

# Los Angeles' "Headline-Happy Public Housing War"

BY DON PARSON

---

There was a concerted attack during 1952 and 1953 by what was popularly known as the real estate lobby on the Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles and the Federal public housing program which it administered. The ammunition used by the real estate lobby was charges of "communism" culminating in a giant "red scare" which took place (not coincidentally) at the same time as the seminal 1953 mayoral election, signalling the defeat of public housing not only in Los Angeles but nationally as well. Looking backwards, the way in which the red scare was formulated and mobilized appears irrational and, at times, blatantly silly. Though it may seem condescending and even patronizing to focus on such events, it is nevertheless essential to see the way in which the media articulated the attack on public housing via red scare tactics. There should be no misconceptions here: The issue involved was never one of communism, it was public housing. Charges of communism not only destroyed the careers and wrecked the lives of a number of socially aware and concerned individuals in the City Housing Authority (CHA) and even the liberal Republican mayor but, most importantly, it destroyed the public housing program and the opportunity for millions of people for improved and affordable homes. All of this is not to say that should the public housing program have succeeded, everything would be wonderful now. The point is that the means by which people obtain their shelter fell back into the realm of the private construction interests and real estate speculators, whose goal of maximizing their rate of return does not always coincide with the need for adequate and affordable housing. The anti-urban renewal struggles of the 1960s and 1970s and the rent-control struggles of today are the direct descendants of the struggle for public housing in the 1950s.

\* \* \*

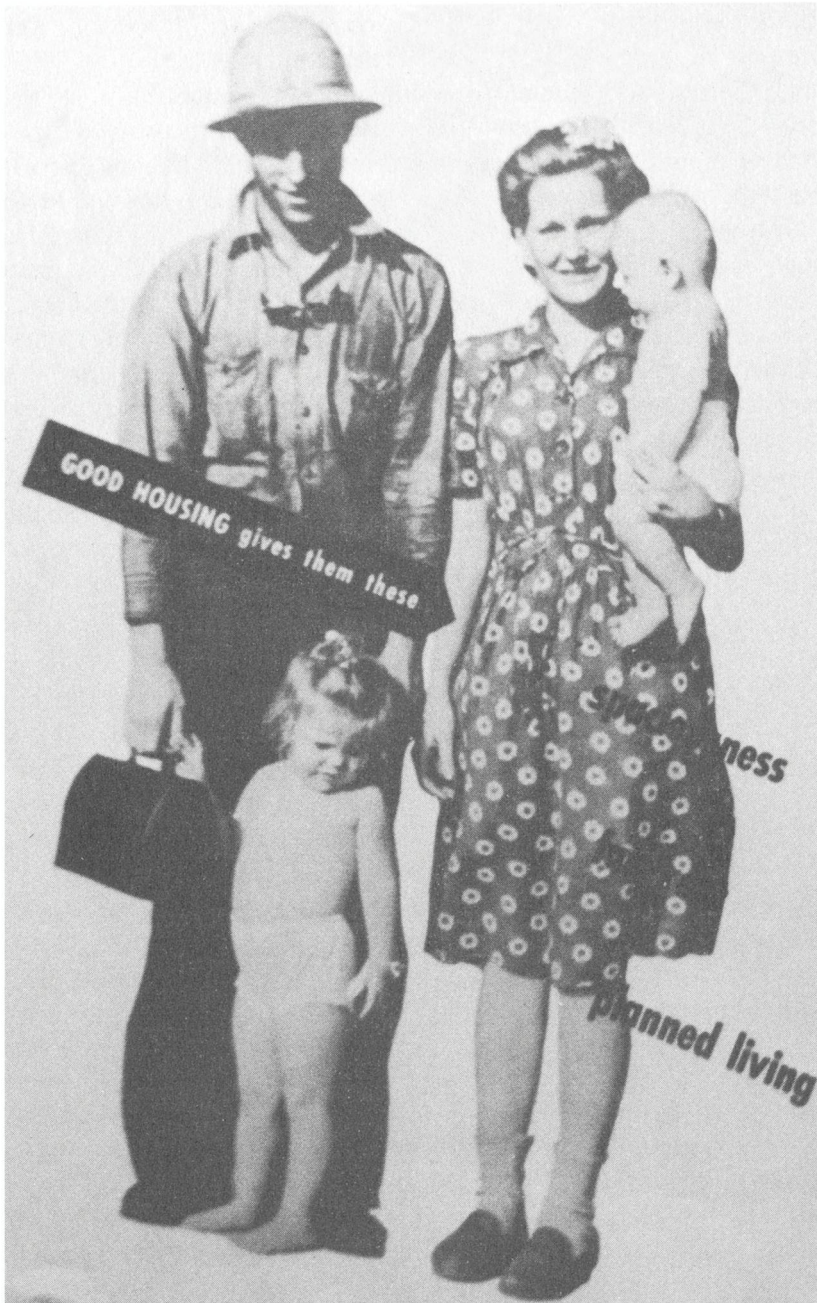
Following brief flirtations during World War I and with the Public Works Administration in the early years of the Depression, public housing became firmly established in the US with the passage of the

1937 Wagner Act. As part of Roosevelt's New Deal, the Wagner Act was sponsored by progressive Democrats under pressure from two sources. On the one hand, the Building Trades Council of the AFL, organized through the Labor Housing Council, considered the Wagner Act as "must" legislation and was instrumental in lobbying for its passage.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, there were the disruptive tactics of the Unemployed Councils, organized primarily through the Communist Party, who bodily prevented the eviction of many who were jobless and unable to pay the rent. Frequently there were 'rent riots'—often bloody, sometimes deadly—which forced the mayors of several large cities to call moratoriums on evictions and pressure the federal government for a 'solution' to the housing problem.<sup>2</sup> In Los Angeles the direct action tactics of the Communist Party fused with the self-help movement and the remnants of Upton Sinclair's EPIC (End Poverty in California) campaign, with "huskies" and "homeguards" preventing evictions in Watts and organizing in the "Hoovervilles" that had sprung up in the dry bed of the Los Angeles River.<sup>3</sup> As was true of most New Deal legislation, the Wagner Act sought to defuse a very volatile and potent political situation. It was bitterly opposed by the U.S. Chambers of Congress, the National Association of Real Estate Boards, the United States Building and Loan League, etc., who were in agreement that "public housing was a dangerous socialistic experiment which threatened free enterprise and the traditional American principles of government; public housing also threatened the continued prosperity of the enterprise that each of them represented."<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, public housing proponents were successful. By March 1939, the Ramona Gardens project was under construction in Los Angeles under the auspices of the CHA.

The growth of defense industries, particularly aircraft assembly and shipbuilding, resulted in a Los Angeles flooded with war workers during World War II. With housing production approaching zero due to the war effort, an acute housing shortage soon developed which was very hard felt in the Black districts with hundreds of shelterless families sleeping on the sidewalks.<sup>5</sup> This severity was compounded due to the segregation policies of both private owners and the CHA. In 1942 the Citizens' Housing Council, organized a picket around the just completed Hacienda Heights project, protesting the segregation policies of the CHA. Despite the severe housing shortage, no one occupied the project during the month-long picket. One of the organizers, Frank Wilkinson, was hired by the CHA off the picket line when the president

*Los Angeles' Public Housing War*



An illustration from "Homes for Heroes," 4th Annual Report of the Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles, 1942.

of the Central Labor Council walked up to him and asked, "If you like the niggers so much, Frank, why don't you come live with them?", thus becoming the manager of the first integrated public housing project in South-Central Los Angeles.<sup>6</sup> By the end of the war, the CHA had built and was managing 3,468 units housing 17,186 people under the Wagner Act; and managing a further 12,275 units housing 53,469 war workers and their families under the Lanham Act.<sup>7</sup> Public housing, especially in Los Angeles, was fast becoming one of the means to remedy Roosevelt's "one-third of a nation, ill fed, ill clothed and ill housed." The program was supported by the Labor Housing Council of the AFL; the Housing Council of the CIO; and especially the UAW in Los Angeles which proposed that the aerospace industry convert their plants to the mass production of housing with the cessation of hostilities. The CHA was definitely optimistic (one might even say militant): the 1945 consolidated annual report is illustrated by a multi-racial assemblage of veterans and war workers marching into Los Angeles and demanding a home as their right.<sup>8</sup>

By the end of the war the housing shortage was tremendous. The estimated need was 12,600,000 units nationally and 280,000 annually in Los Angeles.<sup>9</sup> "I appeal to you for help in connection with a critical housing shortage in Los Angeles," Mayor Fletcher Bowron wrote to President Franklin D. Roosevelt in March 1945.<sup>10</sup> Help was not forthcoming. It seemed that the New Deal had died with Roosevelt. Private enterprise either would not or could not adequately address the housing crisis, and the increasingly conservative congresses of 1945-1948 refused to either expand the Wagner Act or to pass any significant new housing legislation, leading President Truman to denounce the real estate lobby which he claimed "had been sitting on the housing bill."<sup>11</sup> According to the real estate interests there was no housing problem. The problem was one of an increased standard of living and higher consumer expectations, pointed out Herbert Nelson, executive vice president of the National Association of Real Estate Boards, at a meeting of Los Angeles real estate interests at the Biltmore Hotel in November 1947. Supply would easily match demand in another depression, "but there isn't going to be any depression for five years at least."<sup>12</sup> The *Times* editorialized that "Both the builders and workers by refraining from any gouging practices and by intelligent self-policing undoubtedly can contribute effective aid in working out of this housing bottleneck."<sup>13</sup> Officers of the National Association of Home Builders visited Mayor Bowron and were soundly rebuffed for their failure to

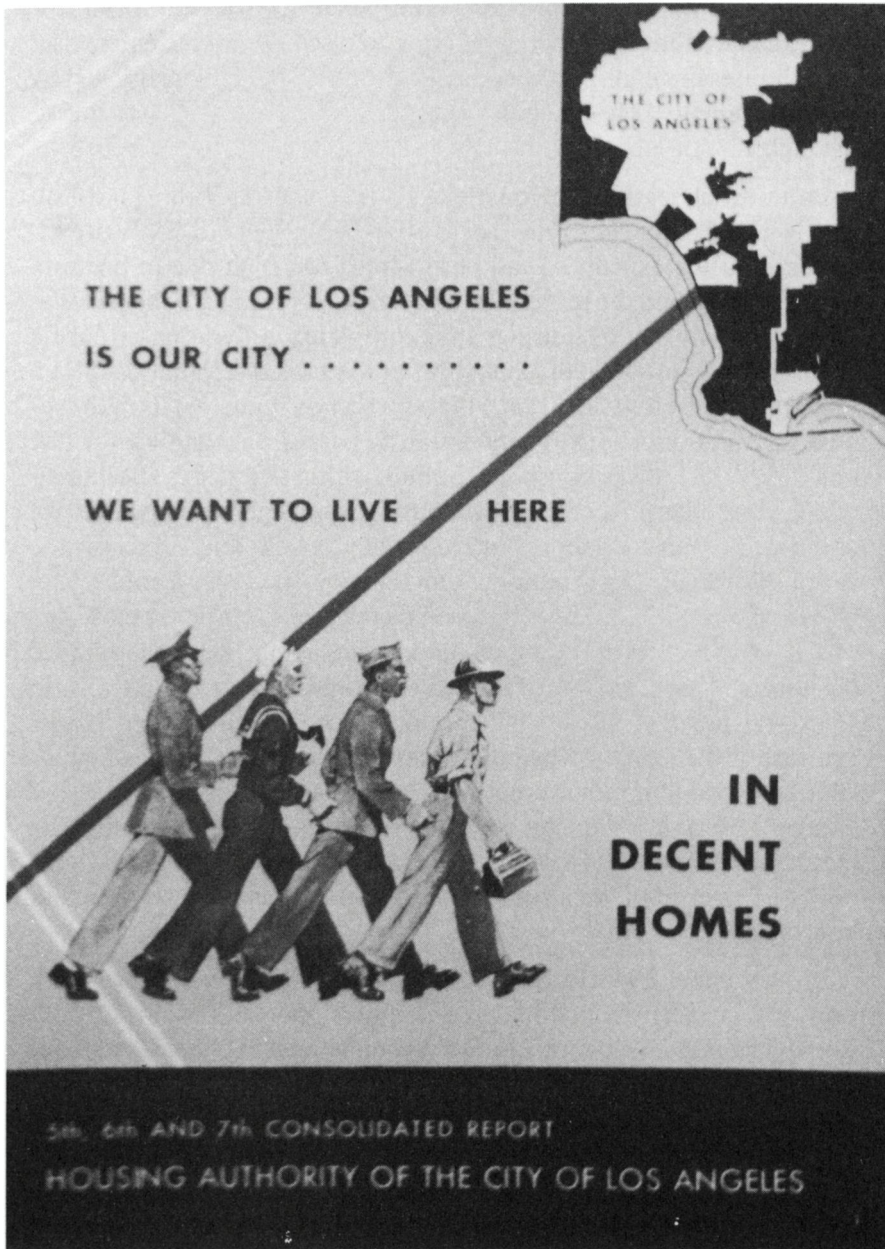


## *Los Angeles' Public Housing War*

address the housing shortage. "Left-wingers," NAHB president Edward Carr charged, "who are trying to discredit private enterprise, think houses are high-priced because they want the homes supplied by the government." He concluded that the housing shortage was due to the high cost of labor.<sup>14</sup>

In an article entitled "Houseless? Here's Figures Will Make You Cozily Hot," the *California Eagle* observed that Wilson Wyatt, ex-federal housing expeditor, had been forced to resign due to pressure from the GOP and the real estate lobby. The story led with the fact that there were only 35,000 housing units completed in the country during 1946: "That's just 965,000 units short of the goal of one million units a year set by Wilson Wyatt . . .,"<sup>15</sup> the paper wryly noted. At its 67th Annual Convention, the AFL unanimously passed a resolution for one million units of public housing to be built within five years. The inability of private enterprise to meet the housing need engendered protest not only from organized labor, but from the NAACP and especially the various veterans' organizations. On January 10, 1947, a multiracial coalition of 1500 veterans sponsored by the American Veterans Committee pitched tents and camped out in MacArthur Park to dramatize the housing shortage. One of the protester's posters read "Fox holes in 1945—rat holes in 1947." "We want to know," demanded Norris Helford of the AVC, "why our country had no trouble furnishing us with guns and ammunition but now offers us only excuses instead of homes."<sup>16</sup> Frank Wilkinson, who was (among other tasks) the official liaison between the CHA and the veterans' organizations, recalls huge rallies of over 5000 vets held at the Shrine Auditorium to demand housing.<sup>17</sup>

In November 1948 President Truman amazed everyone by being reelected, a fact which stimulated congressional support from both Republicans and Democrats for a new housing act. The real estate lobby strongly opposed the act, with the budget of the Washington Realtors Committee alone being twice as large as that of all the public housing proponents put together.<sup>18</sup> The Los Angeles Central Labor Council called for "immediate attention" on the bill in order to "help absorb some of the unemployment in industry and to create low-cost, low-rent housing." "While the bill does not include all of the features desired by the American Federation of Labor, it is a good start for a much needed housing program."<sup>19</sup> Within three days of the signing of the 1949 Housing Act into Law, the Los Angeles City Council unanimously approved the appropriation of \$110 million towards the



An illustration from “A Decent Home . . . An American Right,” the 5th, 6th, and 7th Consolidated Report of the Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles, 1945.

### *Los Angeles' Public Housing War*

construction of 10,000 units of public housing, becoming the first city in the US to take advantage of the legislation. It looked as if Los Angeles was slated to become, in the words of the CHA, "the first city in America free of bad housing."<sup>20</sup>

Following their defeat with the 1949 Housing Act, the real estate lobby began to regroup and consolidate itself, particularly on the local level. "Let us present a united front, as 'a house divided against itself must fall'. The future holds many problems for the real property interests. Let us complete our organization and move forward together," said John Owens of the Apartment House Owners Association of Los Angeles at a conference of the National Property Associations.<sup>21</sup> In 1950 the real estate lobby tested its strength in Los Angeles by fighting rent control which, with the low vacancy rate and tight housing market, had been in effect since World War II. The key organizations involved in fighting rent control were the National Association of Real Estate Boards, the National Apartment Owners Association, the National Association of Home Builders, and the Chamber of Commerce.<sup>22</sup> Providing invaluable aid in orchestrating these interests and propagandizing their views were the Chandler newspapers (the *Times* and the *Mirror*) and those of the Hearst empire (the *Herald and Express* and *Examiner*). The material interests of these major newspapers, that is, their extensive real estate holdings and dependence on the financial well-being of the downtown businesses (for advertising revenues, promoting the area's growth, etc.) combined with their near monopoly on news, made them the logical mouthpiece of the real estate lobby. Opposing the real estate lobby and rent decontrol were the Los Angeles Central Labor Council, the AFL Voters League, the Greater Los Angeles CIO Council, the Los Angeles Building and Construction Trades Council, veterans' organizations, the Los Angeles Tenants' Council, the NAACP and the Los Angeles Urban League. Summarily, the real estate lobby was successful in rescinding rent control in late 1950 in a heated battle which is well chronicled elsewhere.<sup>23</sup> What is important here is that this set of contenders was basically the same as that involved in the public housing fight which followed on the heels of the rent control fight. Flush with their victory in rent control, the real estate lobby took aim at public housing. With shades of things to come, Congressional Representative Norris Poulson threatened Housing Expediter Tighe Woods with a congressional investigation to confirm "suspicion that he is collaborating with labor unions" to delay the removal of rent control in Los Angeles.<sup>24</sup>

In 1949 the City Council had voted unanimously in favor of the 10,000 unit contract. As late as November 1950, when the twelve proposed sites for the housing were being approved, the real estate lobby did not blatantly object to the program, but they requested that the council take more time to consider the matter. The council endorsed the sites with a vote of 12-1. After the conservative victories in the 1951 municipal elections, the real estate lobby "caught the scent of blood" and attacked the public housing program in force.<sup>25</sup> In June of 1951 the *Times* made the first overtures of redbaiting by declaring public housing to be a "huge Socialistic scheme."<sup>26</sup> The Small Property Owners League published a pamphlet, *Bowron Administration Moving People via Gestapo Housing Authority*, which claimed that "government owned tenement housing . . . would accomplish the major step to Communism."<sup>27</sup> In November 1951 Councilman Harold Harby discovered that some of the 10,000 units were to be built on vacant land: "When you remove the slum clearance element, there is nothing left but Socialism."<sup>28</sup> Councilman John Holland, also finding out that some of the housing was to be built on "unfortunate locations," i.e., vacant land, in his middle-income district, declared "When I think of those public buildings going up on these rolling, virgin hills, I revolt."<sup>29</sup> Holland's revulsion spread to Councilmen Cronk, Navarro, Baker, Austin, Henry and Davenport. Though anti-rent control, Davenport had been a staunch proponent of public housing and "It was the general consensus that Davenport's change of heart had not been based entirely on principle."<sup>30</sup> (Indeed not; but more on this later.) On December 26 the City Council voted 8-7 against the housing project, leading Mayor Bowron to respond that the real estate lobby "who are leading the fight against public housing subsidies are the very ones who have received the greatest benefits from other Federal subsidies." He failed "to grasp the reasoning that Federal subsidies for the benefit of the less fortunate are socialistic and Federal subsidies for those who are engaged in business, with particular reference to building and financing, are not socialistic."<sup>31</sup> Robert Alexander, member of the City Planning Commission and co-architect of the Chavez Ravine project, recalls public debates with the "Real Estate lion's den" over the issue of public housing: Agreeing that public housing was indeed "socialistic" when defined as the expenditure of government money on public works, "I would point out that as I drove to the meeting on a socialistic road, walked on a socialistic sidewalk under socialist streetlights and had just drunk a glass of socialist water, I thought I would meet an opponent who was a product of socialist education as I was."<sup>32</sup> The

# MAYOR SLUGS HOUSING FOE



### THE WINNAH—BOWRON BY ONE PUNCH

## Bovvron Hits Landlord With Fist in Court Row

BY ART WHITE, Mirror Staff Writer

The war over public housing in Los Angeles broke out on an old front today as Councilman Ed Davenport broke up another session of the City Council and on a new front as Mayor Bowron and a property owner engaged in a fist fight.

Bowron and John Hogya, 39, of 1150 S Lake St., staged a one-punch brawl on the steps of a Superior Court building, hizzoner landing the single punch and the landlord landing the last word.

"It was like a woman's punch," said Hogya, member of a small property owners' organization who provoked Bowron's wrath by accusing him of "representing Joe Stalin" in the dispute over \$110,000,000 worth of public housing.

Davenport launched into an angry verbal tirade for the third straight day and fellow Councilmen for the second straight day walked out on him.

"Why dignity a guy like that by answering him?" demanded Councilman Don Allen as he walked out of the

In the historic episode, Lloyd Taber, executive assistant to Bowron, quickly separated his boss from the property owner and the Mayor went back to the City Hall where Rogers criticized his fighting ability before reporters.

"The Mayor doesn't know how to hit," he said, pointing to his left shoulder. That is where the Mayor hit him.

Councilmen pulled the parliamentary fur out from under Davenport after he tried to his feet to take this opportunity to

"I'm not mad as Ed Ryehol," Davenport thundered, getting mad to all outward appearances, then launching into a bitter tirade against councilman Don Allen, who called the doctors yesterday

Turn to Page 2

Turn to Page 2.

[259]

Council decided to submit the matter to a public vote on June 3, 1952, though in the meantime (April 28) the California State Supreme Court ruled that the city could not cancel its federal contract, meaning that Proposition B would be no more than a straw vote. Turnout was very low, and the anti-public housing forces were victorious with a margin of 378,000 to 258,000.

Up to this point, charges of “socialism” and “communism,” and countercharges of “vested interests” had remained at a fairly remote and impersonal level. However, on August 29, 1952, the attack on public housing became very personal and vicious. On that date, Frank Wilkinson was testifying as an expert witness for the CHA in Judge Otto Emme’s superior court in a law suit that was being brought by three Chavez Ravine homeowners (Chavez Ravine was the largest of the twelve proposed sites) against the CHA regarding condemnation payments and proceedings. After some routine questioning, Felix McGinnis, attorney for the home owners, asked, “And now, Mr. Wilkinson, what organizations, political or otherwise, have you been a member of since 1932?” Seeking to qualify himself as an expert witness, Wilkinson told of the professional organizations that he belonged to, and of his world-wide observations and first-hand experience of slum conditions. Obviously not interested in Wilkinson’s professional qualifications, McGinnis again asked the question, to which Wilkinson replied, “I believe that I shall be compelled by matters of personal conscience to refuse to answer the question and state that I am doing so because of personal conscience and I’d like to assure you (the court) that there is nothing that I have belonged to that I am not completely proud to state, but I do not feel that I want to answer this question and, if necessary, I would hold that to answer such a question might in some way incriminate me.” Wilkinson was immediately suspended by CHA Director Howard Holtzendorff who said he was “shocked” when Wilkinson refused to answer, but he thought his refusal was based on “moral and religious scruples.” “However,” he continued, “there is no place in the Authority for any disloyal person or for any one who raises doubt of his loyalty by refusal to answer the question.”<sup>33</sup>

The anti-public housing majority on the City Council quickly moved to exploit the situation. “It is always the same people who beat their breast for the downtrodden who also refuse to answer questions on the grounds it might incriminate them,” said Councilman Charles Navarro, “I predict that many eyebrows will be raised when other



## *Los Angeles' Public Housing War*

Housing Authority people are asked the same question.” “This is the same pattern that Communists are using in order to overthrow the government under which they live,” stated Councilman George Cronk. After claiming that Wilkinson had been “indoctrinating our children” by showing “a phony film—an absolute travesty—about Los Angeles slums,” Councilman Ed Davenport introduced a resolution, voted for 10-0, to have the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) investigate the CHA.<sup>34</sup>

On September 2 McGinnis asked Wilkinson point blank if he was now or had ever been a member of the Communist Party. After Wilkinson refused again to answer, McGinnis asserted that he would “prove” Wilkinson to be a card-carrying Communist, the most damnable evidence being the fact that Wilkinson subscribed to *People's World*.<sup>35</sup> Under *Herald and Express* headlines of “Dad's Broken Heart Death,” Councilman Earle Baker made public that Wilkinson's father, Dr. A.M. Wilkinson, had confided in him of his son's changed philosophy and outlook on life following his return from Europe in 1938. “Earle,” Dr. Wilkinson told Baker, “I've lost my boy,” then expired a week later of a broken heart.<sup>36</sup> County Supervisor John Anson Ford retorted, “How cruel can desperate anti-housing foes get?”<sup>37</sup>

On September 3 the *Mirror* headlined “Councilman Throws Tizzy” and proceeded to give a blow-by-blow account of the day's antics in the City Council. Councilman Davenport, “the pudgy name-caller,” attempted to introduce a resolution in which Mayor Bowron was called a “co-conspirator” of the CHA. When the wording of the resolution was questioned by (anti-public housing) Council President Henry, Davenport became extremely agitated and screamed at Henry, “Whose side are you on anyway?”, and then “shouted, shrieked, paced” and generally ranted about the evils of public housing. Unnerved, Councilman Kenneth Hahn asked the sergeant-at-arms to “keep an eye” on Davenport, remarking, “I think he's going berserk.” While President Henry futilely tried to call the Council back to order and to have Davenport take his seat, Councilman Ed Roybal volunteered to Henry, “I'll set him down if you want me to.” “He's threatening me with physical violence,” shouted Davenport, claiming that Roybal had previously threatened him with a knife.<sup>38</sup>

The next day the Council received a letter from the Mexican Chamber of Commerce complaining of the derogatory remarks of “a certain councilman” towards Ed Roybal, who was (and has been the

LOS ANGELES CITIZENFriday, April 18, 1952—9

# PUBLIC HOUSING IN ONE EASY LESSON

Reprinted from the Daily News of April 12 by the Publisher  
For the convenience of our readers.

BY ALAN PERREN

ALL CITIES ARE in pretty much of a mess, and with slight variations they all have about the same problems. But the best of these problems is the necessity of providing adequate housing for the citizens of a metropolitan city. Los Angeles has many people who must live in the outskirts of the city, but the constant change and rapid growth of this city. Most cities have plans to provide public housing to take up at least minimum this problem. Los Angeles has plans now, but soon, and for the education and consideration of its readers, the Daily News presents here a short history of public housing in L.A.

1.—IN AUGUST, 1949, Mayor Fletcher Bowron signed, with the approval of 15 of Los Angeles' 15 councilmen, an agreement with the City Housing Authority for the building of 45,000 units of public housing. The cost was \$85,000,000. The money to be borrowed from the Federal Public Housing Administration.

2.—TWO YEARS later in November, 1951, 80 per cent of the land had been bought and about 70 per cent had been cleared. Plans for 36 new 12-story public housing apartments had been drawn and the CHA was just about to let the first construction contracts. Then the first of a series of peculiar events took place.

3.—COUNCILMAN JOHN C. HOLLAND, who had discovered that some of these public buildings were to be built in his district, began to worry. He worried so much about public housing that he quit his job as a member of the City Council. He was replaced by Councilman Austin and Henry, who just as suddenly turned themselves into members of a brand new anti-housing group in the City Council.

4.—NOBODY was worried about this switch in affiliation. The contract with the CHA was considered valid and binding. Then Councilman Holland popped up with a private, attached to the Independent Offices Appropriation Act of 1951. This provision happily obligated the City from its obligations to the CHA, and in Councilman Holland, who prepared the contract to be signed.

5.—WHEN THE fight was on, if the city broke the contract it would have to pay back the \$85,000,000 the CHA had already expended in Federal funds. Facts and figures of great importance to the Council. Public housing was an investment in money, and the pre-housing plan "SOCIALISM" demanded the anti-housing advocates. Then in a rather unusual the Council voted to put the matter off until the return of Mayor Bowron from Europe.

6.—IN EARLY December, 1951, Councilman Disenchantment, formerly a militant anti-housing man, went home over the weekend and returned a just as militant anti-housing man. Mayor Bowron thereupon returned from Europe, back and back, and announced angrily that the city's agreement with the CHA was binding and the Council had no authority to break it.

7.—ON DECEMBER 13, Councilman Henry, another ardent supporter of public housing, advised the Council members after some weekend thinking and gained the anti-housing forces, giving them an eight to seven majority. December 26, the day of approval of the city attorney, voted to break the agreement with the CHA. Mayor Bowron promptly vetoed this resolution.

8.—BY THIS TIME the whole town was in an argument. Later, tourist groups and most of Los Angeles' citizens supported the mayor. The hotel areas with the exception of you know who, gave the mayor a stiff forty loss and went on to appropriate Disenchantment and Henry for their change. It will appear that public housing had some well organized enemies. But who were they?

9.—COUNCILMAN TIMBERLAKE thought he knew what the boys in the town were having. In January, 1952, Timberlake made his charge. He said in effect that the sitting of the contract was part of the biggest land grab in the history of Los Angeles. Also with the contract killed the City Housing Authority would have to contribute the land to the Federal Public Housing Administration, which had put on the money, some 12,000,000 dollars. The Public would then get the land of public housing and the security would be assured by the private operators for periods. Timberlake was not challenged.

10.—THE CHA has filed suit with the State Supreme court in an effort to have the city to honor its agreement of August, 1949. The court will decide whether or not the Council has legal authority to repudiate the contract. But no matter what the decision in the anti-housing case are ready with another ambush for the public. They say almost a month taking protection on the part of the same primary operators and will be the voters and thousands of them. So goes Public Housing in Los Angeles.

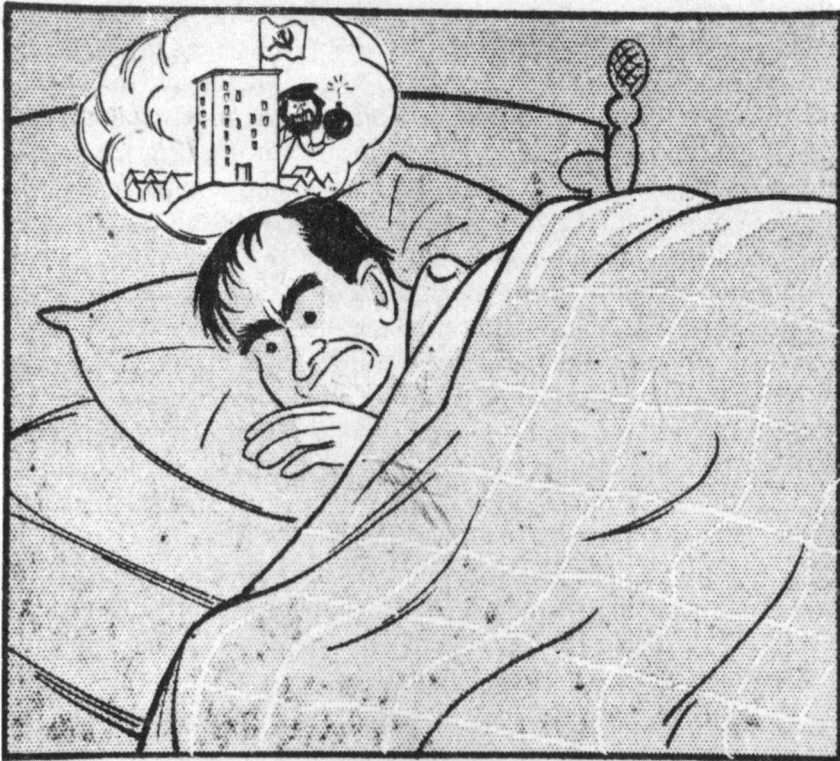
Ask Your Union How You Can Help Save Los Angeles  
Slum Clearance — Public Housing Program — and Fifteen  
Million Dollars of Taxpayers' Money — This Is Your Money

An editorial cartoon page from the Los Angeles Citizen, April 18, 1952. Courtesy of the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor.

## *Los Angeles' Public Housing War*

only Councilman in Los Angeles) of Mexican descent. Davenport screamed and ranted at the letter. "It looks like I am going to stand alone on the housing issue," he shouted as the rest of the councilmen, en masse, walked out of the meeting room. This did not put off Davenport who, with "face livid and eyes glazed," raved on for thirty-five minutes on the general subject of public housing and subversives to a Council meeting that was devoid of councilmen and to an audience of spectators who continued to boo him. On leaving he accused the public of being a "bunch of lefties." In his private chambers he was met with police and doctors who had been called by concerned councilmen because it appeared that Davenport was having a nervous breakdown. "Sending those cops and doctors was a dirty contemptible Communist trick," said Davenport later, further stating that the Mexican Chamber of Commerce was a "Communist-front organization," that the "housing organization is infiltrated by Communists and Communist principles," that Roybal continually voted with "Communist-front organizations," that "the demagogues are out to get me," and finally, that he was surprised by the letter from the Mexican Chamber of Commerce because "I am fighting to save the homes of Mexican-Americans in Chavez Ravine that are threatened by the public housing project."<sup>39</sup> Two days later the *Herald and Express* urged its readership to heed Davenport's tirade against "socialistic" public housing and to dismiss the antics in the Council as a "frame-up" by a "stacked deck of leftists."<sup>40</sup> William Randolph Hearst fired a broadside with a personal editorial entitled "The Housing Stench," decrying the "socialistic" New Deal and Fair Deal tendencies of public housing and recommending a full-scale HUAC investigation into both Wilkinson and the CHA.<sup>41</sup>

September 5 was certainly one of the highlights of what the *Mirror* called the "headline-happy public housing war." There was a repeat of the Davenport "Whing-ding" with the Council again walking out, but such news was definitely secondary to "Bowron, Housing Foe in Slugfest."<sup>42</sup> Mayor Bowron, subpoenaed to appear at the eminent domain hearings for Chavez Ravine, was confronted outside the court by one John Hogle, age thirty-nine, a vocal member of the Small Property Owners League. "Didn't I warn you about Wilkinson?" Hogle belligerently asked. The mayor replied that he hadn't, but Hogle persisted with the same question. Becoming annoyed, Bowron asked Hogle who he was and "who do you represent, Joe Stalin?" "No, I don't," Hogle shot back, "but you do." Enraged, the mayor swung at



3—COUNCILMAN JOHN C. HOLLAND, who had discovered that some of these public buildings were to be built in his district, began to worry. He worried so much about public housing he suddenly found himself associated with Councilmen Cronk, Baker, Navarro, Austin and Henry, who just as suddenly found themselves members of a brand new anti-housing group in the City Council.

A closeup from the *Citizen* editorial cartoon.

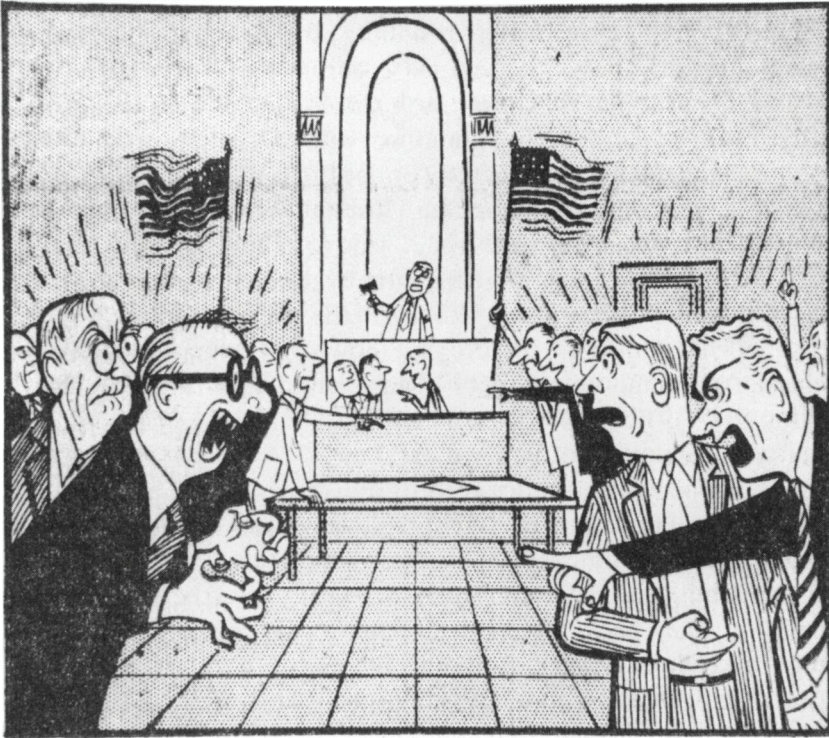


## *Los Angeles' Public Housing War*

Hogya, while an aide stepped in to keep the brawl from escalating. Unhurt, Hogya announced to the press "It was like a woman's blow—a powder puff punch."<sup>43</sup> Henry Weber, president of the Small Property Owners League, announced the offer of a winner-take-all fight for a \$500 purse between the mayor and "any selected anti-public housing opponent of his own age."<sup>44</sup>

On September 26 the California State Un-American Activities Committee (note—not HUAC) came to town to ferret out the reds in the CHA as part of an investigation initiated by State Attorney-General Edmund G. "Pat" Brown. With headlines of "12 Named in the CHA Commie Investigation."<sup>45</sup> the media chronicled that nine CHA employees, including Wilkinson, and three ex-employees were subpoenaed to appear before the committee, with instructions from CHA Director Holtzendorff to either testify or be fired. Wilkinson, undergoing knee surgery at Good Samaritan Hospital, was unable to appear, but this did not stop the police from trying to subpoena him when he was in the operating room! Refused entry by the doctors and failing to awaken the still-anesthetized Wilkinson in the recovery room, they left the subpoena pinned to his dressing gown.<sup>46</sup> Committee attorney Richard Combs announced that he had received reports that six high-ranking CHA officials were "card-carrying Communists" in addition to thirty more rank and file "sympathizers." Director Holtzendorff testified that he had received reports of subversive activity in the CHA since his arrival there in 1941. What really demonstrated red domination of the CHA was the refusal of three CHA officials, Sidney Green, Elizabeth Smith and Adina Williamson to testify, and the "disappearance" (i.e., they had moved out of state a year previous) of Carol Andree and Oliver Haskell, former employees of the CHA. The most "cooperative" witness was CHA management supervisor Hy Sunshine who revealed that he had been approached in 1945 by Wilkinson and Andree but only later "realized and now believes . . . that they were trying to recruit him into the Communist Party." The evidence was conclusive and the judgment swift: "Red Plot to Control L.A. Housing Bared" headlined the *Herald and Express*.<sup>47</sup>

HUAC came to Los Angeles the week of September 29 in order to investigate the Communist infiltration of the Hollywood movie industry. Though not directly investigating the CHA as had been requested by the City Council, the HUAC hearings were significant in fanning the flames of red hysteria. Screenwriter Eugene Stone refused to answer any of the committee's questions, but was nonetheless able to assert his



5—WHEE! The fight was on. If the city broke the contract it would have to pay back the \$12,000,000 the CHA had already expended in Federal funds. Facts and figures of speech began to fly in the Council. Public housing was an investment in humanity, said the pro-housing bloc. "SOCIALISM!" screamed the anti-housing advocates. Then in a calmer moment the Council voted to put the matter off until the return of Mayor Bowron, then in Europe.

A closeup from the *Citizen* editorial cartoon.

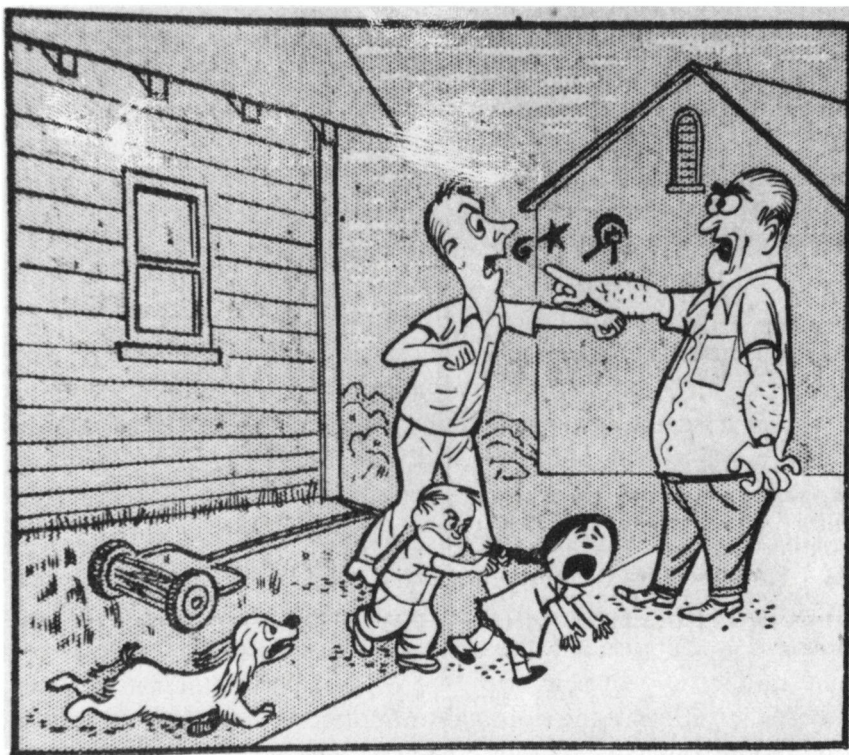


## *Los Angeles' Public Housing War*

own views. Stating he was from Hannibal, Missouri, boyhood home of Samuel Clemens, Stone told the committee, "If Mark Twain were alive he would be high on your list. There are some very subversive passages in *Huckleberry Finn*." Stone then proceeded to state his views on the public housing war; "When the Los Angeles housing program couldn't be blocked in any other way, it was labelled Communism."<sup>48</sup> HUAC provided comic relief: enter again our friend, John Hoga, fresh from a two-week recuperation following his boxing bout with Mayor Bowron. On September 30, in front of the Federal Building where HUAC was convening, Hoga and other anti-Communists were picketing about 150 screenwriters and actors who were, in turn, picketing HUAC. Unwittingly, Hoga stepped on the toes of one George Redston. Apparently, neither knew that the other was an anti-Communist. Mistaking Hoga for a red, Redston punched him full in the mouth. "I thought he was a \_\_\_\_\_ Communist," explained Redston as police intervened. Redston was no "powder puff" like Bowron, his punch drew blood. But once it was discovered that they were both anti-Communists, everything was OK. Realizing it was a "case of mistaken identity," Hoga continued to picket wearing a smile, a swollen lip, and a placard that read: "Drive all Commies underground. All other rats live underground. Why not Commies?"<sup>49</sup>

On October 29 at a closed door session of the California State Un-American Activities Committee, Wilkinson, now recovered from surgery, appeared and again refused to testify as to his political affiliations, and was immediately fired from the CHA. Attorney for the Committee, Richard Combs, asserted that Wilkinson was "the backbone of the effort to infiltrate the Housing Authority," being a "floater" in the Communist Party. In refusing to answer, Wilkinson stated that "No progressive social reform ever can be achieved and sustained at the sacrifice of basic constitutional principles." He noted that the failure of the CHA to support him "has in no way softened the savagery of the anti-housing opposition's attack. On the contrary, it has opened yet wider the floodgates for more serious assault."<sup>50</sup>

Jack Naiditch, a painter for the CHA, suffered the same fate when he refused to testify. Wilkinson's wife, Jean, was subpoenaed, but she "hid" behind a law that does not permit a wife to testify against her husband, and then refused to answer the question as to whether she was a member of the Communist Party. As Jean Wilkinson was a high school teacher, the spectre of red subversion that had been haunting the CHA spread to the public school system, to the Federation of



8—BY THIS TIME the whole town was in on the argument. Labor, tenant groups and most of Los Angeles' clergymen supported the mayor. The local press, with the exception of you know who, gave the mayor a cold, dirty look and went on to congratulate Davenport and Harby for their change. It was apparent that public housing had some well organized enemies. But who were they?

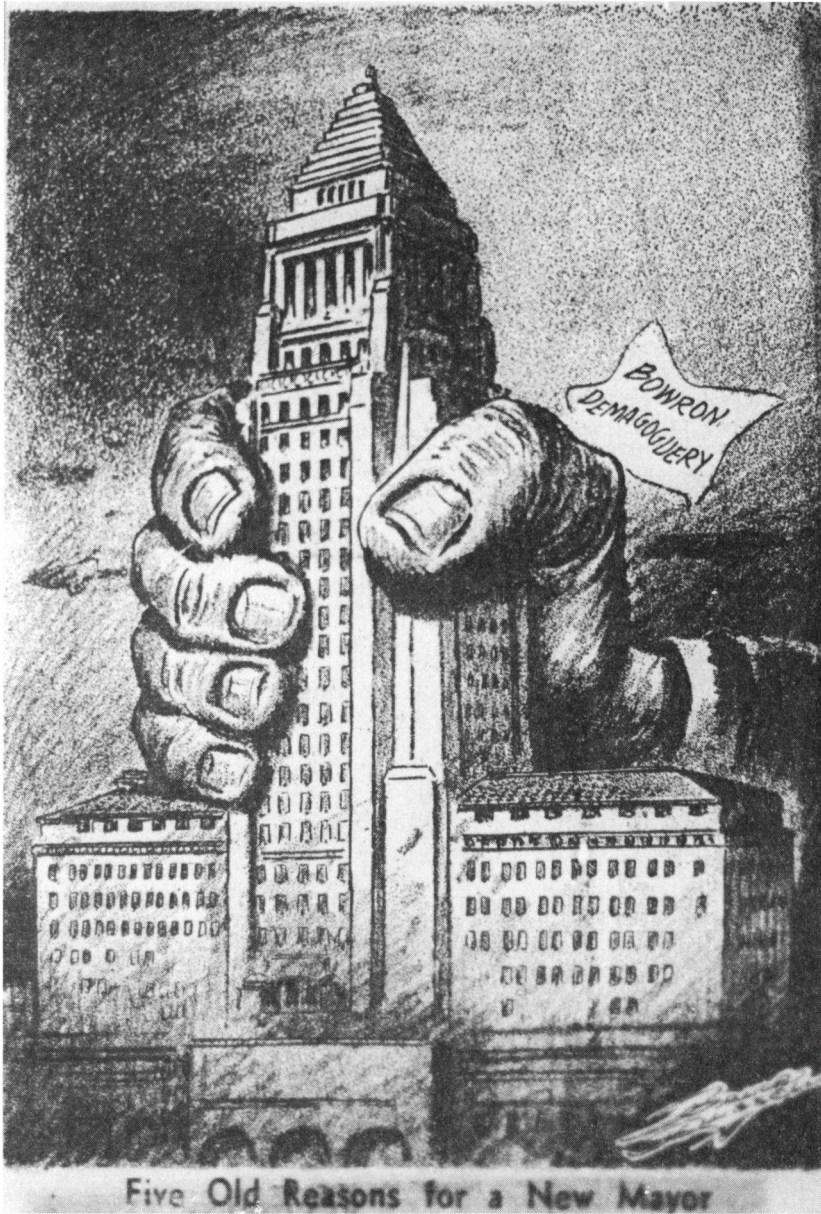
A closeup from the *Citizen* editorial cartoon.

## *Los Angeles' Public Housing War*

Teachers, to the United Public Workers, to allegedly encompass 600 city employees who were (more or less) under the control of the Kremlin. (All of this substantiated Davenport's claim that Communists and their "fellow travelers" would attempt an "invasion" of the City Council.) The only non-hostile (and the only voluntary) witness at the hearing was Fritz Patrick Burns, Jr., son of the Los Angeles "Builder of the Year" and leading spokesman of the real estate lobby in Southern California, Fritz B. Burns. Junior testified that he had seen Wilkinson in the company of a "known Communist" (i.e., Carol Andree—still unfound) at a 1949 conference on housing at USC. As Combs said: "Burns was very helpful in adding important links to the overall Communist picture which is now taking form." The evidence was overpowering: "Huge Red Plot to Control Public Workers Here Bared," trumpeted the *Examiner*.<sup>51</sup>

In October of 1952 the California Supreme Court had declared that the City Council could be held in contempt for its opposition to the legal and binding housing contract with the Federal Government, thus leaving Bowron, as the executive branch of city government, as the one person who "can now liberate the people of Los Angeles from the Socialistic scheme they overwhelmingly defeated at the polls. . . ."<sup>52</sup> But Bowron would not renege on the contract. He was the "President of the National Conference of Mayors and all his eastern colleagues thought Public Housing was a godsend and even respectable."<sup>53</sup> Bowron had "gone over entirely to the left-wing of the Democratic Party," according to Davenport.<sup>54</sup> On December 26, 1952, *Times* publisher Norman Chandler wrote to Congressman Norris Poulson asking him to run for Mayor with the financial backing of the *Times* and downtown businessmen. Chandler promised that the mayor's salary would be increased and that he would be "entitled to strut around in a car (Cadillac) and chauffeur supplied by the city."<sup>55</sup> Enticed by the Cadillac, Poulson announced his candidacy in early January 1953.

The *Times*, the *Mirror* and the Hearst papers began electioneering for Poulson early on in January, defining the election issue as public housing. As Poulson said, his election would "pave the way for us to get rid of this program New Deal hangers-on are trying to ram down our throats."<sup>56</sup> In contrast Bowron based his campaign on his opposition to the *Times* domination of city government. Bowron's vendetta against the *Times* may have appeared frenzied: following a Bowron TV appearance (with then-liberal Ronald Reagan), Poulson retorted,



Editorial cartoon from the Los Angeles *Times*, May 24, 1953. Courtesy of the Los Angeles *Times*.

## *Los Angeles' Public Housing War*

"Those whom the Gods would destroy, they first make mad. Bowron's campaign has been a campaign of rage."<sup>57</sup> The highlight of the campaign was the week of May 19 when the House Committee on Government Operations came to town to "grill" the reds in the CHA. The proximity of this probe to the mayoral election, the fact that the hearings were conducted by political allies and personal friends of Poulson, and the subject—public housing—being the central election issue, made the hearings seem as they were—an obvious political ploy by Poulson and Co. The pro-public housing *Daily News* congratulated "Norrie" on his ingenuity in the campaign: "The best way to get some free campaign help is to persuade a committee of Congress to intervene in local politics by putting on a 'hearing' at just the right time."<sup>58</sup> In the televised hearings, three ex-CHA employees again refused to state whether or not they were members of the Communist Party; a "reluctant" Police Chief William Parker admitted that he had collected dossiers on ten CHA employees, and then proceeded to read three of them—those of Wilkinson, Sidney Green and Adina Williamson—to the TV audience; it was charged that 489 CHA employees had been forced to contribute a part of their wages to combat anti-public housing legislation; Bowron was subpoenaed and, following a session of very rude and abrupt questioning in which he was never allowed to make complete statements, was abruptly dismissed ("Housing Quiz Ousts Bowron" headlined the *Mirror*);<sup>59</sup> Howard Holtzendorff was similarly badgered when he was subpoenaed—charges of the destruction of pay records, threatened fisticuffs, shouting and the throwing of books and papers by lawyers and witnesses were all part of the show ("Housing Boss 'Howls' as Book Tossed in Clash").<sup>60</sup> A representative of the Huntington Villa Property Owners Association testified that he had made a tour of the public housing projects and had observed Cadillacs (perhaps like the one promised Poulson), Buicks, Chryslers and Oldsmobiles parked in front of the "low-rent, tax subsidized" apartments, many of which had TV antennas on the roof. "You don't think its right for someone to buy a Cadillac and make big payments on it and then have you help pay his rent, is that your point?," Chairman Hoffman encouraged the witness. "That's exactly the point," was the response. The *Examiner* editorialized that "We regret that there is some merit in the claim that the inquiry is being conducted to influence the mayoralty election. . . . Nevertheless, the general conviction is inevitable. . ." as to the committee's "findings."<sup>61</sup>





*"I've got no strings on me".*

**DON'T BE BEHIND THE Times**  
**Vote for MAYOR BOWRON**

CITY ELECTION TUESDAY MAY 26

A 1953 Bowron campaign circular.



## *Los Angeles' Public Housing War*

Two days before the election, Police Chief William Parker again appeared on TV with Wilkinson's dossier, telling of how he had presented it to Mayor Bowron the previous summer, to which Bowron had promptly thrown the file in the trash, saying, "I know that boy (Wilkinson), and I trust him."<sup>62</sup> (Personally affronted, Parker "leaked" this file to attorney Felix McGinnis which, it will be recalled, started the personal redbaiting in August 1952.)<sup>63</sup> Parker then proceeded to read the dossier over the air, in which it was revealed that Wilkinson subscribed to *People's World*, several liberal magazines, and had been seen having lunch with Dorothy Healy (chairperson of the Communist Party in southern California).<sup>64</sup> In the McCarthyite atmosphere of the early 1950s, the effect on Bowron's campaign was disastrous. The Sunday prior to the election, the *Times* ran the editorial "The Strange Case of Mayor Bowron," which claimed that the mayor had repudiated his constituency:

In their place he has taken the "liberal" union officials of the CIO and the AFL. He has taken them on the assumption, which has often proved false, that the union officials command the votes of the union membership. He has also accepted the support of the Independent Progressive Party, which walks with one foot on the red line. He has borrowed their slogans and hurled them at the people who used to vote for him. They are now "economic royalists," "vested interests" and creatures of the "real estate lobby."

Bowron's support of public housing was, according to the *Times*, the cause of this schizophrenic behavior. "The story of his relations with Wilkinson is enough, we gravely submit, to disqualify him for his office." Poulson was the man for the job because "he has no Wilkinsons in his train."<sup>65</sup> "Up To You Tomorrow!" was the title of the *Times* editorial on election eve,<sup>66</sup> and on May 26, 1953, the liberal Fletcher Bowron was defeated by conservative Norris Poulson, receiving 46.7% of the votes cast.

Upon his inauguration, Poulson's first order of business was to negotiate a deal between the federal government and the city whereby nearly half of the contract for 10,000 housing units was dropped, and the city purchased the three unused sites (where the other 5,000 units would have gone) from the government with the proviso that the land would be for public use. The *Times* was triumphant: "The Times is proud of its part in crying the alarm against this creeping Socialism and in supporting the Mayor who found the way to stop the creep."<sup>67</sup>

Bowron had his revenge, however. As a lame duck mayor, he appointed a Democrat, a labor attorney, and the president of the Greater Los Angeles CIO Council to fill three vacancies of the CHA Board of Directors. Justifying his move, Bowron explained, "I felt it was my duty. . .to protect and preserve public property for public uses. . .(against) a scheme afoot to sell. . .parcels of property acquired for public housing projects to real estate speculators or subdividers."<sup>68</sup> Finally, on June 9, only a matter of weeks following the election, the California State Un-American Activities Committee released a 296-page report which seemingly legitimized the red hysteria of the preceding months. The report "documented" the extent to which Communist infiltration of the CHA, the Federation of Teachers, the United Public Workers, public schools and universities was tied in to the international Communist conspiracy and the Russian plot to take over Latin America. California, it seems, had more Communists than any other state save New York, and they were most concentrated in Southern California because of the abundance of "racial minorities"; Communists from all over the U.S. would come to Southern California to attend "conferences" and then cross over the border to Mexico; all of which led to the obvious conclusion that the Russians were trying to take over Latin America. The Associated Press went so far as to send a reporter to interview Jaques Mornard, assassin of Trotsky, in his Mexican prison cell, who "expressed complete indifference to the whole thing" when confronted with the "evidence."<sup>69</sup> The report named Wilkinson, his wife, and the other fired CHA employees *as* Communists, though no substantiating evidence was presented.

\* \* \*

The above narrative tells how public housing was defeated in Los Angeles, but the question of why involves a deeper consideration on two points: First, the politics of the media and the real estate lobby and their opposition to public housing; and second, the politics of the failure of organized labor in their support for public housing.

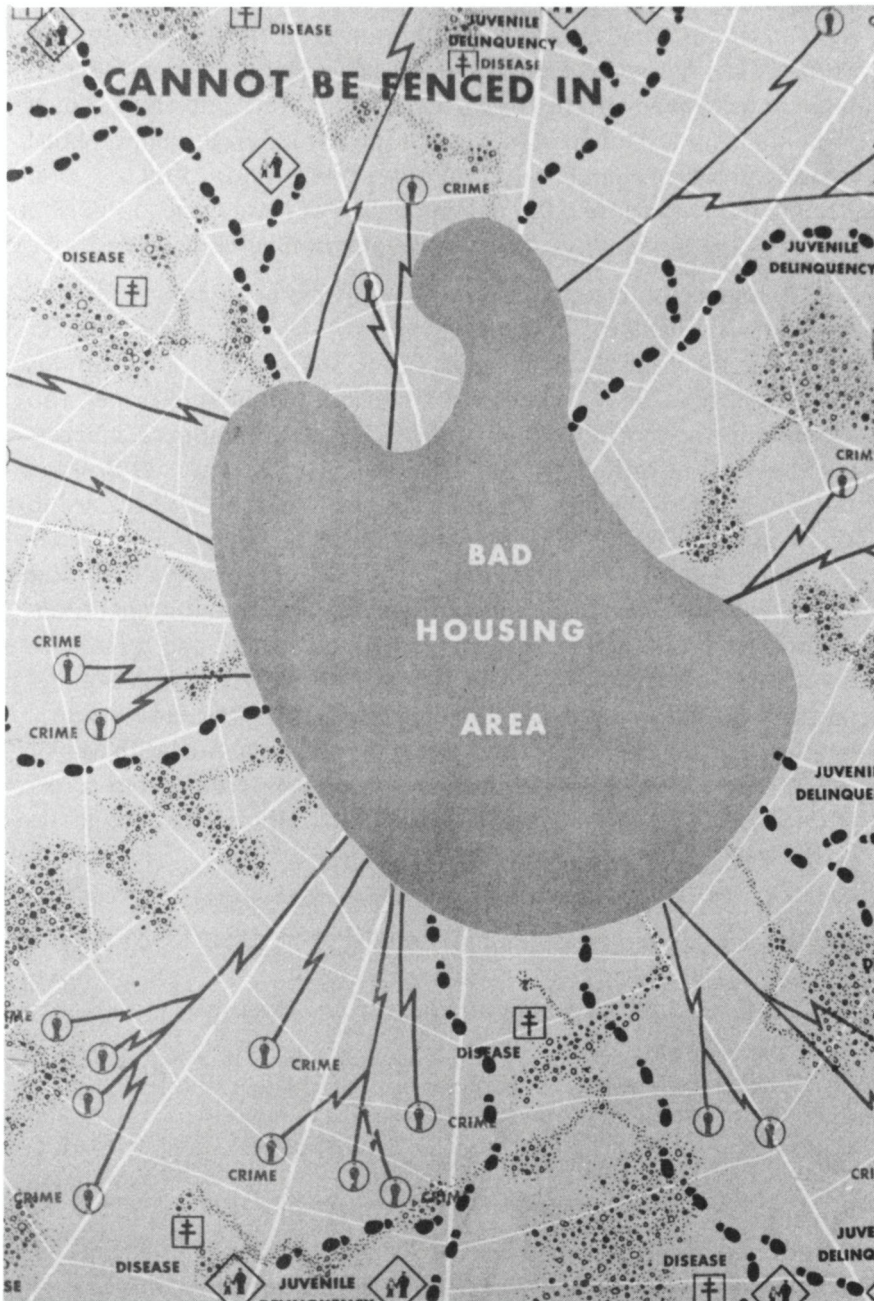
Editorially, the major newspapers, with the exception of the *Daily News*, presented the question of public housing to the public as some form of socialism or communism that was alien to the American way. At best public housing was seen as an outmoded relic of the New Deal. Many examples of the above have already been given. The day-to-day news coverage and reporting were hardly "objective": recall the

## *Los Angeles' Public Housing War*

sensationalistic headlines; Carlton Williams, who covered the story for the *Times*, continually described Wilkinson as the “chief propagandist of the CHA;” Howard Holtzendorff was dubbed the “sweating, red-faced housing czar” by the *Herald and Express*,<sup>70</sup> etc., etc.; all of which promoted, to say the least, a very unfavorable image of the public housing program. Similarly, in the three weeks prior to the mayoral election the *Times* gave 1,019 column-inches of news space to Poulson and only 219 for Bowron, much of it unfavorable.<sup>71</sup>

Also important to consider is the relationship between Bowron and the media, particularly the *Times*. Elected with a large base of popular support in the recall election against Frank Shaw in 1938, Bowron was opposed by the *Times* who described him as an “honest reformer who has become the unwitting dupe of the CIO, the Communists, and certain crackpot reformers.”<sup>72</sup> In the following years, however, Bowron “made his peace” with the Chandler empire to the extent that Carlton Williams could confide to a sympathetic councilman that, while Bowron might be a son of a bitch, “He’s our son of a bitch.”<sup>73</sup> But after the 1951 municipal elections and the defeat of the anti-rent decontrol forces, Bowron became increasingly independent and forceful in his politics, especially as regards public housing. As Bob Alexander recalls: “To add to the tremendous hysterical war of the real estate lobby, the L.A. Times had become increasingly disenchanted with Mayor Bowron who after the re-elections no longer took orders from across the street. As I see it, the Times used the Public Housing issue to get rid of Brown.”<sup>74</sup>

The media, again particularly the *Times*, articulated, orchestrated and publicized the views and opinions of the real estate lobby and the commercial interests of downtown businessmen. The reason for this is quite simple—both Chandler and Hearst had extensive landholdings in Los Angeles as well as diversified business interests. With a near monopoly on printed news they became the logical mouthpieces for such interests. Since its founding in 1881, the *Times* had embraced and promoted the concept of a “Greater Los Angeles”—a plan for Los Angeles with growth based on expanding real estate speculation and a “favorable” business climate. When public housing was seen as a future competitor and a possible challenge to the profit motive by construction firms, apartment owners and real estate agents, and as constricting commercial growth (should the real estate lobby disinvest), the newspapers, as they *were* these same interests, actively, even



An illustration from "A Decent Home . . . An American Right," the 5th, 6th, and 7th Consolidated Report of the Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles, 1945.

## *Los Angeles' Public Housing War*

maliciously, campaigned against public housing. *Times* influence in Los Angeles government should not be underestimated: *Times* city hall reporter Carlton Williams attended Council meetings giving thumbs up-thumbs down signals as to which way council members should vote;<sup>75</sup> as Bowron stated during his campaign, "the Norman Chandler group is undoubtedly the largest single property owner in the city and County of Los Angeles" and through its stock ownership is able to command a powerful influence "over this great city in almost every field — newspaper, publishing, printing, banking, insurance, industry, real estate, farming, oil, department stores." Thus, "Whenever it is proposed that your city government do something in your interests — for the general welfare — which touches any of the properties or interests of the Norman Chandler group, their newspaper ceases to be a source of facts for you and becomes an instrument of propaganda — propaganda for them."<sup>76</sup> After his death in 1957 and the discovery of \$50,000 in his wall safe and an additional \$27,570 in three checking accounts, it was revealed by his widow that Councilman Ed Davenport (who, it will be recalled, became a foe of public housing at a very opportune moment) had received this money as "gifts" from the real estate lobby, though no specific institutions or individuals were named.<sup>77</sup>

The politics of the real estate lobby extended far beyond the local level to the national scale. At a conference in San Francisco, the California State Apartment Owners Association resolved that, "The Republican Party has adopted a platform which is consistent with our own opinions in which they safeguard the liberty and rights of the property-owners of the United States." The association then endorsed the candidacies of Eisenhower and Nixon in the upcoming national elections.<sup>78</sup> Senator Richard Nixon had been the darling of the real estate lobby in Los Angeles since he and Senator William F. Knowland had introduced bills in the Senate that would allow local governments to break federal housing contracts. Campaigning for the vice presidency, Democrat John Sparkman claimed that his opponent, Richard Nixon, had "consistently and vigorously fought against good housing." He added that it was no surprise that many of Nixon's personal political contributions "were from real estate interests in the Los Angeles area, where public housing had suffered its most virulent attack."<sup>79</sup> To give an idea of the networking involved, when Fritz B. Burns, Sr., "prominent home-builder and anti-public housing crusader," was named "Builder of the Year" in the Biltmore Hotel of Los Angeles, the prominent guest list ran for two paragraphs in the



A closeup from the *Citizen* editorial cartoon.



## *Los Angeles' Public Housing War*

*Herald and Express*, including city councilmen and representatives from national and local associations of builders, contractors, savings and loans institutions, etc.<sup>80</sup> The real estate lobby was prominent and active locally as well. It will be recalled that Burns, Jr. testified against Wilkinson; Bob Alexander recalls debating Burns, Sr., and then receiving "an anonymous note from a sympathizer who had been hired as a secretary to the head of a dirty 'P.R.' firm engaged by our opposition. Every evening she dropped copies of intra-office memos into the mail for us. Frequently, I was the subject. 'Find out who Alexander works for and get him fired,' etc. 'Tell that radio station not to let him speak again.'"<sup>81</sup> L.A.'s public housing battle seemed to play a large part in the development of political conservatism during this period.

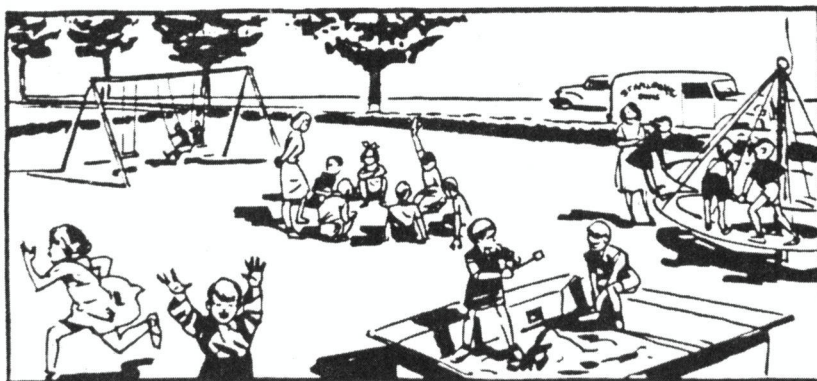
The fact that they were well financed and well organized, both locally and nationally, does not, by itself, explain the victory of the real estate lobby in the public housing battle. As pointed out before, the public housing program was actively supported by the AFL, the CIO, veterans' organizations, the NAACP, the Urban League, church groups, etc., but the unions were the obvious center and vanguard of the fight, around which the other organizations coalesced. As such they were the weak link. The loss of the struggle to retain rent control was disastrous because, "Councilmen found that they could deny the unions without fear of effective reprisal, and the anti-rent control coalition, flushed with victory, pushed ahead to new fights with an expectation of ultimate victory."<sup>82</sup> Redbaiting and charges of Communism and/or Socialism were found to be *the* tactic to nullify the power of the unions and ultimately fragment the coalition. Thus, when charges of Communism were hurled at Wilkinson in August of 1952, the Greater Los Angeles CIO Council immediately dropped from political sight as regards public housing — the CIO was too busy redbaiting itself and expelling its "Communist" unions to make way for its merger with the AFL to become involved with the "creeping Socialism" of public housing. Similarly, the Los Angeles County Central Labor Council (the local AFL) dropped its overt support of public housing once socialism reared its ugly head. (The last statement of support for public housing came in the April 14, 1952 *Bulletin*.) Instead the AFL joined with Bowron in his attacks on the *Times* and Poulson as being anti-labor, not a difficult matter to substantiate. (Poulson had voted for Taft-Hartley and against rent control.)

But a far more practical and day-to-day reason for the disintegration of rank-and-file support for public housing was evolving than the

*Do you want this?*



*or this*



A 1953 campaign circular put out by the Independent Progressive Party.

## *Los Angeles' Public Housing War*

spectre of redbaiting which was haunting the union leadership, namely the fact that union workers were becoming able to purchase their own homes. This was not a clever ploy to “fool” or divide the working class, but very much the product of unionized workers own struggles. Thus, while the AFL supported the 1949 Housing Act and the 10,000 unit public housing contract in Los Angeles, the Los Angeles Central Labor Council *Bulletin* noted that the public housing program, while helping to “eliminate slum conditions and guarantee suitable housing for low income groups,” would not address the needs of the middle income group — “the bracket in which most AFL members fall.” The *Bulletin* urged its readers to support the Sparkman Middle Income Housing Bill which would provide long term, low interest loans to middle income home buyers. “Los Angeles is especially in need of the Sparkman Bill.”<sup>83</sup> The *Bulletin* continued to hit home on the Sparkman Bill, noting that it also “provides for cooperative non-profit housing which would reduce rents for working men and women who are required to continue on a rental basis instead of purchasing a home.”<sup>84</sup> In such a manner suburban housing became a very practical answer to unionized workers’ housing question. FHA mortgage insurance on suburban subdivisions and federal money to construct metropolitan freeways (to transport union members to and from the suburbs), both of which were supported by the unions, served to spatially isolate ‘middle income’ workers in the suburbs while public housing was delegated to low-income, non-unionized workers and welfare families in the inner city. Further, the rising real wage of union members, again, the product of union struggles that was institutionalized by the Keynesian social contract, combined with the increased output of the private construction industry in the 1950s to create an expanding suburban housing market. Thus the organized labor “vanguard” of the pro-public housing coalition was isolated and defeated on two fronts: 1) in ideological terms, through the tactic of redbaiting, and creating a public pathology of “red hysteria”; and 2) the material stake that union workers had in public housing was eroded as their struggles for better housing conditions opened up new suburban possibilities.

The public housing war in Los Angeles was very significant for the future of the public housing program nationally. Following 1953, public housing construction in the U.S. fell drastically, with local contracts not even reaching the levels of federal appropriations. Inspired by and learning from the “success” story of the real estate lobby in Los Angeles, such cities as Dallas, San Antonio, Houston, Seattle, Akron

and Portland were able to sidestep federal public housing projects, while most appropriations went to cities such as Chicago, New York and Pittsburgh, i.e., those dominated by the patronage system of machine politics. This "refusal" of public housing was probably most hard felt in the ghettos of the inner city where the lack of adequate, affordable housing combined with anti-urban renewal struggles and violent, direct action politics in the 1960s. Noting the connection between the politics of housing and the Watts riot of 1965, Wilkinson wrote, "Thus the sixties reap the folly of the fifties."<sup>85</sup> With the recession of the suburban housing market in the 1970s and its virtual collapse in the 1980s, the struggle for housing has circulated from the ghettos to once again (as in the 1930s) encompass middle income workers. The struggles for rent control and against condominium conversions are two more consequences of the premature death of the public housing program. And thus the eighties will reap the follies of the fifties.

\* \* \*

Following his dismissal from the CHA, Wilkinson was unemployable for a year, after which he worked as a janitor in a Pasadena Department Store for \$1 an hour, under the condition that he work nights only and that he tell no one where he was employed. As Wilkinson recalls, the redbaiting "wiped out all the really concerned people in the Housing Authority" so that "the energy that would have gone into housing was instead put into the fight to preserve civil liberties."<sup>86</sup> Accused of being a Communist based on a subscription to *People's World*, a lunch-date with Dorothy Healy, and the testimony of a son of the leading spokesman of the real estate lobby in Los Angeles, Wilkinson became involved in the "Committee to Abolish HUAC," had both his home and office bombed in 1960 by right-wing extremists, and served a year in federal prison for refusing to testify for HUAC. He is now involved with the "Committee Against Repressive Legislation" in Los Angeles. Bob Alexander wrote of working in "slums in six-story wooden walk-up tenements in L.A. with Frank... Nothing against him in my book. If somebody didn't question our system in the Great Depression he was dead between the ears. It's time to question it again and again..."<sup>87</sup>

## Los Angeles' Public Housing War

### NOTES

*Acknowledgement.* The author wishes to give special thanks to Laura Chase for her research assistance in preparing this article.

<sup>1</sup>Timothy McDonnell, *The Wagner Housing Act* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1957), p. 176.

<sup>2</sup>Frances Piven and Richard Cloward, *Poor Peoples' Movements* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), pp. 53-55.

<sup>3</sup>Leonard Leader, "Los Angeles and the Great Depression" (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, UCLA, 1972), p. 183.

<sup>4</sup>McDonnell, *The Wagner Housing Act*, p. 62

<sup>5</sup>Dorothy Baruch, "Sleep Comes Hard," *Nation*, 160 (January 27, 1945), 95-96. Black families doubled up and tripled up in existing housing, occupied garages and attics, and slept overnight in fire stations: Keith Collins, *Black Los Angeles: The Maturing of the Ghetto, 1940-1950* (Saratoga, CA: Century 21 Publishing, 1980), p. 70.

<sup>6</sup>Frank Wilkinson, "In Defense of Public Housing: Redbaiting Your Friends," speech given at UCLA's School of Architecture and Urban Planning, November 5, 1981. Blacks were restricted to approx. 5% of the residential area of the city. In the Fall of 1943 the CHA received 1,795 applications for public housing from Blacks, 362 from Whites, 238 from Chicanos, and 5 from other minority groups; Collins, *Black Los Angeles*, pp. 26 and 28. Hacienda Heights was to be all White.

<sup>7</sup>"A Decent Home...An American Right," The 5th, 6th and 7th Consolidated Report of the Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles, 1945.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup>Quoted in Martin Schiesl, "City Planning and the Federal Government in World War II: The Los Angeles Experience," *California History*, LIX (Summer 1980), 138.

<sup>11</sup>Robert M. Fisher, *Twenty Years of Public Housing* (New York: Harper, 1959), p. 59.

<sup>12</sup>*Los Angeles Times*, November 4, 1947.

<sup>13</sup>*Times*, November 8, 1945.

<sup>14</sup>*Daily News*, August 5, 1947.

<sup>15</sup>*California Eagle*, June 12, 1947.

<sup>16</sup>*Daily News*, January 11, 1947.

<sup>17</sup>Interview with Frank Wilkinson by Don Parson and Laura Chase, Los Angeles, December 1981.

<sup>18</sup>Jewel Bellush and Murray Hausknecht, "Public Housing: The Contexts of Failure," in Bellush and Hausknecht, eds., *Urban Renewal: People, Politics and Planning* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967), p. 458.

<sup>19</sup>Los Angeles Central Labor Council *Bulletin*, III (June 13, 1949).

<sup>20</sup>"A Decent Home...."

<sup>21</sup>*The Real Estate Lobby vs. The People of California*, Committee for Representative Government (Los Angeles, 1950), p. 3.

<sup>22</sup>Richard Baisden, "Labor Unions in Los Angeles Politics" (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Chicago, 1958), Chapter VI.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup>Quoted in "L.A. Rent Control Delayed by Series of Injunctions," *Western Housing/The Apartment Journal*, 37 (September 1950), 25.

<sup>25</sup>Baisden, "Labor Unions in Los Angeles Politics," p. 359.

<sup>26</sup>*Times*, June 27, 1951.

<sup>27</sup>Cited in Baisden, "Labor Unions in Los Angeles Politics," p. 309.



*Historical Society of Southern California*

- <sup>28</sup> *Times*, December 4, 1951.
- <sup>29</sup> Richard Donovan, "The Great Los Angeles Public Housing Mystery," *Reporter*, 6 (March 4, 1952), 25.
- <sup>30</sup> Baisden, "Labor Unions in Los Angeles Politics." p. 363.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 366.
- <sup>32</sup> Letter from Robert Alexander to Don Parson, January 13, 1982.
- <sup>33</sup> *Times, Mirror, Herald and Express, Examiner*, August 29, 1952. Apparently Wilkinson's refusal to answer was a bit of a surprise to the CHA and their attorneys as Wilkinson's record was very "good." At Beverly Hills High School he had been president of "Youth for Herbert Hoover," and as a conservative fraternity member at UCLA (1932-1936) he had been active in driving the "reds" of campus. "In Defense of Public Housing..." speech by Wilkinson at UCLA.
- <sup>34</sup> *Times, Mirror, Herald and Express, Examiner*, August 29, 1952. The film that Davenport referred to, "And 10,000 More," was made by USC film students and narrated by Chet Huntley for the CHA to document slum conditions and the need for public housing in Los Angeles. The film was destroyed following the redbaiting in the CHA and has only recently reappeared (1982), when one of the USC students who worked on the film, now retired, found a copy in his garage.
- <sup>35</sup> *Times*, September 3, 1952.
- <sup>36</sup> *Herald and Express*, September 3, 1952. Baker was referring to Wilkinson's trip to Europe and the Holy Land following his 1936 graduation from UCLA and in preparation for a career in the Methodist ministry. Wilkinson lived in the slums of different countries and was profoundly affected by the Spanish Civil War (where he saw, at a time of American neutrality, Texaco tankers providing fuel to fascist tanks directly in front of the American embassy in Barcelona), so that, when he returned to the U.S., "the playboy outlook was gone." (Wilkinson, "In Defense of Public Housing..." speech at UCLA). In no way, of course, was this the cause of his father's death.
- <sup>37</sup> *Daily News*, September 4, 1952.
- <sup>38</sup> *Mirror*, September 3, 1952.
- <sup>39</sup> *Herald and Express*, September 4, 1952.
- <sup>40</sup> *Herald and Express*, September 6, 1952.
- <sup>41</sup> *Examiner*, September 6, 1952.
- <sup>42</sup> *Mirror*, September 5, 1952.
- <sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>44</sup> *Mirror*, September 8, 1952.
- <sup>45</sup> *Mirror*, September 26, 1952.
- <sup>46</sup> Interview with Frank Wilkinson by Don Parson and Laura Chase, Los Angeles, December 1981.
- <sup>47</sup> *Herald and Express*, September 27, 1952.
- <sup>48</sup> *Times*, September 29, 1952.
- <sup>49</sup> *Mirror*, September 30, 1952.
- <sup>50</sup> "Statement by Frank Wilkinson," October 28, 1952, xerox copy.
- <sup>51</sup> *Examiner*, October 29, 1952.
- <sup>52</sup> *Examiner*, October 14, 1952.
- <sup>53</sup> Letter from Robert Alexander to Don Parson, January 13, 1982.
- <sup>54</sup> *Daily News*, October 8, 1952.
- <sup>55</sup> Robert Gottlieb and Irene Wolt, *Thinking Big: The Story of the Los Angeles Times* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1977), p. 263.
- <sup>56</sup> *Times*, April 23, 1953.
- <sup>57</sup> Norris Poulson, campaign circular, 1953.
- <sup>58</sup> *Daily News*, May 19, 1953.

## *Los Angeles' Public Housing War*

- <sup>59</sup> *Mirror*, May 21, 1953.
- <sup>60</sup> *Herald and Express*, May 21, 1953.
- <sup>61</sup> *Mirror*, May 21, 1953.
- <sup>62</sup> Wilkinson, "In Defense of Public Housing...", speech at UCLA.
- <sup>63</sup> Gottlieb and Wolt, *Thinking Big*, p. 262.
- <sup>64</sup> Wilkinson, "In Defense of Public Housing...", speech at UCLA.
- <sup>65</sup> *Times*, May 24, 1953.
- <sup>66</sup> *Times*, May 25, 1953.
- <sup>67</sup> *Times*, July 30, 1953.
- <sup>68</sup> Quoted in Lawrence Freedman, *Public Housing: The Politics of Poverty* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967), p. 50.
- <sup>69</sup> *Examiner*, June 9, 1953.
- <sup>70</sup> *Herald and Express*, May 21, 1953.
- <sup>71</sup> Gottlieb and Wolt, *Thinking Big*, p. 264.
- <sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 224.
- <sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 259.
- <sup>74</sup> Letter from Robert Alexander to Don Parson, January 13, 1982.
- <sup>75</sup> Gottlieb and Wolt, *Thinking Big*, p. 258.
- <sup>76</sup> Quoted in Baisden, "Labor Unions in Los Angeles Politics," p. 375.
- <sup>77</sup> Drew Pearson, "Dodger's Move Costly," in Edward Roybal Papers, Special Collections, UCLA.
- <sup>78</sup> *Times*, October 6, 1952.
- <sup>79</sup> *Mirror*, October 16, 1952.
- <sup>80</sup> *Herald and Express*, September 26, 1952.
- <sup>81</sup> Letter from Robert Alexander to Don Parson, January 13, 1982.
- <sup>82</sup> Baisden, "Labor Unions in Los Angeles Politics," p. 380.
- <sup>83</sup> Los Angeles Central Labor Council *Bulletin*, III (December 5, 1949).
- <sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, February 28, 1950.
- <sup>85</sup> Frank Wilkinson, "And Now the Bill Comes Due," *Frontier*, 16 (October 1965), 12.
- <sup>86</sup> Wilkinson, "In Defense of Public Housing...", speech at UCLA.
- <sup>87</sup> Letter from Robert Alexander to Don Parson, January 13, 1982. Mr. Alexander has asked me to emphasize that he did not know if Wilkinson was a Communist or not. The point being, of course, that nobody knew.