Dear Helen -

I have just read your speech on striking and I think it is a very good speech. My copy is to you.

How are you? I miss not having you on the delegation, as usual my time is completely filled but I am well.

Affe -
Speech of Congresswoman
HELEN GAHAGAN DOUGLAS
before the Regional Conference of the
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF HOUSING OFFICIALS
at Santa Barbara, California
Thursday, September 18, 1947

THE HOUSE JACK CAN'T BUILD

Mr. Chairman and all friends of Housing at a price people can afford
to pay:

I understand that the National Association of Housing Officials is a
non-partisan, non-political organization - and probably that is as it should be.
Unfortunately, however, I find it increasingly difficult to make speeches that
are either non-political or non-partisan. And on the subject of Housing, it
becomes flatly impossible,

When certain parts of my Congressional District in Los Angeles - and,
I have no doubt, of other Districts too - are full of slums that would put Port
Said to shame, that, in my view, is a political matter. When rents are raised
beyond the ability of the average working man and woman to pay, I think that is
a political matter. And when newly-married veterans of World War II are forced
to start their families under the handicap of a hopeless debt because they have to
pay $13,000 for a huddle of Number Three white pine with naked wiring running
through the knot-holes, that, in my humble opinion, is a political matter too,
I conceive these things to be the legitimate concern of elective representatives at all levels of government. That is why I introduced my Veterans' Housing Bill which Senator Taylor introduced in the Senate at my request; that is why I "dropped in the hopper" my resolution to investigate the real-estate lobby; and that is why I intend to continue the fight for housing when Congress reconvenes. I think the people of my District expect me to know what is going on and to make some attempt to protect them when they cannot protect themselves.

As for partisanship, when one major party has, by and large, consistently supported housing and the other party has, by and large, just as consistently blocked it, it is neither honest nor realistic to pretend to be unaware of the facts. Everything that we have, or have ever had, in the way of a permanent housing program has been built with Democratic votes; that is not partisan propaganda; that is a simple statement of existing fact.

I have been told that Senator Taft had been invited to address this conference. I wish he could have seen fit to accept the invitation. I think that his speech would have been well worth hearing - especially if he had decided to explain why Senator Wagner's Housing Bill, or, pardon me, the TAPT-
Ellender-Wagner Bill, did not come to the floor of the Senate for a vote. That should make an interesting story.

In the 80th Congress, Senator Taft bossed the Senate. Don't be under any misapprehension about that. Mr. Taft ruled the Senate of the United States as rigidly and completely as any legislative body has been ruled since the days of Uncle Joe Cannon. His word was law, and what was true of the Senate held for the House as well where Speaker Joe Martin cracked the legislative whip, and passed by a wide margin all "must legislation." Senator Taft laid down a point-by-point program of "must legislation" and every single point was enacted into law. But where was the Taft-Ellender-Wagner Bill - legislation on which he had put his own name and for which he was claiming credit?

That was not "must" legislation. And when the National Public Housing Conference humbly asked him about it, he replied that time was very short but he would try to see what he could do. Let me assure you that in the 80th Congress anything that Senator Taft "tried" was promptly accomplished. So Senator Taft did not try and the bill was not brought out.

WHY?

I think that is very simple. It works about like this:
Last year and this year there has been a great deal of publicity about a housing bill to which Senator Taft’s name is attached. A great many organizations and individuals have endorsed it. Popular opinion polls have shown that the great majority of people favor it.

Next year is an election year. Senator Taft hopes to be a Presidential Candidate. Consequently, next year, the flower of publicity will become the ripe fruit of a housing bill carrying Senator Taft’s name. The bill will be brought out and passed.

BUT - do not delude yourselves into thinking that it will be the same bill we have all been talking about. It will not be the bill that has garnered overwhelmingly favorable publicity and that your organization has endorsed. It will be a National Association of Real Estate Boards-Building and Loan Association bill. The titles in which you are specifically interested will either have been eliminated or will have been rewritten in such a manner as to make them completely unworkable.

It will be a bill to aid housing in exactly the same manner that the Taft-Hartley Bill aided Labor and the lifting of price-controls aided the housewife.
It's bound to be that kind of a bill because that's the way we operate in the 80th Congress.

You see, we have a system. We juggle laws around until you can no longer buy food or pay rent, and then when you join a Housewives' League or a Tenants' Association in protest, we list your organization as subversive and tell people you are a Communist. If you happen to be working for the Government and have been so rash as to have joined such an organization, you get fired and the amount of your salary is listed as governmental economy. It's a beautiful little system and works excellently. Of course, you may not like, and as a free American citizen you don't have to like it. Come election time you can do something about it.

That's what you think, but the 80th Congress is taking care of that too. Read the political amendment to the Taft-Hartley Act - "the new bill of rights for labor." That title is too modest. It is a new bill of rights for the American people. Under this amendment, not only are union newspapers, representing 1/3 of the American people, forbidden to comment favorably or unfavorably upon candidates or issues in national elections but the League of Women Voters, your radio, your newspaper can also be muzzled.
This may sound like a travesty to you but if it does you just don't know the 80th Congress. Indeed, at the next session of Congress, Public Housing itself may well be held subversive. Between now and next January, we find on the Republican score sheet that the House Committee on Expenditures in the Executive Departments is planning a full-dress investigation of charges against the Federal Public Housing Authority made in a secret report of the House Appropriations Committee. Neither the public nor the agency involved has been told the basis of the charges set forth in the press.

The stage is already set for a dramatic repudiation of Public Housing. The National Association of Real Estate Boards has already made noises in that direction, and what the Real Estate Lobby proposes, the 80th Congress will sooner or later adopt. The Real Estate Lobby is a weather vane. Watch it and you can pretty well figure out in what direction the housing wind will blow.

That is what happened to rent and materials controls. The Real Estate Lobby said they were no longer needed because there was no actual shortage of housing. Apparently, we took their word for it. Later, we began to be a little unsure. Angry protests, you see, began to be faintly heard in the pauses between political speeches on Capitol Hill. So now we have a joint committee investigating
the situation to see if there really is a housing shortage.

Now of course anybody who can see and hear and feel knows that there is an acute shortage of low-rent and moderate-priced housing. If it were necessary, I could go into great detail about the crying need for housing that people can afford. Although housing is your work and you are thoroughly familiar with its various aspects, it is possible that I could tell you some things about how people are living these days that might surprise and shock some of you. Because, you see, my Congressional District embraces the heart of downtown Los Angeles, and if there is a spot on earth that needs housing worse, it must surely be Hiroshima.

We hear a great deal about people living in chicken-coops, but in certain parts of my District a chicken-coop would be a high-priority dwelling — especially if you could have it all to yourself.

We have people living in floor-less and almost roof-less old stables; in rat-infested, abandoned warehouses; in door-less and window-less buildings that have been condemned and partly demolished; in the angles behind two-way billboards; and only recently, the Los Angeles City Housing Authority managed to find a place for one of our veterans who was living with his wife and two little
children in a broken-down rose arbor which he had plugged with folded newspapers.

I can show you a place where fifteen people are living in a one-room, nine-by-twelve-foot cabin, with no windows, no water and no lights. Until recently, we had in my District a sheet-iron garage-building in which twenty families lived, with no heat, no light, one water-faucet and one toilet that was out of commission. And old-style eight-room, single-family residences housing upward of fifty people are commonplace,

I know where the figures in Senator O'Gara's excellent report come from, because many of those figures represent the living conditions of some of my constituents.

And yet what do we hear on all sides? What is the propaganda being busily circulated in California by the real-estate minded? That the O'Gara Report is exaggerated; that it does not present a true picture,

Well, I'll go along with that last. I don't think it does present a true picture of California's housing requirements. I don't imagine it was intended to. What it seems to me to present - and very well, too - is a picture of minimum need!
Now, when I speak of these terrible conditions in Los Angeles and in my own District of that City, it is because I know them best and they are naturally closest to my heart. I do not in any sense imply a criticism of the Los Angeles City Housing Authority. On the contrary, I feel that that agency has done a marvelous job in a practically hopeless situation. Furthermore, let me pay my respects to the Housing Authority of my City for being alert to its social responsibilities - something that unfortunately cannot be said of all Housing Authorities everywhere.

Public Housing - Low-Rent Housing - Slum-Clearance Housing - is more than a simple matter of erecting four walls and a roof and collecting some rent for the result. Behind Public Housing is an idea: The idea that Government has a responsibility to the Governed.

Public Housing, with rentals subsidized up to the level of the individual's ability to pay, is one-third of the great conception that no nation can be truly healthy while a large minority of its people are ill-housed, ill-clothed and ill-fed.

Today, in the 80th Congress, that is regarded as an alien, subversive philosophy. About the subversion, I do not know. But alien it may be - for it
was first enunciated 2000 years ago on the shores of Galilee by Him who affirmed
that He was His brother's kinsman.

Nevertheless, it is that concept of Housing - that broad, social aspect -
that you must keep in mind. For from it, all manner of good things derive,

Public Housing has proven, once and forever, that disparate races,
colors and creeds can live together in harmony and unity. There have been no
race-riots in established Public Housing projects. Had Housing made no other
contribution, it would have repaid itself a thousand-fold by this alone, for
discrimination and prejudice are surely the world's most vexing problems. Living
and working together lead to understanding; and prejudice which is a force of
darkness and ignorance, cannot withstand the light of understanding,

Public Housing has demonstrated that children do not become delinquent
through choice. Wherever housing developments with adequate play-space and
community buildings have replaced over-crowded slums, the delinquency ratios
have dropped almost perpendicularly. What this will mean to the crime costs of
future years can scarcely be estimated,
And there are innumerable other good things that flow from the inexhaustible well-spring of a decent home; public health improves demonstrably among people transplanted from a slum to a housing development; the self-government, exercised through the elective resident councils which most well-run housing projects have, is certainly beneficial.

A meeting of a resident council to take up the problems of the community in full and free discussion, is like nothing so much as a New England town meeting — than which there is nothing healthier in our entire scheme of living. Indeed, it is the very root and base of our democracy.

For that matter, the whole gamut of community activities which public housing is supposed to encourage, constitutes a return to neighborliness; a re-awakening of people's interest in each other and in their common problems; a neighborhood sharing of joys and troubles that was the accepted American order forty years ago, but which our breath-taking technological advancements have somehow out-distanced and out-modeled.

These things, I submit, are not only good, but essential. They are well worth fighting for — for when you fight for such aims singly, you also fight for democracy as a whole. And democracy needs fighting for, it is badly beset.
True, fighting did not get you much from the 80th Congress. Every time you asked for housing, you got another investigation. You didn't get the Taft-Ellender-Wagner Bill or the Douglas-Taylor Bill, but you did get four official investigations and at least a couple of free-hand ones. I wonder what the investigators found out.

Sometimes, you know, you find out some surprising things, like Senator Buck who helped write the Rent-Decontrol Bill and is now engaged in fighting his landlord over a rent-raise. He found out that rent-decontrol applied to Senators, too.

But don't allow such temporary obstructionism to discourage you. The 80th Congress, like other trials and tribulations, will pass. And when it does, you must be alert. Your organization may be non-political and non-partisan, but you, as individuals, must do all that is within your power, and within the law, to see that the 81st Congress is a better one. And that the 82nd improves on that.

That is where our great power lies - and the solution to all our problems: In the proper, considered exercise of our franchise. Remember that if control should change to change in the next Congress, then Representative
Wolcott of Michigan will no longer be Chairman of the House Banking and Currency Committee. All housing matters must go through that Committee and I need hardly tell you that Mr. Wolcott, who bears the stigmata of the Real Estate Lobby, is your bitter and implacable enemy.

Mr. Wolcott, you know, is the author of the Wolcott Disposition Bill which would, in effect, turn over all existing permanently-built war housing to large realty interests through the neat little device of requiring all such developments to be sold in their entirety for cash. Under the original law, the tenants themselves are eligible to purchase the projects through a system of mutual ownership, but Mr. Wolcott doesn't favor that.

To back up Mr. Wolcott's point of view, the House Committee on Small Business is investigating Government competition with private enterprise, and will attempt to prove that cooperative or mutual housing is detrimental to private enterprise. Seemingly, home ownership has become alien ideology, too.

Mr. Wolcott, by the way, gets lots of help from our own Mr. Fletcher of San Diego. And there are other eager little helpers from even closer to home but they are not leaders, merely loyal followers - or should I say Fellow Travellers.
In such a climate, housing got short shrift. We did find time to junk rent-controls, to slash the FHA appropriation dangerously, and to reduce the subsidy appropriation to the point where the government was headed for default on its obligations. Fortunately, the Senate restored enough of the subsidies to keep Uncle Sam from being sued as a dead-beat. And, of course, we had time for the interminable and innumerable investigations.

But we had no time for any constructive housing legislation. In the House, the Javits Bill, which is identical with the Taft-Ellender-Wagner Bill, did not even get Committee consideration. Nor did my own bill for veterans' housing.

This bill was introduced to tide over a bad situation. It is in no sense a substitute for the Taft-Ellender-Wagner Bill, but rather a complement to it. We all realize that even if the T-E-W Bill had passed, it would have built no houses this year, for that is a long-range bill, not designed to meet the exigent needs of an inflationary period. Therefore, I introduced my bill to create, immediately, soundly-constructed, permanently-built housing for veterans. This housing would have been subsidized to whatever extent was necessary to keep the rental below $50 per month until such time as the housing shortage was
alleviated and vacancy ratios again existed. When such alleviation was proclaimed
by the President, the housing was to be sold; and, of course, the residents were
eligible to purchase if they so desired.

It was purely a stopgap to enable the veteran and his family to get a
decent place to live until the Taft-Ellender-Wagner Bill could get going. I
thought we owed the veteran that much, but the Banking and Currency Committees of
both House and Senate thought otherwise. There was no time; we had other and
more pressing things to do.

The 80th Congress, you see, had three primary goals — and it attained
one great accomplishment.

The three goals were: to break the back of Labor; to reduce the taxes of
the wealthy; and to destroy the various New Deal agencies that had been set up by
Franklin Roosevelt to protect the American people. The great accomplishment was
that after almost interminable debate, we decided that the District of Columbia
should conduct its business on Daylight Saving Time.

Surely it smacks of statesmanship to set the clocks forward by one hour
in the public places of our National Capitol. That we simultaneously set the
clocks of social legislation back by half a century all over the nation is purely
incidental.
On the general subject of the 80th Congress, I would say: Forget it, that is, until election time. True enough, it has played havoc all along the line but the damage it has done is not irreparable. The only real danger lies in discouragement. I am certain that Labor will not take the vindictive action of this Congress as the final word in its affairs, and good House or must not do so either.

Housing has suffered its casualties, and I am afraid that it will suffer more. But do not be daunted. Close your ranks, face into the sun of a better day, and carry on your fight. Your cause is just, and it will prevail,