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## Inside the St. Louis Rent Strike of 1969

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*By Caitlin Lee and Clark Randall*

e know they are broke,” Ed Roy Harris told reporters in late December, 1968, referring to the St.

“**W** Louis Housing Authority. Harris lived in the Blumeyer Village public housing high-rises in near North City. “But we’ve gone to the state before. We’ve written letters. We’ve called—it didn’t work,” he told the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. “Politicians seem to respond to action.”

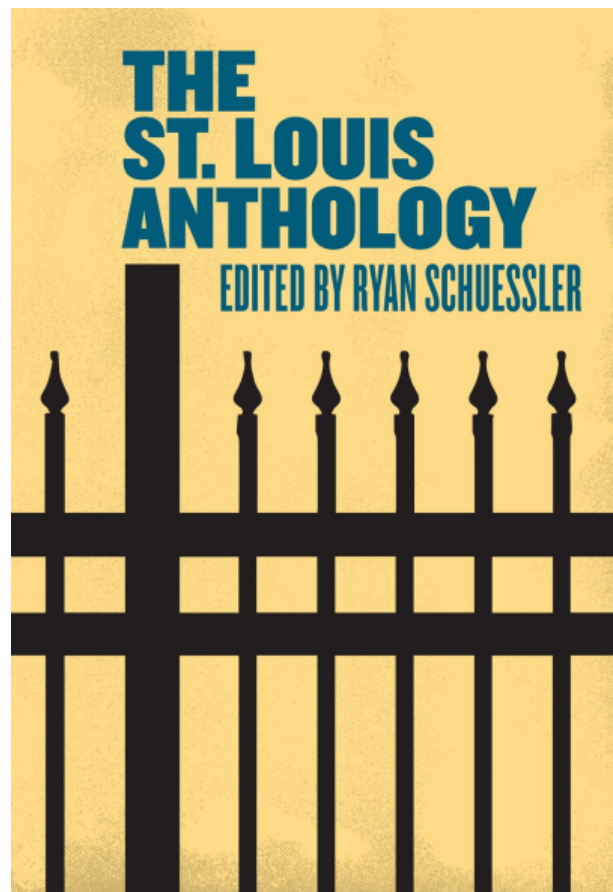
Two weeks prior, Harris and other public housing tenants delivered a list of demands to city officials. Their demands countered a flurry of recent hikes in rents and were simple: lower the rent and treat us as human beings. Between 1965 and 1967, rent increases for public housing in St. Louis had ranged from sixteen percent to thirty-two percent, depending on the project and the room count.

And Harris was right; the St. Louis Housing Authority was bottoming out. During the 1967-1968 fiscal year, the Authority recorded a deficit of well over \$300,000. It had been a long time coming. Public housing projects across the country had been built with federal dollars, then left to be maintained by local rents. This financial structure, codified as law through the Federal Housing Act of 1937, often proved to be an ill fit for local implementation.

According to their 1968 budget, the St. Louis Housing Authority had a \$54.16 allowance per unit, but operating costs totaled \$57.38 per unit. This gap, stretched out over time and across the city’s approximately eight thousand units, resulted in progressive underfunding and widespread deterioration of the housing units. The Housing Authority’s deficit was compounded by increasing vacancy rates, themselves brought on in part by the deteriorating conditions of the units.

Tenants complained of rodent infestation, broken windows, lack of heating, and lack of repairs. Despite the substandard conditions, public housing tenants in St. Louis were at risk of being priced out of the city—out of their homes—by the rent increases.

The state of Missouri provided no relief, effectively clenching their purse. Through its cost of living calculations, the state estimated a minimum that residents needed “to live in health and dignity,” but they provided households on



From Belt Publishing’s the St. Louis Anthology.

welfare less than half of that amount. In 1968, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* called these payments “a disgrace.” And public housing tenants in St. Louis were increasingly reliant on welfare to make ends meet: nearly two-thirds of tenants received welfare as their primary income. As rents rose and welfare stagnated, residents were spending sixty percent or more of their income on housing.

**“It touched everybody all over the country who lived in public housing.”**

The St. Louis Housing Authority and the City of St. Louis witnessed this slow-motion train wreck and had been begging the state and federal governments for help for most of the 1960s.

“The whole public housing program is a federal program,” Mayor Alfonso Cervantes said in 1968, “so they have a responsibility, regardless of what they say.”

“And the state is responsible, too,” he continued, “The state can’t expect us to operate public housing when state welfare payments are so low that people have little or nothing left after they pay their rent.”

“The projects,” Cervantes finished, “have been heading towards bankruptcy for many years.”

The city, nonetheless, refused to acknowledge the tenant’s demands for several weeks.

The conditions at the Darst housing complex were reported to be some of the worst; the modernist high rise building of 645 units sat at Fourteenth and Park Avenue in the city’s near south side. The building’s condition, in line with the dwindling funds, was deteriorating. Tenants that could, left.

Jean King and her husband, who lived in Darst, were looking to move and had the means to do so. But as King later recalled, on her way to tour a new apartment building she saw a young girl from Darst picking a piece of bread up off the ground. Finding the girls’ mother, King learned that the family’s welfare payments had failed to adjust for their newborn child, leaving them in an overcrowded unit, having to make the impossible decision between paying for groceries or paying the rent. “Mrs. King, we don’t have any food,” King recalled being told.

King decided to stay at Darst. “Somebody’s got to do something,” King said, while at a meeting of tenants later that year. “I’m ready to go!” King became an organizer and was quickly recognized as a

leader.

“We wish we could talk with Jean King,” says Sunni Hutton. It is fall 2018, and Sunni is talking with her friend and co-organizer Shuron Jones. “Gotta stay in touch with the old heads, you know?” They share a laugh—“The OG’s.”

The two are sitting at a sushi joint on Delmar. “This street ain’t what it used to be,” Shuron says. “The times I used to have down here, I’m telling you. 2008—it was different.” Delmar Boulevard is the most infamous line of segregation in St. Louis; over the last decade it has turned from a hub for black culture into an extension of Washington University’s campus. Plans for adding a ferris wheel were recently proposed.

The two recount the time they met a few summers back at St. Louis’s Pride event. “Yes! The *black* Pride event!” Shuron clarifies.

“Child, it was hot, it was so hot, and we just danced,” Sunni says, “We were the only people silly enough to be dancing in the middle of the street.”

“It turned out you lived like three blocks from me,” Sunni says. She started inviting Shuron to an area initiative called So Fresh So Clean, where residents pick up waste and encourage neighbors to recycle. “I walk through these alleys every three months,” Sunni says. “By the end of October, it will be a year since this one site has been cleaned by the city.” On a given day, the *Post-Dispatch* reported in July 2018, half of the city’s eighty-four garbage trucks are out of service, having broken down, making sites like the one Sunni referenced common. The City of St. Louis is close to bankruptcy. With remaining services, like trash pickup, unevenly distributed, black neighborhoods are hit worse.

“We trying to get some fucking trash picked up here,” Sunni says, laughing but not kidding.

Sunni and Shuron had connected over struggles dealing with their landlords in Gravois Park on the south side. Their time renting had often been fraught with issues of negligent ownership and upkeep.

Alongside residents of surrounding neighborhoods, they began organizing through the local community corporation, Dutchtown South. “We came together and started sharing stories about life on the south side.” Residents were in the process of revamping Dutchtown’s Community Empowerment Committee. “A topic kept coming up,” Sunni explains, “the experience with poor quality housing and slumlords.”

“I was waking up in the morning and having bed bug bites all over my body,” Sunni says. “I was dealing with a swarm of rodents in my house.” Without response from the property’s owner, Sunni looked elsewhere for support. “I was calling the city to report it, but I was met with an unresponsive city government,” she says, “so we went full force.”

“To be honest, I hadn’t heard of the 1969 rent strike,” Sunni says. “Do you remember when we started talking about it?” she asks Shuron.

“We were going to the mall, I think,” Shuron responds, “I was like, ‘Yo, I just read this book, and the last chapter was dedicated to the rent strike. These women—these black women—did something that is almost unfathomable. They organized themselves. And they did it in this systematic way.’”

**I**n the wake of the Great Depression, public housing was created for white families. Then, when the projects that were built became more integrated around the 1950s, white people began to leave. White families across income levels were given access to homeownership through federal loans at affordable rates created by the New Deal.

Black families, however, at the direction of the federal government, were locked out of the subsidized mortgage market. Between 1934 and 1968, ninety-eight percent of federal homeownership loans went to whites, thereby constructing the nation’s suburbs. Black people were all but confined to be renters, left with depleted city tax bases and failing services to match.

In the meantime, the values of suburban homes were further propped up by publicly subsidized highways, connecting city to suburb, through the Federal Highway Act of 1956—the largest public works project in the nation’s history.

In addition to becoming racialized, public housing became gendered. New rules disqualified families with able-bodied men. Black women and children became the primary tenants of public housing.

In the midst of suburbanization, renters in the city fought for their homes. In 1967, sixty public housing tenants, primarily black women, picketed in front of the St. Louis Housing Authority. They called for rent reductions, pest control, and better clean up services. Historian Clarence Lang later argued, in *Grassroots at the Gateway*, that in doing so these women rejected male-oriented narratives assigning them a passive role in struggle, or one dependent on a male breadwinner.

Again in May of 1968, tenants took to the streets. Two hundred tenants marched to city hall, calling for rent reductions and reforms to Missouri’s welfare system. They were backed this time by black

power groups in St. Louis including the Black Liberators, the Zulu 1200's, and ACTION.

**By the end of April 1969, those on strike had withheld over \$140,000 in rent.**

In November 1968, the St. Louis Housing Authority imposed yet another rent increase—despite HUD's disapproval. "We thought the rents were too high for the tenants to pay," said the director of housing at HUD to the *Post-Dispatch*. "We did not agree with the authority that the increase was the answer to its financial problems."

In response to the rent hike, organizers went door to door in the Carr Square and Vaughn buildings on the near north side of the city. By December 1968, over half the tenants living in those two buildings—approximately 800 families—committed to strike. Rent would be paid, instead of to the Housing Authority, into a joint account.

"This structure was planned," Shuron emphasises. "I don't wanna say they did it by the book, because they kind of wrote the book on it," she says in between sips. "They collectively organized to withhold all of their money in an escrow account."

"That history, these women, inspires us with tactics," Shuron says. "Of course we can get people affordable housing that is dignified and that someone actually wants to come home to—because these women did it, you know?"

As city leadership continued to ignore the group's demands, the coalition of tenants grew. The rent strike was to begin January 1, 1969.

On the south side, tenants in the Darst, Webbe, and Clinton-Peabody housing complexes came together, signing on to the rent strike. The south side coalesced around Jean King's leadership. Tenants elected King as chair of the Citywide Rent Strike Committee.

Over time, tenants of eight housing complexes across the city joined in. Each cluster operated their own tenant council. The Rev. Buck Jones, for example, led tenants at Carr Square and Vaughn, buildings which neighbored each other on the near north side. Jones had been a preacher since the age of fifteen and a community organizer for years before the strike.

Soon, well over a thousand public housing tenants were signed on to the strike—from the north side down to the south side. With numbers still growing, leadership, including King and Jones, pushed the start date back to ensure residents were organized. “For the first time,” Jones said, “the people in public housing are consolidated into a power bloc that can get change.”

On February 1 the strike began.

**T**he late 1960s was a time of confrontation. The country was on the back end of the long civil rights movement. Malcolm X had been assassinated; so called “race riots,” or uprisings, had literally burned through Newark, New Jersey, and Detroit, Michigan, in 1967; Stokely Carmichael, chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, coined the term “black power”—defining it as “the coming together of black people to fight for their liberation by any means necessary.” In doing so, he articulated the militancy in the air.

By that time, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. had turned his attention to international and anti-capitalist struggles. Rev. King arrived in Memphis the spring of 1968 to support over thirteen hundred black sanitation workers on strike over working conditions and poverty wages.

“Something is happening in Memphis,” Rev. King said on April 3, 1968. “Something is happening in our world.” He was assassinated the following night.

A year after Rev. King’s death, in St. Louis, the Rev. Buck Jones told the *Post-Dispatch*, “Now, more than ever before, I respect Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.” Jones continued, “Judging from the number of people we have and dollars in the bank, we must have the right approach.”

By the end of April 1969, those on strike had withheld over \$140,000 in rent. Residents at Pruitt-Igoe had recently organized and joined the strike. Pruitt-Igoe consisted of thirty-three towers—each eleven stories high. In response, the Housing Authority filed eviction suits on seventy-three striking tenants and placed a lien on all overdue rents. By doing so, they effectively barred access to the collective accounts. “The Housing Authority closed the doors to the banks on us,” Jones told the *Post-Dispatch*. “We are not throwing in the towel, though.”

With the liens in place, organizers and their legal team collected and withheld rent outside of the banks. King, however, encouraged strike participants to spend their what-would-be rent money. As a result, many tenants moved out, renting private units or often even purchasing homes with saved up funds. Vacancy rates in the complexes spiked.

That May, King wrote to Mayor Cervantes: “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.”

**S**unni, considering her home, says, “These neighborhoods are just a part of a cycle.”

Nationwide, black wealth and home ownership gains of the 1990s and early 2000s were attacked through the racialized predatory lending of subprime mortgages. In 2008 when the housing market crashed, half of all black wealth in the country was eliminated. The housing crisis hit Sunni’s zip code, one that had a growing number of black homeowners, with particular force. “Black home ownership rates plummeted,” she says, “Now the majority here, over sixty percent, are renters.”

The neighborhoods where Sunni and Shuron focus their energies—Gravois Park, Dutchtown, Marine Villa, and Mount Pleasant—are just a few miles southwest of where Jean King called home.

The foreclosure crisis concentrated ownership. The prevalence of foreclosed properties in the neighborhoods created a ripe market for opportunistic buyers, many of whom stalled on investing in the units. Instead, the new landlords rented them out without improvement or held them vacant for years.

These neighborhoods, built up around the turn of the century, are full of brick buildings. Most are single family, with duplexes and four-units interspersed.

“Then cities add to the decline when they remove public services,” Sunni says.

Today, the areas in the south side where Sunni and Shuron live and work are home to a high concentration of tenants receiving housing subsidies. Instead of next door to one another in high rises, families now live in a fractured landscape.

The iconic, nationally televised, 1972 demolition of the St. Louis housing project Pruitt-Igoe marked a shift, not just in the structural form, but also in the financial framework of low-income housing. The new program called Section 8 began in 1974 as a partnership between housing authorities and private rental markets. Tenants and their local housing authority would begin paying rent to private landlords. Under the oversight of local housing authorities, these landlords were responsible for the upkeep of their buildings.



Landlords outside of impoverished black communities have historically refused prospective tenants when presented with a voucher. Layers of disinvestment and denial of housing have concentrated both poverty and public housing tenants in places like Gravois Park in the city's twentieth ward. "The ward," Sunni says, "is over seventy-eight percent people of color."

Since meeting, Sunni and Shuron have built community with residents, both those receiving subsidy and those not, across the south side.

"The first step was to just activate other people," Sunni says.

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In the 1960s, tenants went next door or down the hall to talk with their neighbors about rent and unit conditions. Today, in neighborhoods where private ownership of publicly-subsidized rental units is high, conversations about housing and ownership happen in a different context. "We had to take this on the road," Sunni says of their organizing efforts.

Sunni recalls meetings with residents from across the neighborhoods, "It was so crazy when people started talking and sharing." She continues, "You had folks coming to meetings and finding out they had the same property owner or management company when they sat down and started voicing their grievances."

Shuron says, "Myisha and I even knew each other, but we didn't realize we had the same slumlord until we started talking at that meeting." Sunni follows, "Yeah, and then Jara and I figured out we have the same slumlord, too."

The current fragmentation of public housing tenants limits collective bargaining power. The landscape positions individual tenants against landowners, who have the weight of rental law and access to wealth behind them. "There's no way some of these landlords should be getting a subsidy for these properties," Shuron says, "But they are. And they're getting it through the Housing Authority."

“At the moment our target is the slumlord, but one of our future targets has to be the Housing Authority. The St. Louis Housing Authority is allowing this mess to happen.”

“What’s also amazing,” Sunni says, referring back to the rent strike, “is that they saw the intersectionality of their movement.”

“Correct!” Shuron interjects.

The 1969 rent strike, while catalyzed by black women living in public housing, gained support from all over of the city. Harold Gibbons and his Teamsters Union provided financial support and assistance in negotiations with Mayor Cervantes and the Housing Authority. Black power collectives like the Zulu 1200’s and the Black Liberators also provided organizational support.

ACTION, CORE, and the Black Arts Group (BAG), too, aided in dramatizing the conflict of the rent strike. BAG created music and theater as well as hosted weekly meetings for tenants at the building they owned on Washington Avenue.

The Legal Aid Society of St. Louis offered their skills. Lawyers continually fought off the city and the Housing Authority. They warded off eviction threats and kept tenants from losing their withheld rent money.

“That’s one thing that’s always brought up,” Sunni says, “How does our movement intersect with other movements like black liberation, the struggle for LGBQIA+ rights, immigrant rights, labor, those fighting for a higher minimum wage?” She continues, “We understand that these are the same populations usually most affected by housing issues, too.”

Community Empowerment Committee’s recent mass meetings built a network of allies and members. Still, Sunni notes, “We are in the beginning of it. We know how crucial it is to connect with the people on the north side and in North County. They are us. They look like us. They, economically, are the same.”

**I**n July of 1969, with tensions high, HUD sent a private contractor to investigate St. Louis’s public housing conflict. Edgar Ewing’s report called the projects in St. Louis “the worst in nation.”

The following week, King made a trip to Washington to testify in front of the Senate. She shared her case and that of St. Louis on the national stage with the support of Massachusetts senator Edward Brooke.

Back in St. Louis, things came to a head. The strike brought the St. Louis Housing Authority to the very brink of bankruptcy. By October, over twenty-four hundred tenants from the eight public housing projects had withheld well over \$600,000—today’s equivalent of \$4.5 million.

The Authority reported back to HUD that mass closure of public housing was inevitable if the strike continued. They made plans to shut down the complexes and evict the tenants in January 1970. Public housing residents were unphased; the strike persisted. Worn down, after nine months, Mayor Cervantes and the Housing Authority agreed to the tenants’ demands. Rent would be based on a tenant’s ability to pay. A tenants’ affairs board was created to amplify residents’ voices. Further, tenants were to be included on the St. Louis Housing Authority’s Board of Commissioners.

King’s recommendation, included in her testimony, that rent for publicly assisted housing be income-based, was included in the Brooke Amendment of the Housing Act of 1969. The amendment capped rent at twenty-five percent of a public housing tenant’s income. As a result, federal subsidies increased nationwide to cover the differences.

Today, HUD’s federal standard—that no more than thirty percent of a subsidized household’s income should go to rent—is owed in large part to pressure created by St. Louis residents. Shortly after President Ronald Reagan was elected, he directed the twenty-five percent cap be raised to thirty percent.

“It touched everybody all over the country who lived in public housing,” King later wrote, reminiscing on the strike. “I’m very proud of that.” Still, the win was not achieved without its toll. Jean King worked a full-time job—nights at Malcolm Bliss Hospital, from 11:00 p.m. to 7:00 a.m. During the day, she routinely spent nine hours on rent strike activities, two of which were focused on reading about social movements. As a parent, King depended on her mother for childcare while organizing tenants. In just the first two months of the strike, King fainted three times from exhaustion.

Following the strike, King built her career on reshaping low-income housing. King and Richard Baron, a lawyer whom King met just prior to the strike in 1968, formed McCormack Baron and Associates, a group dedicated to building quality low-income rental units. King ran some of Baron’s first developments in Cleveland and continued working with him back in St. Louis as the business grew to be one of the most prominent of its kind.

Shuron says, “It’s bananas how they would walk to all the housing projects—walk all the way downtown to city hall. I’m like, ‘No thank you. I ain’t walking to city hall. That ain’t happenin’.’ But they did it. I couldn’t.”

“She says that now,” Sunni responds, “But she would. She would walk.” She turns to Shuron, “Listen, we start at my house...It’s not bad.”

“I guess I would,” Shuron agrees. ■

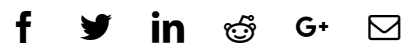
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**Caitlin Lee**’s creative research practice weaves in themes of rust-belt urbanism and collective agency. The writing and the engagement tools she develops employ aspects of design, public policy, investigative reporting, and popular education.

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Cover image of Darst, from *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth* via [Flickr](#) (cropped; [CC BY 2.0](#)).

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