

The St. Louis Rent Strike of 1969: Transforming Black Activism and American Low-Income Housing

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Abstract

In 1969, public housing tenants launched a rent strike that shaped federal legislation and helped make housing a central concern of the Black Freedom Struggle. In addition to providing a detailed narrative of the rent strike, this article follows the lives of the rent strike's three primary leaders—Ivory Perry, the Rev. Buck Jones, and Jean King. Following the rent strike, Ivory Perry worked to curb lead poisoning while Buck Jones sought to reform welfare in Missouri. Later, Jones labored to improve living conditions in East St. Louis, Illinois. Jean King worked with private developers following the rent strike, helping remake the architecture and management of low-income housing. By focusing on how these individuals aided the rent strike, and by following their subsequent life careers, this article demonstrates that the St. Louis rent strike influenced developments central to American low-income housing and black activism in the St. Louis metropolitan area.

Keywords

rent strike, Black Power, low-income housing, welfare, Black Freedom Struggle

During the 1960s, African American men and women came together to resist rent increases and poor living conditions across the nation. In the winter of 1969, black women living in St. Louis's public housing launched a general rent strike that lasted for a total of nine months. Their efforts met with significant success at the local level and their activism influenced federal legislation. In addition, the St. Louis rent strike launched the careers of three individuals—Jean King, Ivory Perry, and the Rev. Buck Jones—all of whom worked to remake low-income housing and the ways in which Americans understand urban space as it relates to social justice. After working together during the rent strike, King, Perry, and Jones went their separate ways. Yet, all three continued to fight against racial injustice in the realm of low-income housing in the St. Louis metropolitan area. Following the rent strike, Perry initiated a vibrant campaign alongside black mothers to protest the prevalence of lead paint poisoning in African American homes in the city of St. Louis, Missouri. The Rev. Buck Jones, who led the rent strike with Jean King, founded a community organization that worked to improve welfare in Missouri and later helped relieve the plight of low-income black families in East St. Louis, Illinois. Lastly, Jean King—the rent strike's

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primary leader—helped found the United States' most successful federally subsidized low-income private housing developer. In all of these ways, from its impact on federal legislation to grassroots activism, the St. Louis rent strike of 1969 stands out as a crucial event for appreciating how low-income housing and black activism developed in postwar America.

Since the 1970s, a handful of scholars have detailed St. Louis's rent strike and the events that transpired in its wake. Charles Cummings and George Lipsitz authored the first two comprehensive examinations of St. Louis's rent strike. In 1975, Cummings completed a dissertation that explored the social and political conditions that provoked the strike. Although he detailed how the rent strike influenced federal legislation and empowered tenants, Cummings viewed the strike as a failure since the Pruitt-Igoe public housing complex, which consisted of 2,700 units capable of housing fifteen thousand people, was destroyed shortly thereafter.¹ The next significant treatment of the rent strike, and the first examination of the anti-lead paint campaign, appeared in George Lipsitz's *A Life in the Struggle*, a richly textured biography of Civil Rights activist Ivory Perry. Lipsitz included two chapters that detailed Perry's involvement with the rent strike and St. Louis's lead paint protests.² More recently, Clarence Lang reconsidered the rent strike in the framework of the Black Power movement. In the context of Black Power activism, which often assigned cursory and menial positions to women, Lang found the degree of black female solidarity as strong evidence that women "implicitly rejected masculinist discourses assigning them a passive place in the Black Freedom Movement."³ Lastly, Robert Gioielli recently published the definitive account of lead poisoning in St. Louis. His work contributes greatly to understandings of the lead paint campaign and he carefully draws out the ways that the lead paint protests influenced the nascent environmental movement.⁴

Although St. Louis's public housing rent strike of 1969 has received a great deal of attention from scholars, the legacy of the strike has not been fully assessed. Those who have written on the strike rightfully highlight that it was the nation's first and largest public housing rent strike and that it directly influenced federal legislation. In doing so, previous scholarship has often weighed the success of the rent strike by considering how it shaped the Housing Act of 1969.⁵ While vastly important, focusing solely on federal legislation has belied some of the significance of St. Louis's rent strike. Similarly, the infamous destruction of Pruitt-Igoe has overshadowed momentous reforms made by activists in the realm of low-income housing. By following the activism of Jean King, Ivory Perry, and the Rev. Buck Jones, this article demonstrates that one of the most considerable legacies of the rent strike was that it fostered a great deal of community-driven activism that has had far reaching consequences for cities across the United States. Considering the impact of the strike on this Midwestern city, and other cities throughout the United States, clearly demonstrates that St. Louis's rent strike helped make housing activism a central component of the Black Freedom Struggle in the last decades of the twentieth century.

To understand how the rent strike launched a generation of low-income housing activism, it is crucial to appreciate that St. Louis, like other American cities, experienced population decline, deindustrialization, and housing deterioration following World War II. As urban dwellings decayed, cities implemented programs of urban renewal that sought to remake run-down sections of town into new and vibrant spaces, such as business centers and recreation areas. While urban renewal was aesthetically pleasing to some, it displaced poor people from their homes. So-called slum clearance savagely interrupted people's lives and forced families, many of whom were African American, to resettle in public housing complexes. By the mid-1960s, public housing seriously deteriorated because of federal and municipal policies. Although the population of St. Louis City began to dwindle well before World War II, city planners continued to operate in a framework of growth. Increasing suburbanization, coupled with municipal fragmentation in the suburbs of the greater St. Louis region, led to growing racial segregation, job loss, and a lack of investment capital in the city. Since a lack of federal subsidies meant that public housing relied upon a municipal tax base—which was an assumption made by planners counting on

growth—suburbanization starved the city. As a result, the quality of public housing suffered immensely. Cost-cutting initiatives removed crucial services and building maintenance so that by the end of the 1960s, the situation for public housing tenants reached unlivable levels. On a daily basis, residents faced rodent and insect infestations, damaged heating units, faulty plumbing, exposure to lead, and collapsing walls. Only against this backdrop of institutional and environmental racism can the obstacles and significance of African Americans' housing reform campaigns of the late 1960s and 1970s be fully appreciated.⁶

Since the condition of St. Louis's housing stock reflected national trends, the city offers an ideal case study for examining how rent strikes became part and parcel to African American activism. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, tenants withheld rent to combat poor living conditions all over the United States. By the time St. Louis's tenants went on strike, withholding rent was a widespread form of protest. In 1965, for instance, residents in Harlem utilized rent strikes to oppose oppressive housing conditions.⁷ As early as 1963, rent strikes swept the nation, from San Francisco to New York City. Rent strikes became such a common method of protest in the 1960s that lawyers began examining them systematically to fully comprehend the legal ramifications of withholding rent for extended periods of time.⁸ Yet, St. Louis's rent strike achieved national attention because it was the largest and longest public housing rent strike at that time.⁹ Similar to the magnitude of the city's rent strike, lead poisoning severely plagued black children in St. Louis. In fact, during the 1970s, health officials rated St. Louis as one of the worst cities in the nation for lead poisoning.¹⁰ Likewise, since the race riot of July 1917, East St. Louis, Illinois, has stood as a blighted paragon of race relations in the United States—the activism that Buck Jones initiated there helps to assess the import of the 1969 rent strike. Thus, the St. Louis metropolitan area, which has included East St. Louis since its industrial heyday during the early decades of the twentieth century, provides an important window to examine how low-income housing reform became a vital component to black activism in postwar America.¹¹

By the time of rent strike, the Black Freedom Struggle was in full force in St. Louis. Activists of different ages, classes, and backgrounds gained inspiration from diverse ideologies and strategies that included nonviolent civil disobedience, liberal integrationism, and Black Power. Of all the ideologies that came to bear on St. Louis's African American activists, Black Power was certainly among the most influential. Indeed, more militant strains of Black Power undergirded both men's and women's activism in 1960s St. Louis—many of whom participated and led the rent strike. Yet, other rent strike leaders drank from the wellspring of nonviolence and followed the example set by Martin Luther King Jr. Beneath the tenacious activism that defined the rent strike flowed a variety of ideologies and tactics, many of which had deep roots.

Black women in St. Louis have long demonstrated their independence as Civil Rights and labor activists. In the 1930s and 1940s, African American women who worked in the food, defense, and garment industries built their own movement of labor resistance. Black women organized with the National Urban League, the Communist Party, and the March on Washington Movement. In so doing, black women found a niche in, what was at that time, a labor movement that white men largely dominated. Moreover, their activism also defied the masculinist characteristics of the black community's working-class ideology. Their efforts influenced both national and local Civil Rights activism in the postwar era. Although African American women were able to make some significant gains, the most important legacy of their efforts for this study was the slogan that they employed in the 1930s that redefined how black women understood their rights as American citizens: "entitled to live."¹²

Public housing initiatives launched during the New Deal and World War II led many Americans to believe that decent living conditions were a right afforded to all American citizens. Although the majority of St. Louis's public housing stock was not constructed until the mid-1950s, following the passage of the United States Housing Act of 1949, the belief that American citizenship entailed the right to decent living conditions continued unabated in the postwar era.

Indeed, the opportunities that public housing offered poor women—as an entitlement and right of citizenship—is crucial for understanding black female public housing protests in the 1960s and 1970s.¹³

Black Power, which is the other foundational element of this article, emerged from Black Nationalist movements that reach back further than the New Deal. In the United States, one of the first, most vocal, and most successful calls for pan-Africanism in the twentieth century sprang forth from the mouth and pen of Marcus Garvey, whose Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) claimed tens of thousands of African American followers. Although the Black Nationalistic ideology that Garvey articulated went underground following his arrest and deportation from the United States, activists resurrected and redefined Garvey's ideals in the mid-1960s. Malcolm X, perhaps the most famous Black Nationalist of the mid-twentieth century, argued that people of African descent needed to form all-black organizations. Since American society privileged white people, Malcolm X believed any white involvement would eventually lead to white leadership, which would in turn relegate the desires and goals of the black community. As we shall see, Malcolm X directly influenced the rent strike's primary leader.¹⁴

Beyond Malcolm X, the most significant articulation of Black Nationalism emerged from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). In 1965, the assassination of Malcolm X and the murder of Jimmy Lee Jackson, a twenty-six-year-old black activist killed by an Alabama state policeman, radicalized many young black people.¹⁵ As a result, the leaders of SNCC called for increased black militancy to combat racial inequality. Rallying under the cry of "Black Power," SNCC advocated African American self-determination and black autonomy from the influence of white people.¹⁶ SNCC's famed leader Stokely Carmichael described Black Power as "a call for black people in this country to unite, to recognize their heritage, to build a sense of community. It is a call for black people to begin to define their own goals, to lead their own organizations, and to support those organizations." In addition, Carmichael insisted that "the concept of Black Power rests on a fundamental premise: Before a group can enter the open society, it must first close ranks."¹⁷ For many in the black community, any desire to proceed amicably along lines of nonviolence and integration died with Martin Luther King Jr. on April 4, 1968.¹⁸ Black Power was the next logical, and necessary, step for African Americans to achieve equality. It did not take long for Black Power to reach St. Louis, and when it arrived, it transformed the Black Freedom Struggle in the Gateway City.¹⁹

In St. Louis, and throughout the nation, the Black Freedom Movement had reached a crossroads by the mid-1960s. For St. Louis activists, the turning point in the Civil Rights Struggle was the Jefferson Bank Boycott of 1963.²⁰ The strike at the Jefferson Bank and Trust began as an effort to force the bank to hire more African American workers. The Congress of Race Equality (CORE) initiated the boycott with an ultimatum that demanded Jefferson Bank hire more black people to work as salespersons, clerks, and tellers within two weeks. When bank officials scoffed at their demands and hired five white employees over African American applicants, CORE and other black activists launched a "General Strike" against racism, in which protesters successfully disrupted business. Although the boycott resulted in the hiring of African Americans at Jefferson Bank and other banks throughout the city, the contest had greater implications for the St. Louis movement.²¹

Even before the bank boycott, many leaders in CORE began to oppose more established Civil Rights tactics. In addition, the Jefferson Bank protest brought class and generational tensions to the fore. Young working-class black people turned away from the integrationist and nonviolent methods of middle-class black and white activists. Percy Green, who scaled the St. Louis Arch while it was being constructed to protest the fact that the city had not contracted with or hired any black people, recalled that the Jefferson Bank protest was the moment in which he and fellow activist Ivory Perry "became radical."²² Black Power arrived in St. Louis and it came in a variety of manifestations. Organizations such as the Black Nationalists, the DuBois Club, the Jeff Vander

Lou Community Action Group, the Nation of Islam, the Mid-City Congress, and the Zulu 1200s all articulated Black Nationalist ideologies in the mid-1960s. The newly founded Action Council to Improve Opportunities for Negroes (ACTION) oscillated between Black Power and Civil Rights tactics, while CORE and the Black Liberators became vociferous advocates of Black Power in 1960s St. Louis. Indeed, on November 8, 1968, the Liberators formally allied themselves with SNCC.²³

African American women had varied responses to the Black Power movement. Initially, many black women in SNCC accepted certain masculine elements of Black Power, even with its contradictions and double standards.²⁴ Over time, however, the patriarchal qualities of Black Power aggravated female activists who sought to partake in more direct action.²⁵ In fact, the rigid masculinity that sometimes dominated Black Power ideology led many women to form their own organizations in which they could pursue both racial and gender liberation.²⁶ In other cases, organizations such as SNCC and the tenets of Black Power radicalized and empowered black women.²⁷ It gave them a set of tools with which they forged threads of commonality and community to combat racial injustice. When they began protesting unjust rent increases in the late 1960s, black women in St. Louis's public housing embraced the ideals of Black Power by appealing to racial solidarity and assuming a militant stance toward white city officials.

On Strike

In August 1967, nine black women staged a ten-day sit-in at the Human Development Corporation (HDC)—St. Louis's primary antipoverty agency—to protest low wages and racial discrimination in hiring practices. The HDC sought to provide skills training, social services, and jobs for so-called unemployables.²⁸ The nine women who occupied the office had just completed an HDC job-training course in electronics. Since graduating, explained activist Margie Carter, “we have been to fifteen different places seeking employment and have received fifteen different excuses from employers for not hiring us.”²⁹ When they could not find decent pay, even after their skills training, they took the HDC to task. Because the sit-in significantly debilitated business, the St. Louis circuit court issued an injunction that ordered the women to leave unless the HDC specifically invited them to remain on the premises. When protester Lillie Marshall was handed a copy of the injunction, she simply dropped it to the floor. Delores Smith, another occupier, told the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* she did not “plan to walk out of here unless I have job. They'll have to carry me out.” Another demonstrator, Birdie Lou Saine, taunted that “next time you come back with the contempt citation bring some food with you.”³⁰ After a couple of weeks, the HDC found all the women employment. By forcing the HDC to find them jobs, their sit-in set the stage for the first major tenant protests against unfair rental practices.³¹

Two weeks after the HDC sit-in, Black Power activist H. Rap Brown visited East St. Louis and delivered a fiery speech that pushed many African American youth toward Black Power. Following the HDC office occupation, and Brown's exhortation to “display Black Power if it is no more than the power to disrupt,” sixty public housing tenants, most of them black women, picketed in front of St. Louis's Housing Authority to advocate for rent reductions and policy changes.³² The executive director of the Housing Authority, Irving Dagen, asserted that the picketers' demands were “fiscally and politically impossible.” Mattie Trice, who represented 450 public housing residents, organized the protest. The picketers insisted that rent payments be limited to 25 percent of a tenant's income. In addition, they demanded that black people have increased representation on the Board of Commissioners of the Housing Authority, more janitorial services, improved pest control, and better police protection. These stipulations formed the bedrock for the demands public housing tenants asserted when the rent strike commenced just over one year later.³³

If city officials refused to acquiesce to renters' demands and take corrective action "in due time," reported the *St. Louis Argus*, tenants threatened to "call a rent strike."³⁴ Similarly, the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* noted that "the threat of a rent strike has been discussed as an ultimate weapon in the campaign." Reluctant city officials did not want to admit that the demands of the picketers reflected the desires of St. Louis's public housing residents. Dagen, for instance, told the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* that "I don't think the tenants are the ones behind it." Even if they were, Dagen was not worried about the consequences. In the event of a rent strike, Dagen reported that "we will try to act sensibly. But if rent stops we will have no way to pay for services. They would have to end." Dagen's disconnect from the neglect of "services" that the Housing Authority provided, and his lack of awareness that significant numbers of tenants supported the picketers, pointed toward an immense rift that laid between city bureaucrats and poor people who struggled to make homes in failing housing complexes. Indeed, the lack of services provided for public housing—as well as increasingly expensive rent—originated from municipal officials both separated from the reality of public housing and the city's shrinking tax base. The protest's leader, Mattie Trice put it succinctly: "When you get a check for \$75 (monthly) how can you possibly eat if you are going to pay \$50 to \$55 rent." Reflective of the attitudes toward public housing that developed during the Great Depression, Trice told reporters that "these buildings were built for us, for the poor people."³⁵

In the months following the picket at the Housing Authority, black women in St. Louis readily embraced aspects of Black Power and redefined them under the heading of "Woman Power." In March 1968, the *St. Louis Argus* explained that more than two hundred black female activists joined "Project Women Power." Like Black Power, "one of the very unique aspects emanating from" Woman Power was "the involvement of Negro women in meaningful community projects that can be undertaken and accomplished without unnecessary reliance upon other community organizations." In addition, Woman Power maintained "the belief that if the Negro in America is to strive toward developing a meaningful self-identification, then this fundamental concept of 'self-help' projects becomes increasingly important in this complex realm of social revolution." As black women in St. Louis attained Woman Power, so too did thousands of female African American activists in Alabama, New York, Atlanta, Chicago, New Jersey, and Ohio.³⁶ Throughout the late 1960s, black women in St. Louis mounted one of the nation's most successful manifestations of Woman Power.

In May 1968, the Black Power and Woman Power movements, and the examples that female activists set at the HDC and the Housing Authority, coalesced. Following the picketing at the Housing Authority, St. Louis's black community received news that the women who staged the sit-in at the HDC left their jobs because of poor wages and because they did not have the opportunity to use their skills training in electronics.³⁷ In conjunction with this disappointment and the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., the burgeoning scope of Black Power became manifest in St. Louis when two hundred African Americans marched on City Hall.³⁸ The marchers consisted primarily of young public housing tenants from north St. Louis. They demanded welfare and housing reform as well as more jobs for black people. St. Louis's Black United Front, a coalition of Black Power groups that included CORE, ACTION, the Zulu 1200s, and the Black Liberators, joined the tenants. Along with a number of welfare reforms, the protesters demanded a 50 percent reduction in rent charged to public housing residents. The marchers issued several statements that revealed the degree to which Black Power influenced their efforts. The Reverend Oliver Gibson, who headed the Black United Front, declared that St. Louis's Mayor Alfonso Cervantes "doesn't know what we're talking about. It will take the black people united to show him what we're talking about." The march's organizer Barbara Bates proclaimed that "if we as black people unite and work together there's nothing the authorities can do."³⁹ In a matter of months, her declaration proved prophetic.

Just a few weeks before the rent strike began, a young mother named Jean King had prepared to move out of the city's public housing with her child and husband, but the inequity of tenants' lives kept her from relocating. King later recalled that "on a snowy day," while waiting for a taxi to take her to her future residence, she "saw a child pick up a piece of soggy bread from underneath the snow." She grabbed the child, whose name was Andre, and took him to his mother. Andre's mother began to cry, and told King that "he's eating because he's hungry." Similar to other residents' predicaments, Andre's mother explained that she got "\$134 a month welfare, and [her] rent just increased to \$165 a month." At this point in time, the St. Louis Housing Authority did not base rent prices off of residents' income. Rather, it charged public housing tenants for the amount of space they occupied. As a result, people like Andre's mother, who had several children, struggled to feed multiple children and pay more expensive rent. Such policies led King to the rent strike meeting at Blumeyer, where she "stood up front." As she listened "to the stories being told by residents from all over public housing," she remembered saying that "somebody's got to do something—I'm ready to go!" Over the course of the meeting, King later recalled "that group of unknown people voted me to be chairman of the Citywide Rent Strike." When her husband asked her about their plans to move, she explained: "I don't have time for that. People need help."⁴⁰ King spearheaded the rent strike and made the plight of St. Louis's public housing tenants a national concern.

Richard Baron, a young lawyer who later helped remake low-income housing in many American cities, was among that group of unknown people that elected Jean King as president of the Citywide Rent Strike Committee. After tenants elected her, King recalled that a young man approached her and said, "Mrs. King, my name is Richard Baron, I am an attorney." While King admitted that Baron was the only acquaintance she had "that knew anything about housing law," when Baron first approached her, King remembered that he was "just a snot nosed kid as far as I was concerned." At the rent strike meeting, King even cried out to somebody, "What the hell does he know about law?" Despite her initial ambivalence, King explained that Baron quickly became "my resource person. . . . Oh my God did he know housing law!"⁴¹ With Baron's legal aid, King and her tenants prepared to launch the greatest rent strike American public housing had witnessed up to that time. Following the strike, Baron and King took what they learned from St. Louis and remade low-income housing across the United States.

On February 3, 1969, public housing tenants launched a general rent strike to protest unfair rent increases, a lack of social services, and dilapidated living conditions. Although papers such as the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* reported that one thousand tenants joined the strike on the first day, Jean King subsequently claimed that only three people formally participated. When reporters asked King how many people began striking that day, she lied, telling them that 103 families withheld their rent. "That did two things," King recalled, "number one, it scared the hell out of the city. Number two, tenants said 103? There's only 300 families here, I might as well join the rent strike."⁴² In a matter of days, the number of striking tenants swelled. Ernest Calloway, an activist and black columnist for several St. Louis newspapers, declared that the rent strike was "a real 'gut' revolution" and it was "morally right."⁴³ The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* headline for the strike carried a photo of Veapplies Mack, a middle-aged woman with a worn and determined visage. She rested on crutches and toled a sign that read: "Down with the rent or we can live in a tent." Mack served as vice president of the Carr Square Tenant-Council while a young minister named Buck Jones functioned as the President for both the Carr-Square and Vaughn housing projects. Although Buck Jones's leadership proved essential for those living at Carr Square and Vaughn, Jean King led the strikers at every other public housing development in the city. Loretta Hall, a radical member of ACTION and veteran of the Jefferson Bank Boycott, likewise offered her leadership services. King told reporters that "when we get our demands, the Housing Authority will get their money. And not a minute before." Until then, tenants deposited their rent

money into an escrow account. King told the strikers to expect retaliation from the Housing Authority but offered encouragement: "Let's stop being so scared of what 'they' are going to do. We have the money, we pay their salaries." In a similar vein, the *St. Louis Sentinel*, an African American paper, exclaimed to readers that "a revolution has hit St. Louis . . . in public housing . . . [tenants] have risen in protest, using a most potent weapon, money, as their blockbuster."⁴⁴ It was evident that the rent strikers faced overwhelming odds when St. Louis Urban League Executive Director William E. Douthit stated that "the tenants are beating a dead horse," since the city was already strapped for cash.⁴⁵ For many in the African American community, concluded the *St. Louis Sentinel*, the rent strike demonstrated that "St. Louis must face its housing crisis today—even yesterday if possible."⁴⁶

Just as tenant picketers had stipulated nearly two years before, the rent strikers demanded that rent payments be limited to 25 percent of a resident's income and that leases guarantee rent would not increase for three years. They insisted upon adequate police protection and improved building maintenance. It was evident that Black Power undergirded their efforts when offers of outside help "had been rejected" by the strikers. To paraphrase Stokley Carmichael and the principles of Woman Power, as outlined by the *St. Louis Argus*, the rent strikers united, built a sense of community, defined their own goals, and lead their own organization. Housing Authority executive Irvin Dagen, who deemed such demands as "impossible" in 1967, declared that if tenants could not pay higher rents, the state and federal government would have to provide the city of St. Louis with increased government subsidies to support public housing.⁴⁷ In a matter of months, the rent strikers' activism prodded the federal government to better fund public housing across the United States.

By spring, the militancy and role of Black Power in the rent strike came more clearly into focus. As it did, differences in strategy between the rent strike's leaders became apparent. In early March, the *St. Louis Sentinel* reported that "there has been a lot of talk about black power and racial unity. Militants and conservatives alike engage in long haranges [*sic*] about the force of togetherness."⁴⁸ Two weeks later, the *Sentinel* reported that several shotgun blasts were fired into the front door and windows of the Housing Authority. The paper noted that "there were no clues on who did the shooting or whether the violence had any connection with the rent strike." The mere suggestion, however, that there was a connection between the strike and the shotgun blasts tied the two together.⁴⁹ The Reverend Buck Jones denounced the violent approach taken by some community members. To keep public sympathies alongside the strikers, Jones believed black people needed to follow the example of Martin Luther King Jr., even more tenaciously than they had in the past. Jones reported that "more than ever before, I respect Dr. Martin Luther King. I can't see any tangible benefits gained by those who advocate disruption and chaos."⁵⁰ Jean King disagreed.

In March, black activist Ivory Perry called a press conference to announce that the Black United Front, and all the groups associated with it, supported and endorsed the rent strike.⁵¹ The support of so many Black Power groups emboldened tenants and troubled city officials.⁵² Following the endorsement message of the Black United Front and the shotgun blasts at the Housing Authority office, Jean King wrote a letter to Mayor Cervantes imbued with the more militant rhetoric that had been circulating around the city. After Cervantes paid to bring the Spanish Pavilion to St. Louis from the New York World's Fair, King suggested that tenants would not shy away from force to achieve social justice:

[We] 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. 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.⁵³

In a mood of heightened militancy, King quickly suggested to the city's mayor that the black community would not hesitate to embrace more forceful means of protest to realize racial equality. Every time the mayor "turned around," remembered King, "I was in his office. I'd go down there and give him hell." While King never self-identified with the Black Power movement, and never directly advocated violence, she later explained that "my leader is Malcolm X. Strict non-violence was never my thing, but if you hit me, I'm gonna hit you back."⁵⁴ Somewhat like King, another strike leader—Loretta Hall—embraced Black Power several years before as a member of ACTION.⁵⁵ In the case of St. Louis's rent strike, then, it was the female leadership who took an aggressive position, while Buck Jones remained ambivalent to assume a militant stance.⁵⁶ In many ways, King became the primary leader of the strike. Ernest Calloway noted that "the leadership qualities of Rev. Jones are understandable . . . but Mrs. King, with her clear, out-spoken voice steeped in the group struggle is an outstanding example of what the dynamics of real social conflict will do—it releases its own voices and leadership."⁵⁷ Despite their differing approaches, King, Hall, and Jones worked together to bring the strike to a successful end. Indeed, as King later recalled, she and Buck Jones had similar needs and they "met frequently to map out strategy."⁵⁸

Alongside King's letter to Cervantes, other actions of Black Power activists worried city officials about what might occur if the rent strike continued. The strike put significant pressures on government officials and workers at the HDC.⁵⁹ When Kenneth Brantley, the only black executive director of the Land Clearance and Housing Authority, was fired for supporting the rent strike, activists pushed against city bureaucrats even harder.⁶⁰ City officials worried when the public housing rent strike poured over into the private sector.⁶¹ In addition, Ivory Perry organized a group of fifteen residents to withhold rent from their landlord who was notorious for having properties in ill repair.⁶² When the St. Louis community gathered to commemorate the one-year anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination, Black Power activists took the opportunity—against the desires of some black organizers—to urge African Americans to support the rent strike.⁶³ The guilty conviction of a slum owner, who was fined nearly one thousand dollars for breaking housing code, stressed the plight of poor residents once more.⁶⁴ And when Perry, Percy Green, and other ACTION activists burst into the St. Louis cathedral (in a city dominated by a large Roman Catholic community), and accused the Catholic Church of owning slum properties, they dramatically stressed housing issues yet again.⁶⁵

In conjunction with the efforts of Perry and ACTION, the city of St. Louis received a considerable degree of pressure from federal legislators and the National Tenant Organization (NTO). The NTO, established in Chicago in 1968, committed itself to promoting housing equality throughout the United States. In May, the NTO announced it would represent St. Louis's public housing tenants at its first annual convention in September. An NTO representative reported that "we will use our access to information and officials in Washington to help the strikers achieve their goals."⁶⁶ At the same time, Jean King met with William Clay, Missouri's first black congressional representative. King remembered that Clay, who she described as a "ball of fire," got her "through doors" and introduced a bill to appease the demands of St. Louis's rent strikers.⁶⁷ If passed, the bill would have guaranteed that rent prices never exceeded more than 25 percent of a resident's income, a goal activists had been agitating for since 1967. In a column in the *St. Louis Sentinel*, Clay appealed to the community's sense of housing rights that developed during the 1930s and 1940s. He noted that he was attempting to uphold governmental promises "of a decent home and suitable living environment for every American family."⁶⁸ In this way, and many others, Clay became a powerful and important spokesman for African Americans in Missouri. The confluence of Black Power activism and national attention brought about by Clay's proposed legislation propelled the rent strike toward a triumphant conclusion.

As fall approached, the rent strike placed St. Louis's Housing Authority on the brink of bankruptcy. Over 2,400 tenants withheld more than \$600,000.⁶⁹ In August, Mayor Cervantes realized

he had to negotiate with the rent strikers. Much to Cervantes's chagrin, however, King and Jones were unwilling to concede any of their demands. When they rejected Cervantes's initial overtures outright, the strikers demonstrated that they wielded the power to determine how the strike was to end.⁷⁰ The strikers gained even greater leverage when Harold Gibbons—the powerful president of the Teamsters Joint Council—embraced the tenants' cause.⁷¹ Frustrated with Cervantes and emboldened with the support of Gibbons, the tenants tenaciously pursued their demands. Consequently, the strikers achieved all of their goals.

Gibbons, the NTO, and striking tenants met with city officials again throughout the month of October. Gibbons proposed and successfully formed a new coalition of seventy civic leaders that included members of the black community. The new coalition exercised trusteeship over the Housing Authority. The Cervantes administration agreed to the longstanding stipulation that rent payments be limited to no more than 25 percent of a tenant's income—a demand that was first issued in 1967. Tenants and black community members replaced the sitting members of the Housing Authority's Board of Commissioners. Residents won a greater degree of participation in management and created a tenant affairs board—which is still in place in St. Louis today—that gave public housing tenants more say in maintenance and decision-making processes.⁷²

The momentous gains made by public housing residents in St. Louis soon became national in scope. William Clay got Jean King in touch with Edward Brooke, Massachusetts's first popularly elected black senator. King testified in the Senate and worked closely with Brooke, explaining that rent must be based off of income, not occupied space. Brooke took King's suggestions to heart. The Brooke Amendment to the Housing Act of 1969 established that low-income families pay no more than 25 percent of their income for rent. Equally important, it increased federal subsidies for public housing nationwide. King later recalled that when the Brooke Amendment passed “that made me feel real good. And what really made me feel good is that that was applied all over the country, not just in St. Louis.”⁷³ The St. Louis rent strike thus remade federal and municipal public housing policies across the United States. Yet, many cities, including St. Louis, still faced a massive low-income housing crisis. Although the city of St. Louis vowed to improve living conditions for low-income families, the city never adequately adhered to that promise following the rent strike. In response, the black community soon mounted a concerted effort to improve the conditions of their homes by protesting the high levels of lead paint poisoning that plagued their children.

Ivory Perry, Rent Strikes, and Lead Paint

In the weeks following the rent strike, black newspaper columnist Ernest Calloway noted that public housing residents had a “new sense of self-determination.” According to Calloway, the rent strike produced a “social revolution” in which public housing tenants took one significant leap toward “a wholesome environment to live and raise their children.”⁷⁴ The self-determination that Calloway observed in the wake of the rent strike soon transformed into a campaign to curb lead poisoning in children throughout the city of St. Louis. Many of the same concerns raised during the rent strike—mainly reform of unacceptable living environments—occupied the core of the lead paint campaign. Indeed, activists mounted their campaign against lead poisoning in an effort to reform a panoply of housing issues that included broken heating units, leaky plumbing, and poor management. Similarly, Black Power continued to influence black women in the arena of housing reform, though African American men throughout the community likewise joined the struggle. Just as it inspired African American women to come together to protest unfair rent increases in public housing, Black Power inspired African Americans to protest unacceptable living conditions in private housing by tackling lead poisoning. Unlike the rent strike, however, the lead paint protests met with mixed, mostly limited, success.

By the late 1960s, medical professionals, environmentalists, and social activists worked tirelessly to raise awareness about the dangers of lead poisoning across the United States.⁷⁵ In May 1969, the month Jean King mailed belligerent words to Mayor Cervantes, Ivory Perry attended a workshop on the dangers of childhood lead poisoning.⁷⁶ As an employee of the HDC, Perry worked among the poorest black residents in the city—and after attending the workshop—he soon realized the African American children in St. Louis suffered from exposure to lead paint.⁷⁷ Having witnessed the detrimental effects firsthand, Ivory Perry pushed city officials and fellow activists to take lead poisoning seriously. Two months following the rent strike settlement, the efforts of Perry made news, and the city of St. Louis faced another housing crisis. The *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* stated that a “big push” against the “silent epidemic” was about to begin, “thanks in large part to Ivory Perry.” Because of Perry’s campaigning, Alderman Henry S. Stolar proposed and helped pass a law that limited the legal amount of lead paint in children’s toys, furniture, and interior surfaces. In addition, the ordinance required St. Louis landlords to remove lead paint from interiors, it granted the city authority to fine landlords who failed to correct lead exposure, and it provided funds to implement a screening program in public health clinics and schools.⁷⁸

While the passage of the city’s lead ordinance at first appeared to be a victory, activists soon realized the law did not effect any real changes. Because St. Louis’s lead ordinance divided enforcement between the Health Department and the Housing Authority, it took months to take an offending landlord to court.⁷⁹ Moreover, the Cervantes administration was loath to enforce the lead ordinance since St. Louis was financially strained, lacking the revenue necessary to uphold everything the ordinance promised to accomplish.⁸⁰ In 1971, St. Louis faced a \$6-million deficit.⁸¹ In addition, real estate and paint companies protested to the city government that media publicity surrounding lead poisoning hurt business. The Real Estate Board of Metropolitan St. Louis complained that they had “been the focal point of repeated demonstrations by various groups . . . due to a so-called ‘lead poisoning ordinance’ enacted by the Board of Aldermen.” Riled, they wrote that the ordinance “is almost totally unenforceable.” Apparently, Cervantes agreed with the real estate board. He parroted their complaint two years later in stating that the “lead ordinance is unenforceable.”⁸² Although the information never became public, Cervantes attempted to revise the city’s lead ordinance at the behest of several plaster corporations that claimed to have studies that demonstrated the quantity of lead St. Louis law deemed as dangerous was too high. Not surprisingly, no such study was ever produced for the mayor.⁸³

As city bureaucrats procrastinated, and black youth sickened, African American community members took matters into their own hands. In response to the city’s lax enforcement of the lead ordinance, black residents from north St. Louis’s Yeatman district formed an ad hoc activist group that called itself the People’s Coalition Against Lead Poisoning (PCALP). The majority of PCALP consisted of parents whose children had already suffered from lead poisoning. Indeed, one two-year old had already died from lead exposure and four others had been hospitalized. St. Louis’s lead poisoning campaign thus began as an all-black grassroots movement. PCALP distributed pamphlets throughout north St. Louis that read: “City Hall and Real Estate Row Refuse to Protect a Black Child’s Life—So we’re Going to do Something About It Ourselves!!!” The apathy that Cervantes embodied demonstrated to PCALP that “in the Mayor’s eyes, if you are black and if you are poor, you are not human.” Black Power commanded PCALP’s approach to protests. Since the city failed to protect black families, PCALP reasoned that “freeing these homes of lead will only be done by the poor themselves, if their children are to survive.”⁸⁴

The Metropolitan Tenants Organization (a local chapter of the NTO that was founded after the rent strike) joined PCALP along with the Union-Gateway Center. Ivory Perry reported that the coalition of anti-lead paint groups was necessary because the lead ordinance “was not being properly enforced.” As summer turned to fall, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* correctly reported that

“a dramatic confrontation between St. Louis city officials and a group of black residents over enforcement of the city’s lead poisoning ordinance appears to be shaping up.”⁸⁵ As African Americans in north St. Louis contemplated how best to combat the disproportionate incidents of lead poisoning in their community, they turned to a tactic that had previously served them well—rent strikes.

In December 1970, PCALP announced that it was organizing rent strikes against landlords who exposed children to lead paint. A spokesperson for PCALP explained that the rent strikes were a necessary response because “slumlords . . . refuse to obey the law.” Just as they had done during the general rent strike in 1969, the black community planned to put the withheld rent monies to use, noting that payments would be utilized to treat poisoned children and to implement a more strident screening program.⁸⁶ The *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* reported that the first participant in the lead paint rent strike was three-year-old Dorothy Nason, who had been hospitalized twice for lead poisoning. PCALP urged other families who suffered from lead poisoning to join the rent strike and several families followed their lead.⁸⁷

In addition to withholding rent, Carrie McCain filed a suit in St. Louis’s circuit court demanding that the two real estate companies affiliated with her building be forced to comply with the city’s lead poisoning control ordinance. Her landlord, Charles Liebert, evicted her for failing to pay rent. In February, following McCain’s efforts, another landlord named Marvin Frankel received a guilty verdict for failing to adhere to the lead ordinance; it was the first successful prosecution for St. Louis’s lead paint campaign. The poor conditions of Frankel’s properties gained media attention when his residents threatened him with a rent strike for failing to repair their heaters in freezing temperatures. To avoid a rent strike, Frankel gave his tenants free rent for the month of February.⁸⁸

Frankel’s conviction inspired others to withhold rent, though tenants struggled to attain justice. After her children repeatedly suffered from lead poisoning, Vatra Turner quit paying her landlord. Despite the fact she had appealed directly to the Housing Division with the aid of a lawyer, the city failed to enforce the lead ordinance.⁸⁹ Likewise, three other black mothers from north St. Louis filed suit against the city for failing to uphold the lead ordinance. Their efforts, however, came to naught. In most cases, the city of St. Louis put property laws above the lead ordinance and landlords avoided prosecution. Moreover, city officials did not want to use the full force of the lead ordinance because they feared enforcement would substantially disrupt the private housing market.⁹⁰ Many of the same problems that surrounded the rent strike—mainly, growing suburbanization and loss of tax revenue—made it so the city faced serious financial problems. By 1972, St. Louis had projected a \$16 million deficit that made it nearly impossible to allocate the Health Division the minimum \$140,755 a year needed to enforce the lead ordinance.⁹¹ In 1973, the fight against lead poisoning in St. Louis significantly waned when Ivory Perry announced his retirement from Civil Rights activism.⁹² Ultimately, tenants were unable to organize a series of collective rent strikes against landlords who exposed black children to lead. The tactic that served the black community so well during the public housing reform efforts of 1969 simply did not pan out on an individual basis. In the early 1970s, the Vietnam War became more unpopular, the economy spiraled downward because of the oil embargo, and the country turned away from liberalism. As a result, the Black Freedom Struggle fell on deaf ears.⁹³ Nonetheless, activists continued to fight for improved and safe low-income housing in the St. Louis Metropolitan area.

Welfare, Housing, and Buck Jones

Just weeks after helping secure the end of the rent strike, Buck Jones founded a community organization named Operation LIVE and began working to reform welfare. Many of Jones’s efforts sought to pick up where the rent strike left off. In early February 1970, the *St. Louis*

Post-Dispatch reported that Jones planned to “attack on the welfare system in Missouri.” Operation LIVE outlined nine demands—several of which mirrored demands made during the rent strike—and sent them to Missouri Governor Warren E. Hearnes and state welfare director Proctor N. Carter. Two of the most prominent demands included basing welfare payments on the cost of living index and the creation of a new welfare commission. Just as the rent strikers sought to have rent based off of income, Jones wanted welfare based off of the cost of living. And just as the rent strikers sought to create a Tenant Affairs Board to give residents more say in policy decisions, Jones wanted the membership of the new welfare commission to include at least one-third welfare recipients. If Operation LIVE failed to get support from the Governor and the welfare director, Jones threatened to launch “an aggressive state-wide protest.” Jones explained that changes were needed “to guarantee a humane standard of living for all needy persons and to provide jobs that offer the needy security and dignity.”⁹⁴

Jones’s welfare activism eventually brought him and Operation LIVE before a federal hearing attempting to determine whether the Missouri Division of Welfare complied with federal laws and regulations. At the hearing, Jones testified that long delays in processing applications for welfare relief forced some people to resort to crime. In response, Elmore Crowe, who was the chief counsel for the state Division of Welfare, asked Jones if he had “come down here from St. Louis representing your flock for the purpose of telling this examiner that the Federal Government should withhold \$157,000,000 and your welfare recipients have nothing?” Jones fired back: “I didn’t say that . . . my purpose in being here is to get dignity and justice for people, so that people can live like human beings.” He went on to explain that he had “known families forced to have the mother and all the children sleep in one bed with all their clothes on. Some children can’t go to school because they are too cold, too hungry, or too ashamed.” Poor mothers, he elaborated, “are forced to live in houses that are suitable for rats and roaches only.” Jones concluded that he was “asking the Federal Government to right the wrong that has been done to a lot of people.” Newspapers reported that Jones’s response garnered the approval from the audience at the hearing. Further testimony from the Department of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW) revealed that Missouri failed to process 70 to 87 percent of its welfare applications within the federally mandated time frame of thirty days. Crowe called the thirty-day requirement “arbitrary and unreasonable” and admitted that “the state of Missouri is unable to comply.”⁹⁵

While Jones’s efforts helped bring national attention to problems within Missouri’s welfare system, increased government cuts debilitated welfare further, despite Operation LIVE’s continued activism. One month after Jones’ testimony, the Missouri State Legislature faced major funding cuts and representatives began debating taking millions from welfare.⁹⁶ Jones immediately initiated an effort to stop the proposed cuts and joined forces with welfare advocacy groups across the state. Operation LIVE met with Missouri’s Black Caucus and asked them to introduce a welfare reform bill drafted by Buck Jones. The Black Caucus introduced Jones’s revisions in late February 1971. While he viewed the introduction of his reforms as a “significant step,” Jones had largely given up on the legislature at that point. He had become convinced that “welfare recipients don’t have the political power to bring about legislative changes in the welfare system.” Instead, Jones realized that “we must form a coalition with the political, private, business and religious communities.”⁹⁷ Jones and others did just that after the state and federal governments slashed welfare in 1972. Following government cuts, the black community and churches worked hard to fill the financial void created by the scaling back of welfare in Missouri. So, although Jones’s activism did not shape legislation as the rent strike had done, his organizing—along with other groups—helped the black community to care for the poor after the government reduced welfare spending.⁹⁸

Following Jones’s welfare reform campaign, he restructured Operation LIVE to combat housing inequality and renamed the organization Project H.O.P.E. (Helping Other People Emerge). Throughout the 1970s, Jones worked to better the lives of low-income housing residents in both

north St. Louis, Missouri, and East St. Louis, Illinois. On the Missouri side, Jones continually advocated to bring attention to drug trafficking in public housing and to better services for tenants. In the fall of 1972, Jones helped public housing residents in East St. Louis launch a rent strike of their own. Unfortunately for the tenants, the East St. Louis police department went on strike at the same time. As a result, the rent strike received short shrift, and with no police force, violent crimes escalated in East St. Louis's public housing. Conditions became so dangerous that Jones asked the governor to declare a state of emergency. Although the East St. Louis rent strike came to naught, Jones continued to work for low-income housing residents. By the end of the 1970s, however, Jones realized that to achieve equitable housing, many people needed new homes. In 1981, he founded the first local chapter of Habitat for Humanity and began rebuilding neighborhoods. While he continued to build new homes for low-income families through Habitat for Humanity, his activism increasingly focused on issues of environmental justice.⁹⁹

For the remainder of his life, Jones engaged in political contests and protests against regional chemical companies and obstinate government officials. Just as he had done during the rent strike and his welfare reform campaign, Jones demanded that people with lower incomes have access to health care and safe living environments. In the late 1980s, as the environmental justice movement began to take form, Jones realized that poor residents in East St. Louis suffered from environmental injustices. For years, he worked to prove that chemical fallout from East St. Louis's decaying industrial centers caused higher rates of cancer among low-income families in the area. Although local government officials and the Environmental Protection Agency remained skeptical at first, Jones's activism eventually helped launch a multimillion-dollar environmental cleanup in East St. Louis. Throughout the late 1980s and 1990s, Jones joined the larger Environmental Justice movement that swept the country. Like other black religious activists across the United States, Jones attended national Environmental Justice conventions seeking to better poor people's health and daily lives. As a result of Jones' continued activism, Project H.O.P.E won a major victory in 1998 when it received a \$250,000 grant from the EPA to correct detrimental environmental conditions in East St. Louis. Jones continued to fight for environmental justice by advocating, building, and cleaning people's homes until he died of a blood clot in 2002 at the young age of 61.¹⁰⁰

Jean King and Building Decent People

The rent strike not only influenced the activism of Ivory Perry and Buck Jones, it also changed the face of low-income housing in many U.S. cities, as seen in the careers of Jean King and Richard Baron. Baron, as we have seen, served as legal aid to Jean King during the long months of the rent strike. After King and Baron secured the rent strike settlement and helped draft the Brooke Amendment to the 1969 Housing Act, they continued to improve the lot of low-income housing in the United States. Through his work with Jean King and other rent strikers, Baron met a homebuilder and labor leader named Terry McCormack. In 1973, they founded McCormack Baron & Associates and dedicated themselves to providing quality low-income housing. Early on, McCormack and Baron focused on smaller housing sites with mixed-income rentals. With the goal of helping more impoverished areas, Baron and McCormack eventually developed multiblock areas that consisted of a mixture of low- and middle-income housing. The firm's earliest mixed-income developments created affordable public housing with market-rate units. Additionally, McCormack Baron & Associates took momentous reforms made during the St. Louis rent strike—especially the tenant affairs board that gave residents a voice in building maintenance and policy decisions—and put them in place in other cities. And when white city officials opposed such measures in Cleveland during the company's early years, Jean King proved to be the answer.¹⁰¹

In the 1980s, Fannie Lewis, a young welfare mother who was elected to Cleveland's city council, heard about what Baron and King had implemented in St. Louis. She asked McCormack Baron & Associates to build a similar development in Cleveland. During construction, white officials seized hold of the development's management and Lewis threatened to shut the project down. She demanded that housing in Cleveland have similar management as developments in St. Louis, which included a tenant affairs board. To keep the project moving forward, Baron asked Jean King to run the development for its first year, which became Cleveland's Lexington Village. Throughout 1986, King worked at Lexington Village with Fannie Lewis. Together, they helped McCormack Baron & Associates get one of their earliest and most successful developments off the ground.¹⁰²

Jean King continued to work for McCormack Baron Salazar (the firm's current name). Like Buck Jones, she worked to eradicate drug use and trafficking as well as conflicts with police. After settling the rent strike, King worked with Harold Gibbons to get young men jobs with Chrysler, Anheuser-Busch, and Monsanto. For decades, King ensured that residents living in McCormack Baron properties properly reared their children, sought employment, and cared for their homes. King explained that "Richard's position is/was, in that day, we must build decent housing for people. My position was, we must build decent people for housing." King explained what it means to build people for Baron: "That means my people got to be educated, they got to understand responsibility." To this day, King recently stated, "we're still doing that."¹⁰³

Significantly, the company moved away from high-rise buildings, which had dominated most previous major low-income housing developments in the United States. Indeed, Baron and King used to talk for hours into the night about how low-income families—like others—want space for their children to play, room to cook, and yards to tend. Accordingly, McCormack Baron Salazar's developments consist of multiblock areas of townhouses and condos. With a total of 149 developments with costs in excess of \$2.3 billion, and building projects in thirty-five cities, the company has developed more than 16,300 units of housing across the country. Baron and King thus worked together to remake not only the way in which low-income housing is run, they helped to refashion the built environment of many cities all over the country. Yet, the work of Jean King, and others like her, remain the crux of successful low-income housing. In fact, historian D. Bradford Hunt recently observed that substantial resident input and collective community cooperation are vital to the success of even the most attractively built developments. While King anxiously awaits the destruction of St. Louis's last low-income high-rise—the Blumeyer building where she became leader of the rent strike and where she works down to the present day—King is in large part responsible for the success of low-income housing, not new buildings. McCormack Baron Salazar is perhaps the epitome of the nation's transition to a model of low-income housing based on public and private partnerships. Indeed, through the lifelong friendship between King and Baron, the St. Louis public housing rent strike in part created the nation's largest and most successful, for-profit, federally subsidized, and economically integrated housing in the United States.¹⁰⁴

Assessing the legacy of the rent strike is a difficult task. On the one hand, the St. Louis rent strike influenced the Brooke Amendment to the Housing Act of 1969 and gave low-income housing residents more control over their lives and their homes. Additionally, the memory of the strike kept the city from increasing rents on public housing residents in the early 1980s.¹⁰⁵ The solidarity that defined black women's activism demonstrates that Black Power inspired women to agitate for equality and freedom. Unfortunately, their legacy has been somewhat overshadowed by the infamous destruction of the Pruitt-Igoe public housing complex.¹⁰⁶ The rent strike released considerable energy that translated into the lead paint campaign. Black mothers utilized rent withholding as a tool to protest the poisoning of their children. Because of groups like PCALP, the prevalence of lead poisoning in the United States has been reduced from well over 10 percent of the childhood population to less than 1 percent. Since 1971, the frequency of lead

poisoning in St. Louis has been reduced from 28 percent to 3 percent. Yet, black children still suffer from lead poisoning disproportionately when compared to white youth. As of 2009, lead poisoned twice as many black children as white children in St. Louis.¹⁰⁷ Despairingly, and in spite of these statistics, more has been done to correct lead poisoning than any other health and housing disparity that afflicts African Americans.¹⁰⁸ Similarly, while Buck Jones's welfare campaign helped prepare the African American community for cuts to welfare programs, "entitlements" continue to be points of contention in the United States, with some Americans seeking to eliminate them altogether.¹⁰⁹ And although Jean King's lifework with Richard Baron created a successful model of low-income housing, the replacement of public housing units by private developers has displaced many poor people, since condos do not have as much space as high-rise buildings. So, while McCormack Baron and other companies have improved the quality of life for some low-income families, others still face significant challenges.¹¹⁰ The rent strike thrust issues surrounding low-income housing to the center of black activism in the United States—and while Ivory Perry, Buck Jones, and Jean King helped redefine the course of the Black Freedom Struggle in St. Louis and beyond—Americans have yet to achieve the ambitious and determined standards of equality their activism embodied.

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