

RELEASE: Homeowners Fighting Police Brutality Illegally Arrested, Never Charged
Home Closed by Dept. of Licensing & Inspections, Property Seized by PA State Police
Press Conference: Tuesday, June 17th, 1 pm, Outside West Side of City Hall

On Tuesday, June 17th, at 1pm, the owners and residents of 1652 Ridge Avenue will hold a press conference on the western steps of City Hall to inform reporters and interested parties about the June 13th police action seizing their property and sealing off their home. Please read the release below for more details.

Contact: Hannah Sassaman, hannahjs@prometheusradio.org, 267-970-4007
Andy Switzer, andrew_switzer@hotmail.com, 267-269-5448

On the morning of Friday, June 13th, 2008, plainclothes detectives and a Ninth Precinct Police Captain entered a Ridge Avenue home without a warrant and arrested four Philadelphia community members – Daniel Moffat, Trevor Burgess, Andrea Okorley, and Jennifer Rock. These residents were pulled from their home at 1652 Ridge Avenue, arrested, and detained without charges at the Ninth Philadelphia police precinct for over twelve hours. Less than twenty four hours later, almost half a dozen other law enforcement agencies, including the Department of Homeland Security and the Housing Authority, had conducted a tour of the property, and the Department of Licensing and Inspections had closed and sealed the property.

While police claimed entry to the property under the pretext that it was an abandoned building, the residents of 1652 Ridge Avenue have owned and lived at the property for up to four years, while they worked on and improved their house. They have been active members of the Francisville neighborhood – partnering on community food distribution and community garden projects, among others.

On one of the hottest days of the year, these community members were locked into police cars, waiting to discover the nature of the criminal charges against them, as multiple officials searched their home. “They said it wasn’t an arrest,” says Mr. Moffat. “The police captain [Wilson] said he’d do me a favor, and put us in a cell because it was so hot outside. I asked, if we weren’t being arrested, why we were being sent to be processed in jail? He smiled at me in a joking manner, and said, “Call it a kidnapping.” That was my last word with Captain Wilson before later that night, when I was in jail.” Moffat and his housemates were never charged with a crime.

The residents of 1652 Ridge Avenue learned that night, while in jail, that the Department of Licensing and Inspections had written up their home for multiple code violations – and that they would have only a few hours the next day to retrieve personal possessions, before the house was sealed to them and all other nonofficial entrants. When the residents returned to their home the next day, they found that personal papers, books, and computers had been rifled through or confiscated. Trevor Burgess, who returned to his room Saturday morning under police escorts, noted, “The only thing I really noticed they messed with was my photographs. All my photographs were just, like, torn through and all over my room. [The policeman] kept asking me about the photographs.”

“When I was allowed to enter the building, to get stuff out, when I got to my room, my room had been thoroughly searched,” said Moffat. “My computer was gone. I was informed that the Department of State had taken my computer for evidence. I couldn’t find my phone list that was posted on the wall. I couldn’t find a notepad with a bunch of my notes in it. I couldn’t find this little book with a lot of phone numbers in it.”

Residents stress that this incident happened just a week after they had begun circulating petitions about police surveillance cameras that had been installed in the neighborhood. Francisville, which abuts the newly affluent areas of Fairmount and Spring Garden, has seen a rise in police presence and in residents being asked for identification in their own neighborhood and in front of their homes. “It’s clear to me that you don’t have to be doing something wrong in order to be targeted by the police,” said Andrea Okorley. “The fact that we were communicating with our neighbors about the presence of surveillance cameras was threatening enough.”

These residents have called on press to not only hear their story, but to deepen coverage of increased police presence in the city – and the ways in which the city is driving out residents who have lived there for generations. “I want to go home,” says Jennifer Rock. “But this is not an isolated incident. So many others are losing their homes or their freedom – and they can’t be here to speak today.”