not feel comfortable with that, at least to know that her mother had been a mother even though she was absent for those 20 years. But I could not find the family.

In your experience, how does incarceration affect a person deprived of their freedom, as well as their family? Emotionally, financially.

I think in every way... It is a stigma, both for the person and their family members...

I thought I was going to work at the mall forever, or at the food court, and hear that I was lucky to even have that, because at least I was employed. You are exploited to such a high degree, and you still always have to be grateful. That was something that weighed on me.

There was a time, too, when people knew what had happened in a group I was part of. They were women from a movement, and we were in a bar, organizing for March 8. When we left the bar, one of their cars was missing. She asked if I knew anything about it.

Then, she called the police, reported the theft, but she would call me often to ask, "Don't your friends know anything about it?" And in college, a friend's house was broken into, and he also kept asking me where they would be selling his stuff. Like I know, like I am the queen of crime...

In relationships, too. There was a boy who was terrible... He would hook up with everyone and their mother, but he was gentler with the other girls. I wanted him to take me to the bus stop, and he would say I didn't need that. It was as if he were saying, "Oh, you have been through that, you don't need it, you are strong." No, I deserve affection...

And besides, there is the whole fetishization of pain. A guy once bluntly asked me: "Were you raped in jail?" I was not, but what if I had been? He was completely careless. He was lucky that that was not an something I had experienced. And especially in the academic environment... I had the privilege of being a former inmate and getting involved in the academic environment, but I became an object of study in a way that made me think: "my god, I don't think they even do that to animals".

From your experience, from your trajectory, what do you think could be changed in the prison system today?

I think, first: what leads to deprivation of liberty? Thinking about that would be enough to unburden the whole system, in a way. We now know that prisons are crowded especially with people who have committed crimes against property. And when you put someone in jail, you are never just arresting them, but their entire family.

Having your sentence reduced is also difficult; the criteria is extremely hard to meet. I have met mothers who were pregnant when they got in, and the best they could get meant leaving when their kids were five, six.

The coexistence between people outside prison with those in prison, more projects, and accessibility... So, people could really be able to see that inside they are all still people, all able to contribute, too.

Think of how long people stay locked in there, doing nothing, just growing their own pain. They could have access to something else because they will return to society at some point.

They have a factory where they manufacture balls, here... Women are paid less than half a third of the minimum wage. They are so exploited, these people are there working themselves to death so that when they leave, they can have the money to get home. Nobody makes their fortune in jail.

And that is where a lot of people re-offend, because without a project, they leave and have no perspective of the future, so, after a few months, they are back in, right?

Because even at home, their routine, their lives become linked to that institution. When I left, there was a lady who held my hand and said: "Over the years that you have spent here, I noticed that you have a mother, but if anything happens, know that you have another family, here, another home". That is too heavy, it's not nice.

I was prepared, especially by the older people there, not to deceive myself, because, even with a degree, people who have been there tend to end up back there. They prepared me for that: "We have already seen women leave the country and then end up back here". I still fear that today.

Another thing is that the food is really bad. The food stinks.

In Paraná the meals are outsourced. So, the lunch boxes come in, there is no time to refrigerate them, the food turns green — the green rice of Piraquara. It is a rite of passage: people clap their hands for you to swallow the green rice for the first time.

And I would like to say that there are small struggles that we need to encourage, because you talked a lot about education, about very big changes, but... Come on, you need to let them get a little chocolate in there. These small changes matter.

I know it's hard, there is the security. But these places have no mirrors, you lose track of your self-image, you want to see yourself.

Women are infantilized: sometimes people would come and do cut-and-paste with us, and not in the sense of building a collage, of expressing ourselves. Even the guards, even the religious folk, they sometimes think it is a big daycare. No, we have history.

Our families, too, could be careful not to judge. We must remember that incarcerated women are plural: there are people of all colors, all countries, religions. They are not an object of study. Remind them that they are human, because there, they do everything to make us forget.