TOWARD A METHOD OF BLACK FEMINIST REFUSAL IN THE ST. LOUIS RENT STRIKE OF 1969

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JEAN KING: RENT STRIKE LEADER

In the winter of 1968, public housing resident Jean King was standing outside the Darst Apartments when she saw a young Andre Smallwood eat a piece of food off the ground. Disturbed by the scene, King recalled,

> I saw him stop to pick up something, I thought it was something he dropped. As I moved closer, I saw him pulling a piece of soggy bread from underneath the snow. I quickly ran out the door, grabbed him by the hand, and I really told him a thing or two about eating off the ground. And took him to his mother.[1]

As a welfare recipient and public housing resident, Andre's mother, Dolores Smallwood, received only $124 a month from the state of Missouri in Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) payments, while paying $42 a month for food stamps and $73 a month for rent. Left with less than $10 a month to cover other daily necessities, including formula for her newborn, Smallwood could not make ends meet.[2]

1 Public Housing Projects, Cochran Gardens Interior, St. Louis. Photograph: Arthur Witman, 1952

1 Jean King, unpublished interview by Michael Karp, May 15, 2012.
2 Patricia Rice, "Rent Strike Leader," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, July 29, 1969.

That fall, along with residents of the city's six other public housing complexes, Smallwood had received a letter from the St. Louis Housing Authority (SLHA) stating that her rent would increase for the third time that year. The new schedule would calculate rent based upon the size of the apartment rather than a family's total income, primarily targeting tenants in larger apartments.[3] Smallwood's family lived in a three-bedroom apartment. She could no longer both pay her rent and feed her family. King remembered her shock as she spoke with Smallwood that day: "I'd never seen a welfare check in my life. I didn't know nothing about it. I honestly believed, because I didn't know any better, that people on welfare really had it made because the government gave them enough to live. Boy was I in for a rude awakening."[4]

While King and Smallwood both lived in the Darst Apartments, a high-rise public housing complex on St. Louis's near south side, their lives contrasted deeply. Smallwood was among the 65 percent of the city's public housing residents, most of whom were single Black mothers, who relied on state welfare payments for their income.[5] As a single mother of a large family, Smallwood was subject to surveillance by welfare caseworkers and was particularly vulnerable to fluctuating rent prices. King had been living in Darst with her husband and daughter for four years when they decided to leave public housing. While other residents were captive to continually increasing rent schedules and unlivable housing conditions, King, who could afford to find housing in the private rental market, intended to move her family to the city's newly built Laclede Town, an apartment complex located near the downtown central business district. "Well, my husband and I being classified as middle income at the time," she recalled, "we decided we could do better. And we were just going to move out. … All I had to do was go over and sign the lease and we were out of there."[6] But after learning about the hardships that Smallwood faced as a public housing resident on welfare, King quickly shifted her attention away from Laclede Town: "I don't have time for that, people need help."[7] That night, she attended a rent strike meeting in the near north side Blumeyer Apartments. The Black women who led the gathering had been meeting regularly. "I must've said what I had witnessed that day with my own eyes," King recalled. "I do remember saying 'somebody's got to do something and I'm ready to go.' And somehow, that group of unknown people who had never seen me before—I'd never seen them—they organized. They voted 'we are going on a rent strike.'"[8] With the rent strike officially scheduled, King left the meeting as chair of the City-Wide Rent Strike Committee.

3 "Public Housing Rent Hike," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, November 6, 1968; "Rent Hikes Scheduled in Public Housing Units," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, November 7, 1968.

4 Rice, "Rent Strike Leader" (see note 2); King interview by Karp (see note 1).

5 St. Louis Housing Authority, "The Financial Problems Relevant to the Public Housing Rent Strike in St. Louis," April 24, 1969, in Alfonso J. Cervantes Records, Washington University in St. Louis Special Collections.

6 Jean King Chavis, interview by Doris A. Wesley, June 18, 1997, in Lift Every Voice and Sing Oral History Project, State Historical Society of Missouri.

7 King Chavis interview by Wesley.

8 King interview by Karp (see note 1).

2 "Mrs. Jean King," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*. Photograph: John M. Bloomquist, February 17, 1969

King's journey to becoming a central leader of the St. Louis rent strike of 1969, the nation's largest and longest rent strike at the time, dramatizes both the precarity of life for most Black women residing in public housing and the strategies of resistance that these women engaged in to fight for dignity. In addition to navigating the material effects of rent increases, Black women who received public assistance were blamed and stigmatized for their poverty as a rhetoric of "cultural pathology" took hold across the country. Propagated most notably in Daniel Patrick Moynihan's 1965 report

on the purported origins of Black poverty, this framework held that Black women's style of mothering and nonnormative family structures, rather than systematic job and housing discrimination or strict welfare codes, caused cycles of poverty.[9] As poor Black women were deemed a problem, they were blamed for the deterioration of living conditions in public housing and became the face of modern public housing's failure. Notoriously, the Pruitt-Igoe development, a thirty-three-building public housing complex in St. Louis known for its high rates of crime and spectacular demolition by wrecking ball, became a national symbol for this deterioration.[10] Yet, as Black women navigated their day-to-day lives in public housing, they increasingly became politicized to contest welfare policies and state politics.[11] King's initial act of refusal, her decision to forgo a private apartment at Laclede Town and instead continue living and organizing in public housing, guides the theoretical framing of this essay.

The central interpretive frame of refusal here describes a material practice of negation, a figurative practice in imagining and enacting future liberation in the present, and an epistemology guided by Black women's experiences with the state through the entitlements of public housing and welfare. I contend that, throughout the rent strike, leaders enacted a method of Black feminist refusal through their organizing tactics, strike demands, and goals, all of which sought both to alter the quotidian condition of life in public housing and to articulate a vision of Black liberation unbounded by the logics of possessive individualism, private property, and normative domesticity. My use of the framework of Black feminist refusal is not an effort to ascribe a method of resistance to women who would not have used this terminology to describe themselves but rather to "situate practices [and] ideas ... within a broader framework and historical tradition of challenges" to state-maintained structures of spatial inequity based on race.[12] The genealogy of Black feminist refusal I rely on, one rooted in a broader practice of the oppressed seeking to dismantle structures of violence, emerges from scholars across the fields of African American history, Black feminist thought, and Indigenous studies.[13] Through a collective refusal to pay rent, refusal to

9 Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1965), 78.

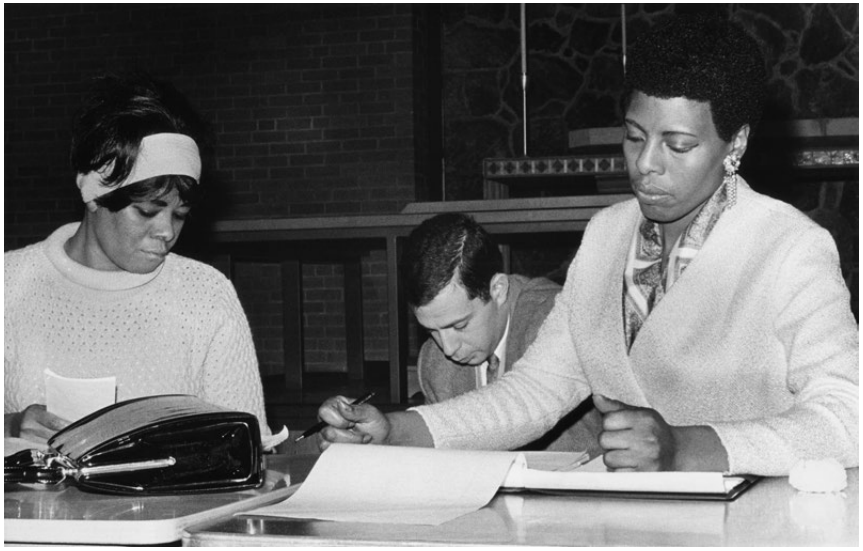
10 Katharine G. Bristol, "The Pruitt-Igoe Myth," *Journal of Architectural Education* 44, no. 3 (1991), 163–71, https://doi.org/10.1080/10464883.1991.11102687; Charles Jencks, "The Death of Modern Architecture," in *The Language of Post-modern Architecture* (Rizzoli, 1991), 22–37.

11 Scholars have shown that as Black women living in public housing developments confronted the inequalities of public assistance, they politicized the seemingly mundane and private acts of paying rent, raising children, and managing a home. See Lisa Levenstein, *A Movement without Marches: African American Women and the Politics of Poverty in Postwar Philadelphia* (University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Akira Drake Rodriguez, *Diverging Spaces for Deviants: The Politics of Atlanta's Public Housing* (University of Georgia Press, 2021); Rhonda Y. Williams, *The Politics of Public Housing: Black Women's Struggles against Urban Inequality* (Oxford University Press, 2005).

12 Sarah Haley, *No Mercy Here: Gender, Punishment, and the Making of Jim Crow Modernity* (University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 292.

13 For histories of Black women's centuries-long legacy of engaging in strategic resistive practices, see Stephanie Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Haley, *No Mercy Here*; Saidiya

stay-in-place, and King's refusal to assume middle-class subjectivity, Black women public housing residents placed the needs of Black women and children at the center of their larger vision for Black liberation.



3 "Irene Thomas, Secretary of Peabody Webbe Darst Movement for Better Living, Phillip Fishman, Their Legal Council, and Irma Jean King, President of the Organization at Work During a Rent Strike," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. Photograph: Fred Sweets, February 2, 1969

In telling the story of the 1969 city-wide rent strike, this essay centers the activism of King while acknowledging the organizing of women such as strike leaders Bertha Mason, Edna Thompson, and Veapplise Mack. On February 3, King joined Mason, Thompson, and Mack to officially begin the nine-month-long coordinated rent strike. With King representing public housing tenants living on the city's south side and Mason, Thompson, and Mack representing those on the north side, all leaders hoped to force the SLHA to decrease rent. In a list of demands sent to housing authority Executive Director Irvin Dagen and St. Louis Mayor Alfonso J. Cervantes, strike leaders called for a reduction in rents, tenant representation on the housing authority's board of commissioners, improvements in living conditions, three-year leases, and that no tenant's rent would exceed 25 percent of their income.[14] Through the act of withholding rent, strikers refused to

Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals* (Norton, 2019); Tera Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Harvard University Press, 1997); Robin D.G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Beacon Press, 2002). For Black feminist theorizing within the field of visual culture, see Tina Campt, *Listening to Images* (Duke University Press, 2017). I also rely on Audra Simpson's theorization of refusal as a political strategy engaged by the Mohawks of Kahnawà:ke to reject settler sovereignty while maintaining alternative modes of belonging: Audra Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life across the Borders of Settler States* (Duke University Press, 2014).

14 Office of Mayor Cervantes, "Demand of St. Louis Public Housing Rent Strikers," 1969,

partake in their established role as tenants in contract with their landlord, the housing authority. Ultimately galvanizing national support and the participation of more than 2,400 tenants from all seven of the city's public housing complexes, strike leaders pushed the issue of low-income housing to the forefront of local Black Power organizing and inspired changes in federal housing legislation. Yet, this essay is primarily concerned with the ways Black women activists used the rent strike as the terrain through which they deployed a nuanced critique of the system that maintained Jim Crow–era racial inequality through urban planning and public housing construction.

"SAFE, SANITARY, AND DECENT HOUSING": PUBLIC HOUSING TENANTS ON STRIKE

On the cold morning of February 3, 1969, Black women public housing residents officially launched a general strike against the housing authority. While the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* reported that more than one thousand tenants from five public housing complexes withheld their rent that day, King claimed that only three tenants from the near south side projects participated. "That first day," she recalled, "only three people, and I was one of them, had money to put in the bank. Of course, here come the newspapers. They came out and asked me at the end of the day, 'Ms. King, how many people joined the rent strike?' I said '103 [families].'"[15] As chair of the City-Wide Rent Strike Committee, King represented tenants living in the near south side Darst, Webbe, and Clinton-Peabody Apartments. Her blatant exaggeration of the number of participants was a ploy to both "scare the hell out of the city" and inspire more tenants to join.[16] On the near north side, strike leaders Mason, Thompson, and Mack led the striking tenants of Carr Square Village, Cochran Gardens, and Vaughn Apartments.[17] They began the strike by staging a picket line blocking the housing authority's north-side rental offices and bussing elderly tenants to a local bank to deposit their rent payments in a collective escrow account. Their spokesman, the Reverend Buck Jones, director of the nonprofit Plymouth House, reported to the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* that strikers deposited more than $10,000 in an escrow account, yet housing authority officials later disputed this claim.[18] Through their refusal to share accurate participation numbers that first week,

in Alfonso J. Cervantes Records, Washington University in St. Louis Special Collections.

15 King interview by Karp (see note 1).

16 King interview by Karp.

17 Mason served as president of the Carr Square Tenants Council. Thompson was chair of the Carr-Central Chapter of the League for Adequate Welfare. Mack led the striking tenants of Carr Square Village, Cochran Gardens, and Vaughn Apartments.

18 "Effectiveness of Rent Strike Being Disputed," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, February 6, 1969, in Globe Democrat Clippings M-112, St. Louis Mercantile Library; "Strikers to Open Escrow Account," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, February 5, 1969, in Globe Democrat Clippings M-112, St. Louis Mercantile Library; "Douthit Says Rent-Strikers Are 'Beating a Dead Horse,'" *St. Louis American*, February 6, 1969, in State Historical Society of Missouri.

4 "Public Housing Projects, Cochran Gardens Interior," St. Louis. Photograph: Arthur Witman, 1952

strike leaders emphasized that the protest would utilize numerous strategies to fight for the dignity of public housing residents.

Strikers protested both the dire state of living conditions in public housing and the SLHA's continual rent increases. Reports of neglected maintenance—inoperable elevators, flooding, lack of heat and hot water—and high levels of crime had dominated local newspaper coverage of public housing in St. Louis for years. While Pruitt-Igoe was well known for its high rates of violence and frequent heat and hot water outages, the city's six other developments were plagued by the same issues.[19] Conditions in the Vaughn apartments were so dire that tenants decried the housing authority as "derelict in providing services."[20] At Cochran Gardens, one longtime resident wrote a letter to the editor of the *St. Louis Argus* pleading for help in addressing the near-constant flooding in her apartment.[21] The St. Louis Board of Aldermen compiled a report on public housing living conditions, demanding that the housing authority "supply more necessary maintenance and custodial services" and "reduce rents immediately when the family in-

19 "Maintenance Problems Continue to Plague Pruitt-Igoe," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, January 14, 1970.

20 "Reports Maintenance Problems at Vaughn Center Are Acute," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, August 25, 1966.

21 "Cochran Letter to the Editor," *St. Louis Argus*, February 21, 1969, in University of Missouri-St. Louis Library.

5 "Pruitt-Igoe, Public Housing Projects, Moving in Day," St. Louis. Photograph: Arthur Witman, October 11, 1954

come has been reduced."[22] Tenants with the financial ability to leave public housing took their chances in the private rental market, thus decreasing public housing occupancy rates. In order to make up for this loss in revenue, the housing authority increased rents for remaining tenants.

Within the first week of the strike, King, Mason, and Thompson held rent strike rallies sketching out a clear set of demands. In correspondence ultimately sent to Dagen and Mayor Cervantes, strikers demanded:

> A reduction in the high rents we are now paying.
> A representative from each project on the board of commissioners of housing.
> That the Housing Authority start treating people as people, and not like

22 Board of Aldermen, "Report of Housing and Land Clearance Committee to Board of Aldermen," March 18, 1966, 8, in Alfonso J. Cervantes Records, Washington University in St. Louis Special Collections.

> animals. Also, that they respect the dignity and rights of all tenants … with no regard to color or finances.
> That general living conditions be improved.
> That tenants be required to sign three year leases only. Not the one year type that can be altered month to month at the housing authority and/or the local manager.
> That there be a moratorium on all law suits and evictions.[23]

Strike leaders asked for fair rent prices, reasonable lease terms, livable housing conditions, and more control over the housing authority's governance of their homes. Their demands responded to both short-term needs for safe and affordable housing and a long-term desire to be treated with dignity as low-income Black women receiving welfare. In a *Globe-Democrat* article, Vaughn Apartments resident Jessie Chatman lamented, "Right now I pay $65 a month [in rent]. I get $220 from welfare. And I've got seven children. If the rent keeps going up, I don't know how we can live here anymore."[24] As a single mother of a large family, Chatman's familial structure and financial status as a welfare recipient reflected that of a majority of women living in St. Louis public housing. Due to a Missouri state law regulating the familial structures of ADC recipients, many Black women in St. Louis public housing were forced to live as single mothers to receive benefits. In her 1968 study of Black girls living in St. Louis public housing, sociologist Joyce Ladner found that "The Missouri Welfare Department forbade the husband to live in the home, and women who received ADC allowances were not allowed legitimately to have boyfriends."[25] Moreover, Black female welfare recipients were subjected to constant state surveillance and strict restrictions on how they could furnish their apartments and spend public assistance entitlements. Within the context of a welfare system predicated on "means- and morals-testing," strike leaders embedded into their demands a keen understanding of the ways that the welfare system sought to control and shape the behavior of Black women.[26] Their demand that all public housing residents be treated "as people, and not like animals" envisaged a future where Black women's identities at the intersection of race, class, and gender did not equate with disrespect.

While King was inspired to participate in the strike due to her neighbor's plight as a welfare recipient, north-side strike leader and single mother of six children Thompson personally felt the financial strain of increasing rent payments. As early as 1967, Thompson began holding regular meetings

23 Office of Mayor Cervantes, "Demand of St. Louis Public Housing" (see note 14).

24 Robert Adams, "Rent Strike Threat in Public Housing," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, November 17, 1968, in Globe Democrat Clippings M-112, St. Louis Mercantile Library.

25 Joyce Ladner, *Tomorrow's Tomorrow: The Black Woman* (University of Nebraska Press, 1971), 36.

26 "Means- and morals-testing" described the power that welfare bureaucrats had to surveil recipients to confirm eligibility and prevent cheating of the system. For many poor Black women, this looked like invasive apartment visits by welfare caseworkers and regulation of their reproductive lives through "suitable home" and "man in the house" rules. Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (Vintage Books, 1997), 226–28.

in her Carr Square Village apartment to discuss the housing authority's rent increases with other mothers living in public housing. The meetings eventually grew so large that Thompson began hosting them at the nearby Plymouth House, a neighborhood nonprofit run by the young and charismatic Reverend Jones.[27] Strike leaders like Thompson understood the increasing difficulty for public housing tenants to both pay rent and care for their families as an issue that required action. For Thompson and other Black women living in state-subsidized housing, private efforts to feed their children and pay rent could not be divorced from a welfare system whose policies both pathologized poverty and yet made "affordable" housing increasingly unaffordable. As historian Rhonda Williams asserts, "Public housing created a bridge between the private sphere of daily living and the political sphere of government. It linked individual rights with social rights, daily budgets with state economics, and familial duties with community participation and political activism."[28] Strike leaders' central demands were directly shaped by Black women's everyday struggles to provide for their families.

6 "Pruitt-Igoe Apartment Buildings, May 14, 1956," St. Louis. Photograph: T. Mac Mizuki

As such, King and Thompson recognized that money was their chief bargaining power to improve life for public housing tenants. At an early rent strike meeting, Thompson asserted that withholding rent was central

27 Mack Williams, HERstory Nomination Form for "Queen" Edna Dale Harris Thompson, 2022. Mack Williams personal archive, unpublished.

28 Williams, *Politics of Public Housing* (see note 11), 7.

to obtaining their demands: "It seems a rent strike is our only hope. The housing authority is only interested in that long green stuff with the short future, and tenants, our future is very short."[29] King told reporters at the *Post-Dispatch*, "When we get our demands, the Housing Authority will get their money and not a minute before."[30] With the help of Richard Baron, a young attorney from the city's nonprofit Legal Aid Society, King and Jones (the latter acting as spokesman for north-side striking tenants) opened two escrow accounts and pledged to hold all rent money until the housing authority conceded to strikers' demands.[31] This strategy proved to be a salient one, as the number of participating tenants grew and tenants from all seven of the city's public housing complexes joined the strike.[32] In response, the SLHA quietly sent letters to all public housing tenants, threatening those who went on strike with fines and eviction suits. King even accused some housing authority officials of attempting to intimidate tenants in their homes, telling a reporter at the *Globe-Democrat* that "Managers have been knocking on doors and trying to scare people."[33] After Kenneth Brantley, public affairs director of the SLHA and the only Black employee on full-time staff, released a public statement in support of the rent strike, Executive Director Dagen terminated him.[34]

Despite the retaliation by city officials, strikers' continued engagement in economic refusal, rooted in knowledge that public housing residents were deserving of dignity, allowed them to continue gaining ground. Almost two months into the city-wide rent strike, the protest grew to include more than one thousand striking tenants from across the city's public housing developments. At a press conference that month, Thompson and Jones estimated that strikers had withheld at least $100,000 in unpaid rents, predicting that the total of withheld rents could easily reach $500,000 within a few months.[35] While this prediction would prove to be an exaggeration, strike leaders emphasized the radical impact that tenants' accumulation and redirection of capital to themselves could have on the Black poor confined to St. Louis's urban core. Thompson and Jones declared that unless the SLHA met the strikers' demands, tenants would keep the withheld rents to instead invest in "safe, sanitary and decent housing for themselves."[36] With

29 "At 3 Housing Developments Rent Strike to Begin Monday," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, January 30, 1969.

30 "Public Housing Protest 1000 Tenants Open Rent Strike," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, February 3, 1969; King Chavis interview by Wesley (see note 6).

31 "Rent Strike Leaders Quit City Hall Parley," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, March 4, 1969, in Globe Democrat Clippings M-112, St. Louis Mercantile Library.

32 "Rent Strike Continues; More Join in Support of Protest," *St. Louis Argus*, March 7, 1969, in University of Missouri-St. Louis Library.

33 Richard Krantz, "High Rents, Poor Services: Leader of Housing Strike Tells of Tenants' Plight," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, February 17, 1969, in Globe Democrat Clippings M-112, St. Louis Mercantile Library.

34 "Ken Brantley Fired for Supporting Rent-Strikers," *St. Louis American*, March 27, 1969, in State Historical Society of Missouri; Jean King to Irvin Dagen, July 18, 1969, in Alfonso J. Cervantes Records, St. Louis Special Collections, Washington University.

35 "Proposal for Use of Rent Strike Fund," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, March 31, 1969.

36 "Proposal for Use of Rent Strike Fund."

this vision to build and maintain their own low-income housing, one that would be partially realized in the years after the rent strike, strike leaders called into question the housing authority's ability to effectively administer public assistance. While the strikers' refusal to pay rent allowed them to tip the power balance away from the housing authority, it also articulated a vision of the future where poor people in public housing exercised more control over the systems that governed their lives.

"A REVOLUTION HAS HIT ST. LOUIS": ENACTING GEOGRAPHIES OF REFUSAL

During the first week of the rent strike, the *Post-Dispatch* published an article featuring an image of strike leader Mack balancing on crutches with a determined look on her face. As vice president of the Carr Square Tenants Council, Mack led the north-side rent strikers in a day-long picket line in front of the housing authority's rental offices. Bundled in warm clothing, Mack defiantly held a sign that read, "Down with the rent or we can live in a tent."[37] This slogan, succinctly representing the dire situation that most tenants were forced to navigate, asserted the impossibility of choosing between paying higher rents or facing eviction. Mack's catchy reference to informal tent housing was a radical threat that anticipated the geographical reach of the Black women–led rent strike. By April, strike leaders had built an informal coalition with local Black Power groups, eventually joining with the Action Committee to Improve Opportunities for Negroes (ACTION) to threaten the creation of a tent city. Using the plight of Black women and children living in public housing as their motivator, ACTION planned to build an informal housing encampment for evicted public housing residents in St. Louis's affluent Clayton suburb, home of housing authority Executive Director Dagen. Within a national and local context of heightened support for the promises of Black Power, rent strikers staged direct confrontations with city officials beyond the geography of public housing. By occupying sites outside St. Louis's "Black Archipelago"—concentrations of the city's Black population surrounded by "seas of white racism"—strikers enacted a refusal to stay in place.[38] Rent strikers dramatized their demands for safe and affordable public housing while contesting the racialized and gendered logic of urban renewal that originally built public housing in St. Louis.[39]

37 "Public Housing Protest: 1000 Tenants Open Rent Strike," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, February 3, 1969.

38 Joseph Heathcott, "Black Archipelago: Politics and Civil Life in the Jim Crow City," *Journal of Social History* 38 (2005), 705–36, here 707, https://doi.org/10.1353/jsh.2005.0035.

39 St. Louis city officials' urban renewal efforts—a collection of schemes to rid the city center of slums and attract commercial, industrial, and middle-class private housing back to downtown—were intimately entangled with the city's approach to public housing construction. As early as 1941, city planners hoped that the construction of Carr Square Village, a north-side public housing project built to house poor African Americans, would prevent Black migration into other parts of the city. By the post–World War II era and the passage of the 1949 Housing Act that allocated federal funds to cities for slum clearance, public housing had become synonymous

Black women began the rent strike at a moment when the rallying cry of Black Power—African American self-determination and militancy in the face of racial inequality—had reached an apex in St. Louis. The city was home to numerous radical organizations, including the Black Nationals, Zulu 1200's, and Black Liberators, that advocated for Black Power. ACTION and the St. Louis chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), groups that had oscillated between nonviolence and Black Power tactics, increasingly became more militant in their fight against racism.[40] While some Black women were members of local Black Power groups, these organizations' focus on the needs of working-class Black men left many women to engage in their own direct-action protests. In the years prior to the rent strike, Black women engaged in large-scale protests for increased job opportunities and linked their fight for fair wages and affordable housing to the larger Black Freedom Struggle. In 1968, hundreds of Black women living in public housing marched to St. Louis City Hall in defense of welfare rights as members of the Zulu 1200's and ACTION's Guerrilla Force served as protest marshals. The legacy of Black women's grassroots organizing inspired six of the city's Black Power groups to declare their support for rent strikers, pledging in March 1969 to "become fully involved at such time as we consider it to be helpful to the people."[41] Their formal support of the rent strike would prove significant, as historian George Lipsitz observes, "Coming from groups better known for paramilitary organization and armed self-defense than for melioristic reform, that endorsement served to embolden the tenants, worry city officials, and increase the negotiating leverage of the strikers."[42]

Following through on their promise, ACTION leaders joined rent strikers in a campaign to create a tent city in Clayton, Missouri's Shaw Park. They used the lived experiences of Black women such as Lizzie J. Lee, a single mother facing eviction from her apartment in the south-side Clinton-Peabody Apartments, to dramatize the urgency of the rent strike. In a statement to the Clayton Board of Aldermen, ACTION spokesman the Reverend William L. Matheus contrasted the "green lawns and clean streets"

with urban renewal. Colin Gordon, *Mapping Decline: St. Louis and the Fate of the American City* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 98–100. Historian Keona K. Ervin demonstrates that St. Louis city planners believed that, to make way for capital investment and "for St. Louis to rebound, it would have to limit the mobility and access of poor and working-class people of color." Keona Ervin, *Gateway to Equality: Black Women and the Struggle for Economic Justice in St. Louis* (University of Kentucky Press, 2017), 152.

40 Clarence Lang, *Grassroots at the Gateway: Class Politics and Black Freedom Struggle in St. Louis, 1936–75* (University of Michigan Press, 2009), 187.

41 Black Conference, "Joint Action Statement," March 5, 1969, in Alfonso J. Cervantes Records, Washington University in St. Louis Special Collections. At a press conference organized by St. Louis activist Ivory Perry, these organizations, including the St. Louis chapter of CORE, Zulu 1200's, Black Liberators, the Metropolitan Tenant Organization, Black Nationals, and ACTION, released their joint statement, calling themselves the Black Conference.

42 George Lipsitz, *A Life in the Struggle: Ivory Perry and the Culture of Opposition* (Temple University Press, 1988), 149; "Public Housing Faces Crisis," *St. Louis Sentinel*, July 26, 1969, in Alfonso J. Cervantes Records, Washington University in St. Louis Special Collections.

of Clayton to the "concentration-like camp[s]" of public housing developments.[43] He continued,

> The rent strike of St. Louis public housing tenants is a serious reality facing the entire metropolitan area ... when Mr. Irvin Dagen and his St. Louis Housing Authority move against striking tenants drastic direct-action will be taken to dramatize the plight of homeless black women and children evicted and set out on city sidewalks amidst their belongings.[44]

Matheus contended that the poor living conditions and unaffordable rents in public housing were intimately connected to the large homes and clean streets of Clayton. City planning initiatives coded as efforts to modernize St. Louis in the 1950s and 1960s functioned to geographically isolate low-income Black people, concentrate poverty within Black communities living in public housing, and deny the Black community access to property ownership. St. Louis city planners built public housing projects in strategic sites north and south of the central business district to protect white property values. By connecting the plight of public housing tenants to "the entire metropolitan area," rent strikers contended that the geography of St. Louis public housing was based upon a racialized logic.

When Clayton's Board of Aldermen rejected ACTION's request for a permit to build the tent city, the group worked with rent strikers to instead occupy the front lawn of Dagen's Clayton home. Contending that Dagen paid Clayton property taxes partially from the salary he received as executive director of the housing authority, it followed, the strikers argued, that the "green lawns" of Clayton were subsidized by "poor public housing tenants."[45] Not afraid to engage in more radical forms of protest, their occupation of Dagen's front lawn created enough physical damage that the housing authority's board of commissioners passed a motion that "all expenses involved in replacing the lawn at the home of Executive Director, which has been ruined by the rent strikers, be borne by the Authority."[46] Through the burgeoning coalition between rent strikers and ACTION, public housing tenants occupied spaces where they did not belong, making visible the intimacies between disinvestment in the city and development of the suburbs. As the rent strike continued into its fourth month, strikers showed they were willing to engage not only in withholding rent but in more direct-action protests that disrupted the sanctity of sites of power.

43 "ACTION Seeks Permission to Build Tent City," *St. Louis Argus*, April 25, 1969, in Alfonso J. Cervantes Records, Washington University in St. Louis Special Collections.

44 "ACTION Seeks Permission."

45 ACTION, "NEWS RELEASE FROM: ACTION Headquarters," April 18, 1969, in Alfonso J. Cervantes Records, Washington University in St. Louis Special Collections; "ACTION Seeks Permission" (see note 43); "ACTION Plans to Go Forward if Tenants Evicted," *St. Louis Argus*, April 25, 1969, in Alfonso J. Cervantes Records, Washington University in St. Louis Special Collections.

46 St. Louis Housing Authority Board of Commissioners, "Memo to Replace Lawn at Home of Executive Director," June 1969, in Alfonso J. Cervantes Records, Washington University in St. Louis Special Collections.

King organized direct-action protests targeting Mayor Cervantes. Strike leaders called on Cervantes to publicly support tenants on strike and use his influence to "take a firm and positive stand for justice and truth."[47] Yet, both publicly and privately Cervantes sided with the housing authority, even releasing a public statement questioning the integrity of the strike leaders.[48] In response, King made a point to frequently occupy Cervantes's office and embarrass him at public events to force him to pay attention to strikers' demands. King recalled, "every time you looked around, I was in his office." She continued,

> I would pick up a bunch of babies, four, five-years-old. I told the mothers, "I'm going to the Mayor's office, can I take your child with me? You'll probably see your child on tv this evening." I'd just go down there and give him hell. I'd ... call the police—they'd give me an escort, make sure the babies were safe—and we'd just walk across the 14th Street bridge to the Mayor's office. [I'd] just let them sit all over his office, tell his secretary they wanted to go to the bathroom. "You want ice cream? Tell her because she works for me and your mother." We did that several times.[49]

By occupying the mayor's office frequently, King suggested that rent strikers would not hesitate to engage in more drastic forms of protest. Sometimes bringing up to thirty children with her, King hoped to create a spectacle that would force Cervantes to directly face those who were most vulnerable to poor living conditions and high rents: children. These "visits" dramatized the high stakes of the rent strike for Black women with children whose livelihoods were circumscribed by employment discrimination and stagnant welfare checks.

Almost a month later, King again threatened Cervantes with direct action when she sent him a letter in response to the opening of the Spanish Pavilion. Intending for it to serve as a profitable tourist attraction in line with the city's Gateway Arch, Cervantes had allocated thousands of dollars to relocate New York City's 1964 Spanish Pavilion to downtown St. Louis. King wrote,

> We the city wide rent strikers of your city would like to congratulate you for your interest in everything but the poor people's plight in your fine city. However, we also feel that the poor people in your city should be congratulated for their fine behavior and nonviolent acts during this time you have taxed them to death in order that you might provide a happy and wealthy life for yourself and your henchmen.[50]

47 Rent Strikers of Carr-Vaughn, "Letter to Mayor A. J. Cervantes," 1969, in Alfonso J. Cervantes Records, Washington University in St. Louis Special Collections.

48 Office of Mayor Cervantes, "Rent Strike Statement," May 1969, in Alfonso J. Cervantes Records, Washington University in St. Louis Special Collections.

49 King interview by Karp (see note 1).

50 Jean King, "Letter to Mr. Cervantes," May 19, 1969, in Alfonso J. Cervantes Records,

After promising to Cervantes that strikers would "let everyone visiting your city know that you have poor people in it that you obviously don't give a damn about," King and other rent strikers protested the event.[51] As limousines dropped off "dignitaries from around the world," King ran up to put her arms around Cervantes and his wife, hoping to embarrass the mayor. King remembered, "He just looked at us crazy. It was fun! He said something about me cussing like a sailor. He was right about that too."[52] King's threatening letter and protest at the Spanish Pavilion highlighted the spatial inequalities of urban renewal efforts: while the city invested capital in what it hoped would be a lucrative tourist attraction, public housing residents faced unlivable rents. King's disruptive approach constituted a refusal to stay in place, an active critique of the racialized spatial ordering of urban St. Louis. Through this refusal King and the rent strikers both hoped their demands would be met and envisioned a future where "poor people" were valued.

"WE BROKE THE HOUSING AUTHORITY": MODELING AN ALTERNATIVE URBAN FUTURE

As the rent strike stretched into its seventh month, attempts by the mayor and housing authority to negotiate a strike resolution continually failed. In one proposal, the housing authority agreed to strikers' original requests while ignoring newer demands, such as a requirement for all housing authority employees to undergo human relations training. Charging that the proposal was a "ruse to get money," King asserted that city officials' attempts at compromise "hasn't changed things one bit—we're no closer to settling the strike and no farther away."[53] Her steadfast refusal to concede until the housing authority met all of their demands served to heighten city officials' anxiety. In a confidential memorandum circulating within the mayor's office, a staff member warned that failed negotiations could lead to volatility: "It seems that a continued lack of settlement can worsen the situation by making the tenants more willing to follow militant leadership if the more moderate leaders cannot deliver."[54] Referring to the "militant leadership" of King, city officials worried that tenants were losing faith in spokesman Jones's strategy of political protest through "negotiations and court processes" and would instead seek out more radical forms of protest.[55]

Housing authority officials and the mayor's office turned to the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) for aid in resolving

Washington University in St. Louis Special Collections.

51 King, "Letter to Mr. Cervantes."

52 King interview by Karp (see note 1).

53 "Rent Strike Leaders Reject Mayor's Offer," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, August 6, 1969, in Globe Democrat Clippings M-112, St. Louis Mercantile Library; Alfonso J. Cervantes, "Memo to News Editors," August 7, 1969, in Alfonso J. Cervantes Records, Washington University in St. Louis Special Collections.

54 Dave Meeker, "Confidential Memorandum to Mayor Cervantes," April 23, 1969, in Alfonso J. Cervantes Records, Washington University in St. Louis Special Collections.

55 Meeker, "Confidential Memorandum to Mayor Cervantes."

7 "Rent Strike Leader," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*. Photograph: Paul Ockrassa, April 4, 1969

the rent strike, petitioning for federal funding to cover the SLHA's operating deficit. Calling St. Louis's crisis in public housing a "local issue," HUD rejected the request for money and instead sent a group of researchers to St. Louis to investigate the stalemate in negotiations. The seven-person research committee, headed by former Baltimore public housing administrator Edgar Ewing, ultimately echoed HUD's original conclusion.[56] Frustrated with the committee's lack of helpful suggestions, King, Jones, and Percy

56 "Public Housing Faces Crisis" (see note 42).

Green, chairman of ACTION, were critical of the committee's visit. Charging that it shifted attention away from the core issues of the rent strike, Green asserted,

> This is a waste of time. Black people have been studied to death. The money could be better spent for the purpose of helping people. ... You're not going to do anything back in Washington. This trip is worth zero. ... The whole damned Housing Authority is a bunch of political prostitutes. ... The problem is racism.[57]

Green and strike leaders believed that neither the housing authority nor HUD were equipped to solve the present crisis in public housing or the underlying issues that structured the lives of poor Black people living in St. Louis. The rent strike hoped to accomplish more than lower rents and safer housing—strikers sought to call into question the legitimacy of larger systems of urban renewal, welfare policies, and racial discrimination.

In an attempt to shift the scales of negotiation in their favor, SLHA officials and the Cervantes administration attacked the trustworthiness of strike leaders and the legitimacy of their escrow accounts. After a report was circulated around the mayor's office that estimated that up to $700,000 in withheld rents would be missing from the housing authority's revenue by the end of September, Cervantes released a public statement implying that leaders King and Jones were withholding important information about the escrow accounts.[58] Cervantes asserted that the undisclosed location of withheld rents was "worrisome."[59] He continued, "We know that $108,000 is being held in banks. But where, it should be asked, is the other $350,000 owed in back rents? The strike leaders have a moral and legal obligation to these poor people to make a complete public accounting of all the money they have received."[60] Cervantes claimed that strike leaders King and Jones were not qualified to manage the withheld rents, suggesting that a "suitable agency" such as the St. Louis chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) or the local Urban League chapter handle the escrow accounts instead.[61]

City officials did not understand that, for King, the goals of the rent strike transcended a desire for the housing authority to concede to strikers' demands. King hoped to improve the lives of public housing residents and encouraged tenants to participate in acts of resistance in any way they could. Some strikers deposited their withheld rent money in escrow accounts, but King estimated that a larger majority saved the money or spent it on daily

57 "Public Housing Faces Crisis."

58 Office of Mayor Cervantes, "Report on St. Louis Housing Authority," September 1969, 4, in Alfonso J. Cervantes Records, Washington University in St. Louis Special Collections.

59 "Mayor Issues Challenge to Rent Strike Leaders," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, August 8, 1969, in Globe Democrat Clippings M-112, St. Louis Mercantile Library.

60 "Mayor Issues Challenge."

61 "Rent Strike Leaders Quit" (see note 31).

necessities.[62] King even returned to the strikers the rent payments held in escrow, both to avoid disclosing specific numbers to city officials and to help tenants buy groceries. After a string of mailbox break-ins at the south-side Clinton-Peabody, Vaughn, and Darst-Webbe Apartments left many residents without their welfare checks, King withdrew money from the escrow account and returned it to families in need. She told the *Globe-Democrat*, "The majority of those withholding their rents spend the money. Children have meat this summer and new shoes. Some families have bought furniture."[63] While the withheld rent payments served as a potent bargaining tool for strikers, King was interested in directly addressing the "human need" of residents.[64] As a self-identified "dreamer," her vision for the future of public housing in St. Louis saw beyond forcing the state to provide improved living conditions for low-income Black residents to also encompass a system where tenants governed themselves.[65]

8 "Mrs. Jean King, A Leader of the Public Housing Rent Strike, and Lawyer Philip Fishman at Press Conference Thursday," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*. Photograph: Howard Vogt, August 1, 1969

62 Jean King, "Letter to All Residents of Peabody-Darst-Webbe," August 29, 1969, in Alfonso J. Cervantes Records, Washington University in St. Louis Special Collections, 2.

63 "Escrow Funds Returned to Some Rent Strikers," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, June 19, 1969, in Globe Democrat Clippings M-112, St. Louis Mercantile Library.

64 "Escrow Funds Returned."

65 King Chavis interview by Wesley (see note 6.)

9 "Ms. Betty Randall, Webbe Housing Manager and Mrs. Jean King, Darst Housing Manager," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*. Photograph: John M. Bloomquist, December 12, 1975

By early October the housing authority was on the brink of bankruptcy. Support for the rent strike continued unabated, with more than 2,400 tenants participating. As a final resort, Mayor Cervantes called upon Harold Gibbons, a veteran labor organizer with the Congress of Industrial Organizations and a representative of twenty labor organizations across Missouri, to organize a meeting of community leaders. "As the real power in St. Louis," King recalled, "[Gibbons] took our situation at the heart and personally met with the Mayor and pulled all the civic leaders, and whoever thought they were somebody in this city, to come together and bring an end to this rent strike."[66] Called the "Convening of the Coalition," the day-long meeting of community leaders and rent strike leaders led to the creation of the Civic Alliance for Housing (CAH), an organization that would serve as a short- and long-term intermediary between public housing tenants and the housing authority. In the weeks that followed, the CAH drafted a final rent strike agreement, created a Tenant Affairs Board made up of a representative from each of the city's seven public housing complexes, and nominated three public housing tenants to replace members on the housing authority's board of commissioners.[67] On October 30, city officials and rent strike leaders King and Jones formally

66 King interview by Karp (see note 1).

67 Harold Gibbons, "Convening of the Coalition," October 10, 1969, in Alfonso J. Cervantes Records, Washington University in St. Louis Special Collections.

signed the agreement to end the nine-month-long strike. City officials agreed to limit rents to no more than 25 percent of a tenant's income, appoint three tenants to the SLHA Board of Commissioners, end all lawsuits against delinquent tenants, and look to form tenant management corporations at the Carr Square Village and Vaughn developments.[68] King recalled, "We broke the housing authority in nine months flat. I mean, we broke them and the strike was over."[69]

In the aftermath of the rent strike, King continued to work for public housing justice, asserting, "The ending of the strike is only the beginning."[70] Through the relationship she built with lawyer Baron, King met and worked closely with Senator Edward Brooke, the first popularly elected Black senator from Massachusetts, to develop the Brooke Amendment to the Housing Act of 1969. The amendment established that low-income families could spend no more than 25 percent of their income on rent on the federal level. King recalled, "It also paved the way for the Department of Housing and Urban Development to give subsidies to housing authorities so that they could pay the difference between ... the twenty-five percent and what the rental unit actually rented for."[71] On the heels of this important legislative change, King continued to advocate for public housing residents as a representative on the newly formed Tenant Affairs Board and as head of the tenant management corporation at Darst Apartments, managing the administration, maintenance, and security of the housing development.[72] Her radical vision of the future of public housing, one rooted in a method of refusal, was grounded in the belief that, to truly improve the conditions of public housing, tenants needed to be in charge.

68 "Rent Strikers Sign Agreement," *St. Louis American*, October 30, 1969, in State Historical Society of Missouri; "Summary of Demands Made in Rent Strike," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, October 29, 1969; Robert Adams, "5 New Housing Commissioners Include 2 Long-Time Tenants," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, October 29, 1969, in Globe Democrat Clippings M-112, St. Louis Mercantile Library.

69 King Chavis interview by Wesley (see note 6).

70 "Civic Alliance for Housing Ends Strike, Begins Needed Changes," *Missouri Teamster* 7, no. 6 (1969), 7.

71 King Chavis interview by Wesley (see note 6).

72 "Tenant Control More than Just a Slogan Here," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, June 30, 1973, in Globe Democrat Clippings M-112, St. Louis Mercantile Library.

INTERTEXTS

Intertext 1: The rent strikers of Carr-Vaughn, "Letter to Mayor A. J. Cervantes," 1969. Alfonso J Cervantes Papers, Washington University in St. Louis Special Collections, wua00358-s02-b50-f02-284

Intertext 2: Office of Mayor Cervantes, "Demand of St. Louis Public Housing Rent Strikers," 1969. Alfonso J Cervantes Papers, Washington University in St. Louis Special Collections, wua00358-s02-b49-f01-230

Intertexts 1 and 2, background: "Public Housing Projects, Cochran Gardens Interior," St. Louis. Photograph: Arthur Witman, 1952. © The State Historical Society of Missouri, S0717

Intertext 3: Public Housing Rent Strike Representatives, "Letter to Mayor Cervantes," February 26, 1969. Alfonso J Cervantes Papers, Washington University in St. Louis Special Collections

Intertext 4: Jean King, "Letter to Mr. Cervantes," May 19, 1969. Alfonso J Cervantes Papers, Washington University in St. Louis Special Collections, wua00358-s02-b49-f01-191

Intertexts 3 and 4, background: "Aerial View of Pruitt-Igoe And Vaughn Public Housing," St. Louis. Photograph: Theodore "Ted" McCrea. © Missouri Historical Society, P0311-0001

Intertext 5: Jean King, "Letter to Irvin Dagen," July 18, 1969. Alfonso J Cervantes Papers, Washington University in St. Louis Special Collections, wua00358-s02-b49-f01-231

Intertext 6: Reverend Buck Jones, Bertha Mason, and Jessie Chatman, "Opportunity Knocking!," August 1969. Alfonso J Cervantes Papers, Washington University in St. Louis Special Collections, wua00358-s02-b50-f02-046

Intertexts 5 and 6, background: Public housing projects, aerial, Pruitt-Igoe, Cochran Gardens, Carr Square Village, St. Louis. Photograph: Arthur Witman, August 20, 1954. © The State Historical Society of Missouri, S0732

TO: Mayor A.J. Cervantes

FROM: The Rent Strkers of Carr - Vaughn

We, the Rent Strikers of Carr Square and Vaughn, appeal to the moral conscience of our MAYOR to take a firm and positive stand for JUSTICE AND TRUTH. We feel that you can demonstrate your concern for the poor tenants of St. Louis Public Housing by:

1. Support publicly the Rent Strikers in their struggle for a VOICE and CHANGE in the administration of the St. Louis Housing Authority.
2. Instruct the St. Louis Housing Authority to rollback the rents....
3. Write HUD and inform Mr Romney that the St. Louis Housing Authority is using federal money to blackmail striking tenants.
4. We urge the mayor to make good his promise to send strike leaders to Washington to discuss the public housing crisis in St. Louis.
5. We urge you to compel the St. Louis Housing Authority to withdraw all suits filed against RENT STRIKE FUNDS.
6. We urge you to support ~~Huse~~ House Bill 644.

Housing

Demand of St. Louis Public Housing Rent Strikers

1. A reduction in the high rents we are now paying.

2. A representative from each project on the board of commissioners of housing.

3. That the Housing Authority start treating people as people, and not like animals. Also, that they respect the dignity and rights of all tenants . . . with no regard to color or finances.

4. That general living conditions be improved.

5. That tenants ve required to sign three year leases only. Not the one year type that can be altered month to month at the housing authority and/or the local manager.

6. That there be a moratorium on all law suits and evictions.

cr

cc: Fro Dagen 2/27/69 mwj

February 26, 1969

MAYOR'S OFFICE
FEB 27 1969

The Honorable A.J. Cervantes
Mayor, City of St. Louis
City Hall
St. Louis, Mo. 63103

Dear Mayor Cervantes:

We, the leaders of the Public Housing Rent Strike have informed Mr. Dagen of our demands as he requested at our meeting yesterday.

It was our understanding that we were going to meet only with you yesterday and not with members of the Housing Authority present.

We feel that Mr. Dagen has now made his case to us with the exception of declaring a moratorium on all legal action against striking tenants. We feel that we cannot talk with Mr. Dagen in an atmosphere of good faith until the Housing Authority dismisses all law suits filed during the last week and declares a moratorium on all future law suits pending a resolution of the entire matter.

Mr. Dagen stated to us yesterday that he had no authority to act without the consent of the Board of Housing Commissioners. Therefore we feel that we might most profitably meet with you, the Housing lCommissioners, and any other Federal Officials who might be available at the meeting scheduled for next Monday, March 3.

Thank you for your concern and cooperation.

Public Housing Rent Strike Representatives:

Mrs. Bertha Mason, Carr Square-Vaughn

Mr. Marc Murray, Cochran

Mrs. Jean King, Peabody, Webbe, Darst

c/o Plymouth House
1521 Carr

St. Louis, Mo. 63103

12

Phone: 421-2579

City Wide Rent Strike Committee
ST. STEPHENS EPISCOPAL CHURCH
14th and PARK STREET ST. LOUIS MO. 63104

Chairman
JEAN KING
Vice Chairman
ED ROY HARRIS
Secretary
LU MARY SCOTT
Treasurer
CLARENCE SWARM
MARC MURRAY

MAYOR'S OFFICE
RECEIVED
MAY 19 1969

May 19, 1969

THE HONORABLE A. J. CERVANTES, MAYOR
200 City Hall
Saint Louis, Missouri 63103

Dear Mr. Cervantes:

In view of the forthcoming opening of your fabulous Spanish International Pavilion, we the city wide rent strikers of your city would like to congratulate you for your interest in everything but the poor people's plight in your fine city.

However, we also feel that the poor people in your city should certainly be congratulated for their fine behavior and nonviolent acts all during the time you have taxed them to death in order that you might procure a happy and wealthy life for yourself and your henchmen.

We wonder why you are playing a game with us. It is a very dangerous one, you know. We didn't have to plead with you and we won't plead any longer. We want to know right now what you are going to do for the rent strikers in your city and Mr. Kenneth Brantley, who was fired for speaking out for his people.

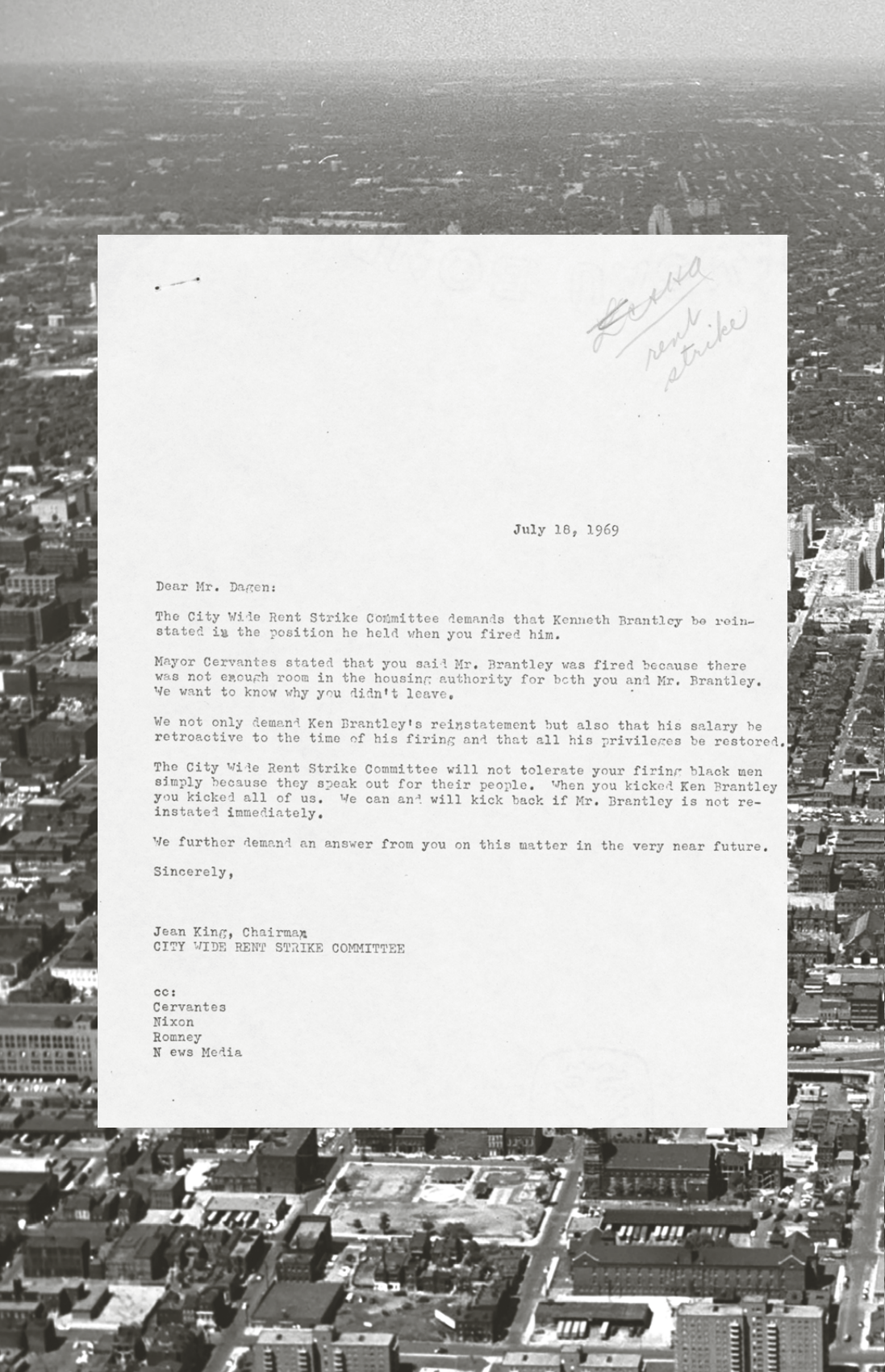
We feel that you should contribute $100 of the $1000 per couple fee that you are charging guests to poor people in public housing who need food in order to survive. We also would like you to admit fifty public housing tenants to your pavilion on opening night, free of charge. These tenants, selected by rent strike leaders, will never be able to attend your fine pavilion again. We would be happy to prepare and serve the meal for you and your guests in exchange for one or both of the above mentioned requests.

We feel that unless you honor some of our requests we have no other alternative than to demonstrate at your pavilion on opening night. We intend to let everyone visiting your city know that you have poor people in it that you obviously don't give a damn about.

Sincerely yours,

Jean King

Jean King, Chairman
CITY WIDE RENT STRIKE COMMITTEE



Cervantes
rent
strike

July 18, 1969

Dear Mr. Dagen:

The City Wide Rent Strike Committee demands that Kenneth Brantley be reinstated in the position he held when you fired him.

Mayor Cervantes stated that you said Mr. Brantley was fired because there was not enough room in the housing authority for both you and Mr. Brantley. We want to know why you didn't leave.

We not only demand Ken Brantley's reinstatement but also that his salary be retroactive to the time of his firing and that all his privileges be restored.

The City Wide Rent Strike Committee will not tolerate your firing black men simply because they speak out for their people. When you kicked Ken Brantley you kicked all of us. We can and will kick back if Mr. Brantley is not reinstated immediately.

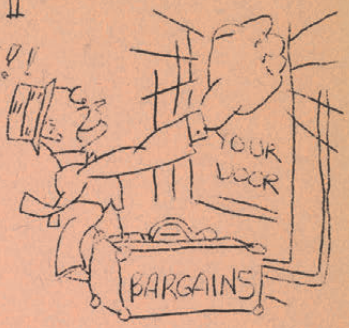
We further demand an answer from you on this matter in the very near future.

Sincerely,

Jean King, Chairman
CITY WIDE RENT STRIKE COMMITTEE

cc:
Cervantes
Nixon
Romney
N ews Media

OPPORTUNITY KNOCKING !!!



ATTEND THE NEXT RENT STRIKE MEETING

WHEN----------AUGUST 12, 1969
TUESDAY NIGHT
TIME: 7:30 P.M.

WHERE----------PLYMOUTH HOUSE
1521 CARR STREET

PROGRAM

1. What about Mayor Cervantes offer to end the rent strike -- What really happened at the negotiation meeting Tuesday Night.
2. Why the Mayor is asking: Where is the money?
3. What about the DEMANDS.

Thank you,

Rev. Buck Jones
Stzff Consultant
Plymouth House

Bertha Mason, Carr TRC

Jessie Chatman, Vaughn TRC