

# Institute of Social relations

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## press information

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### FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

A joint statement regarding the Stella Wright Homes rent strike was issued on behalf of the Institute of Social Relations of the Archdiocese of Newark, by the Reverend John L. Paprocki, Director, and Reverend Jerome F. McKenna, C.P., Chairman of the Institute's Council of Religious.

The Institute of Social Relations is the Archdiocesan agency for social concerns, whose task is to aid Catholics in the four county area of the Archdiocese, and the community at large, to identify social needs, to develop a realization for the necessity of a concentrated communal confrontation in social issues, and to provide guidance in the application of proper social ethics in interpreting issues, in the light of Church teachings. The text follows:

The Stella Wright Homes Project is an ugly scar on the face of the City of Newark. As the subhuman conditions prevailing there continue to be revealed, the general public is becoming increasingly aware that the scar of Stella Wright is no mere blight on the landscape, but extends deeper into the

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sensibilities and consciences of people. Stella Wright is "home" to some residents of Newark; it may be an indictment against the rest of a community that has complacently ignored, or at least tolerated, the intolerable.

In recent weeks numerous individuals and groups throughout the city have manifested concerned interest in the plight of the people who must live in the Stella Wright Homes. Forced by circumstances beyond their control, the people of the Stella Wright Homes endeavored to negotiate with the Newark Housing Authority for improved living conditions. When these efforts met with failure, in a desperate effort to educate the authorities about the deplorable conditions under which they had to live, they launched a rent strike. That strike has been under way since April, 1970. The Newark Housing Authority, taking court action, has endeavored recently to pressure the residents who have withheld their rents into paying arrears or suffering eviction.

During the whole course of the strike, the Newark Housing Authority undertook none of the major necessary repairs to the Project buildings, though small repairs of no substantial value have been made here or there in various buildings. Consequently, the people are forced to exist in buildings with faulty plumbing, an inefficient incinerator system, inadequate recreational facilities, and, in one 13 story building which houses senior citizens as well as young children, there is no elevator service.

Father Thomas Comerford and Mr. Toby Henry, both residents of the Project, had organized the rent strike in 1970, and had held the rents collected between April of that year and January, 1971 in escrow. In November, when

the Court ordered them to turn the money over to the Newark Housing Authority, they returned all but two-thousand dollars of it to the tenants. On Monday, December 18, when they appeared in court to plead guilty to contempt charges and to receive sentencing, they were informed by the judge that they would not be sentenced until after the holidays. Later, the same day, the director of the Newark Housing Authority met with the Newark Tenants Council, an organization composed of representatives of all the housing projects of the city, including the Stella Wright Homes. It seems that, now, there is hope that an agreement will be reached between the Housing Authority and the Tenants Council and that some solution to an agonizing problem is in sight.

Deplorable conditions, such as those which exist at the Stella Wright Homes, can produce good and lasting results not only for those who are directly afflicted by them, but also for the rest of society. Rarely, if ever, is good achieved except at the cost of pain and suffering on the part of those who struggle to make it a reality. If the hardships suffered by the inhabitants of Stella Wright Homes can bring about a change in the attitudes and actions of others who are less involved but, perhaps, more responsible for their situation, then they will have achieved a great victory for themselves and for humanity. If the people of Stella Wright can enjoy any consolation at all in this most trying of times, it should flow from the realization that, through their pain, they have awakened sleeping consciences.

For some time now federal, state and local officials throughout the nation have openly admitted that public housing projects are, at least, of doubtful

value. The planners of such projects, though well intentioned, have more often than not failed to take into account the fundamental purpose of all housing—to enhance human life. Consequently, they plan and execute (often in the literal sense) projects which are efficient, economic and practical, but which prove to be dehumaning. The masterpiece of the drawing board invariably becomes an inefficient, uneconomical, impractical monster that destroys the very spirit of its inhabitants.

Substandard construction, inadequate maintenance, and lack of tenant pride are basic factors in the failure of public housing. If the current situation at the Stella Wright Homes Project is to be remedied and the quality of life improved, action must be taken now. Short of demolishing the buildings themselves, little can be done to alter their basic structure. Nevertheless, certain modifications should be made which could enable the residents of the individual buildings to enjoy a modicum of human decency and maximum safety. The Newark Tenants Council has made specific proposals regarding the second and third factors we have mentioned: inadequate maintenance and tenant pride. These proposals are both reasonable in scope and practicable in fact. We therefore recommend their implementation.

It may be opportune at this time to call for a reevaluation of public housing in all its aspects. The Institute of Social Relations, the Archdiocesan agency for social development, would welcome such a step and would commit itself to a direct activity toward this end.

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The Institute of Social Relations, Archdiocese of Newark, joins its voice to that of all the other groups of concerned citizens in supporting the Stella Wright Tenants Association. Furthermore, it believes that the Newark Housing Authority is bound by moral imperative to bring a speedy solution to a debasing situation which has too long been tolerated and too often over-shadowed by other less urgent social problems in Newark.

Is it expecting too much to hope that, during this season when Christians celebrate the Event that signaled the liberation of mankind from sin and sin situations and brought hope to the hearts of those who sat in darkness, that Newark might begin to work toward the solution of one of its most pressing social problems? Is it expecting too much at a time of the year when we proclaim, as did the messengers of God who announced His birth, "peace to men of good will," that there are enough people of good will in this city who will strive to bring peace to 4,800 of their fellow citizens who have known little or nothing of true peace for the past three years?

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