



ESTABLISHED 1848.

UNQUOMONK SILK MILLS



HOLYOKE, MASS.,

WILLIAM SKINNER & SON,



MANUFACTURERS OF

Satin Sleeve Linings,

MOHAIR BRAIDS,

Pure Dye Silk Braids, Silk Serges, Colored and Black, Machine Twist, Button Hole Twist, Sewing Silk.

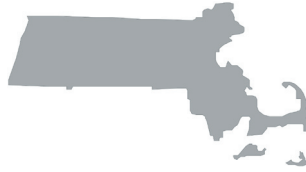
327 Broadway, NEW YORK. SALESROOMS: 144 Fifth Avenue, CHICAGO.

Advertisement for William Skinner and Sons Silk Company

By far the oldest and largest of four silk mills in Holyoke and one of over a dozen textile companies producing cotton, silk, and woolen cloth. Source: *Holyoke: The Skinner Family and Wistariahurst*, Kate Navarra Thibodeau. (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2005), p. 71.

“Something Will Drop”: Socialists, Unions, and Trusts in Nineteenth-Century Holyoke

JOSHUA L. ROOT



Editor’s Introduction: *Massachusetts was at the center of the birth of the American factory system and a dynamo in its nineteenth-century Industrial Revolution. As such, it has more than its fair share of red brick reminders of the past. It is far too easy for contemporary Americans to speed by post-industrial cities with nary a thought about their past glories or how they fell from grace, a story to be told below.*

Modern-day Holyoke is a third smaller and considerably poorer than it was at its historical apex in the early twentieth century. Now known by outsiders for an array of social problems, empty factories, and a struggling downtown, Holyoke was, in 1890, a place of great opportunity, wealth, and promise. At the very moment the city soared, however, troubling trends emerged that laid the foundations for decline. Holyoke’s workers, many of whom were immigrants, did not receive a fair share of the profits they produced: a condition that gave rise to socialist agitation, union organizing, and labor strife. Ultimately, however, industrial consolidation, poor management, and capital flight were more responsible than unions for an economic decline whose effects are still felt. The author is a former Holyoke resident who worked as a union organizer in the famed “Paper City.”

* * * * *

As the dawn of the twentieth century approached, the local newspaper proudly noted that the city of Holyoke “rippled with industrial muscle, especially the muscles of textile factories.”¹ The city’s population neared 45,000.² The world’s largest alpaca and paper mills, one of the largest silk mills, and the “greatest power pump works in the world” were just a few of the many successful industries established in Holyoke between 1875 and 1893. In 1890, Holyoke was home to twenty paper mills, five woolen and five cotton mills in addition to thirteen foundries and machine shops. The Lyman Cotton Mills, the city’s oldest mill, had expanded to over 1,500 employees and 80,000 spindles by 1891.³ The city’s businesses were managed by men who were “self made, trained in the severest schools of experience, and inspired with energy and enterprise.”⁴ The most important industry was paper manufacturing. In 1890, Holyoke’s paper mills produced 80% of the nation’s fine writing and bond papers.⁵ During the closing decade of the nineteenth century, it appeared as if this small industrial city was bound for greatness.

Most of Holyoke’s industrial leaders relied on the same business strategy since their first factories were established fifty years earlier: invest current profits in the company, expand production, increase capacity, and build more mills. *The Daily Graphic* declared that Holyoke was “a remarkable illustration of what business energy and enterprise” could do. It had become a “bustling city of modern growth, filled with manufacturing establishments in great variety and the scene of ceaseless industry.”⁶ Holyoke was declared “the Queen of Industrial Cities,” and the *Transcript*, Holyoke’s main booster and defender of its leisure class, reasoned that it deserved to be deemed “the peer of the manufacturing cities.”⁷ In the process of turning Holyoke into the Paper City, its capitalists had grown quite rich. At the same time, however, it also had the third

¹ *Union News [Springfield, MA]*, June 15, 1895.

² George Allyn, “Sketch of Holyoke,” Thirtieth anniversary issue of the *Holyoke Daily Transcript* (Holyoke, MA, 1912); Daniel Czitrom, “The Hidden Holyoke: An Historical Introduction, 1870-1940,” Unpublished paper (Mount Holyoke College Archives, Holyoke, MA, date unknown), p. 7.

³ Constance McLaughlin Green, *Holyoke, Massachusetts: A Case History of the Industrial Revolution in America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1939), p. 165.

⁴ Czitrom, p. 2.

⁵ John P. Hickey, “The Holyoke Area Paper Industry, 1899-1951” MA thesis. (University of Massachusetts: Amherst, MA, 1953), p. 1.

⁶ *The Daily Graphic*, February 14, 1878.

⁷ *Transcript* [Holyoke, MA], May 13, 1876.

largest percentage of foreign-born people of any city in America.⁸ These immigrants did not prosper alongside the city's industrialists.

As local capitalists grew wealthy, their focus on the city's equity was a distant second to considerations of profit. By the late nineteenth century, a deep division between wealthy and working class had emerged. Housing was one of the most obvious problems. Most homes were substandard and grossly overcrowded, yet one-fifth of the city's poor families took in boarders to supplement their income.⁹ In 1880, there was an average of 10.5 people living in each of Holyoke's dwellings, the third highest average in the nation.¹⁰ By 1910, Holyoke's population leapt to 57,730 and the density per dwelling rose to 11.9. Holyoke ranked behind only New York City and Hoboken, New Jersey, as one of the most crowded cities in America.¹¹ The situation was especially dire among the French-Canadians who had settled in the city's Second Ward (South Holyoke), where the population density rose to a staggering 22.3 residents per dwelling.¹² Conditions within those dwellings were abysmally poor. In 1890, doctors reported that of every 1,000 children born in Holyoke, 312 died before their first birthday.¹³

Particularly in the crowded "Flats" and "Patch," neighborhoods along the river, there was a feeling of being, quite literally, at the bottom – and that feeling had psychological ramifications. Holyoke slopes downhill towards the river and its poorest neighborhoods. Standing in the Flats, one could look uphill at the prosperity in the Highlands and the Hill where the wealthy resided. An invisible but easily perceivable line divided residents in the Flats from those on the Hill. Bonds among neighbors in Holyoke's working-class precincts were strong, but stronger still was the desire to escape those neighborhoods. For a while, workers accepted the contrast between their lives and those of the mill owners because many believed

⁸ Kenneth Underwood, *Protestant and Catholic: Religion and Social Interaction in an Industrial Community* (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1957), p. 207.

⁹ Donna S. Kenny, "Women and Work: Views and Visions From the Pioneer Valley, 1870-1945," *Historical Journal of Massachusetts*, Vol. 8 (1), 1985, pp. 30-41, 35.

¹⁰ Susan I. Hautainiemi, Douglas L. Swedlund and Alan C. Anderton, "Mill Town Mortality: Consequences of Industrial Growth in Two Nineteenth-Century New England Towns," *Social Science History*, Vol. 23 (1) (Spring, 1999), pp. 1-39, 7.

¹¹ Czitrom, p. 6; Ella Merkel DiCarlo, *Holyoke-Chicopee: A Perspective*, (published by the Transcript-Telegram, Holyoke: 1982), p. 235.

¹² Paul N. Dubovik, "Housing in Holyoke and Its Effects on Family Life, 1860-1910," *Historical Journal of Massachusetts*, Vol. 4 (1), 1975, pp. 40-50, 47.

¹³ Constance McLaughlin Green, *American Cities in the Growth of a Nation* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1957), p. 87; *New York Observer and Chronicle*, July 5, 1906; [Holyoke] *Union-News*, June 15, 1995.

that if a man was willing to work hard enough, he could move from the Flats into one of the mansions on the Hill. The belief in social mobility was perhaps more important than its reality. Many Holyokers believed that if they worked hard enough – if they fought hard enough – they could get out of the Flats and the Patch. That was the dream for many local residents – “to work yourself uphill.”¹⁴

THE BOOMS AND BUSTS OF BIG PAPER

America’s early industrial economy was characterized by wild gyrations between periodic booms and busts, and occasionally what seemed to be near complete collapse. Holyoke was particularly vulnerable to ebbs in both the national and the world economies. The city’s industry lived and died by its exports as very little of what Holyoke’s mills produced was consumed in the city. In addition to coarse materials and newsprint, Holyoke produced high-grade “fancy” papers, watermarked and well regarded. While much of the city’s paper went to markets in the United States, a growing portion was exported to Europe, South America, and Australia.¹⁵ For most consumers, both in America and abroad, high-grade writing papers were a luxury that could be sacrificed in hard times. When the economy slowed even a little, Holyoke’s goods grew dusty in warehouses, and the city skidded to a halt — the poor bearing the brunt of an indifferent market economy.

In order to create a buffer between a downturn and a disaster, each of Holyoke’s mills sought to produce as much paper and capture as much of the market as possible during flush times. In the end, the strategy of ever-expanding production, which had worked so well in the past for Holyoke’s paper industry, nearly proved to be its downfall. Since the end of the Civil War, demand for paper had grown steadily, but not always as fast as output.¹⁶ Paper mills in other states such as Wisconsin and in other countries, including Canada, also greatly expanded their production capacity. As more manufacturers entered the paper industry and existing mills installed ever-faster equipment, the price of paper fell precipitously. Between 1865 and 1880, the price of fine writing paper fell by 58%. In the 1890s, the paper market became thoroughly saturated.¹⁷

¹⁴ Ricardo Moraga, Randi Silnutzer, Roger Tincknell, and Katie Tolles, *From True Stories to Nonsense Rhymes: Oral Traditions of Holyoke* (Holyoke Public Schools, 1985), p. 45.

¹⁵ *Friend’s Intelligencer*, August 23, 1884.

¹⁶ Hickey, *The Holyoke Area Paper Industry*, p. 4.

¹⁷ William F. Hartford, *Working People of Holyoke: Class and Ethnicity in a Massachusetts Mill Town, 1850-1960* (NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990), p. 44.

In an 1894 interview with the *Outlook*, William Whiting, a local pioneering paper giant, reasoned that “a good deal of trouble could be avoided if men realized that business runs in cycles [A]lmost all manufacturing has been stimulated to overproduction . . . therefore in the next three years excess of competition and short product will make profits light.” Whiting noted that this was a trend that would correct itself, but only for a while. He prophesized that “in the last three or four years of the decade profits will be high. Then will come a rush of new mills, over production, and stagnation again.”¹⁸ In fact, local paper manufacturers and their competitors in other regions recognized that overproduction was plaguing the industry, creating exaggerated cycles of boom and bust. But individual mills could not be expected to lead the crusade in cutting output. Paper manufacturers had collectively sought better control of the production of paper to ease the fluctuations of the market since at least the 1860s. To coordinate and negotiate reductions, paper manufacturers established the American Paper Makers’ Association in 1878. Then in 1885, in order to cut overhead, mills collectively slashed wages across the board. Holyoke mills were annually shut for four days when canals were drained. In 1892, as overproduction and falling prices depressed the paper industry, Holyoke’s manufacturers agreed to extend the annual mill closing for ten days, just “a little longer than the usual summer vacation.”¹⁹ They also agreed to reduce production across the city by 75 to 100 tons a day thereafter.²⁰

Before the effects of the curtailments could be gauged, however, another problem presented itself. The *New York Times* reported a shortage in the rag supply used to make high-grade papers, “due to the fact that all rags from abroad have been prohibited from landing here because of the cholera in foreign ports.”²¹ This drove the price of rags up sharply, in some cases doubling their cost. Although Holyoke paper mills still purchased some rags locally, increasing amounts were being imported from Europe and Japan; and, in 1891, nearly \$5 million in rags had been imported. The industry was in a precarious position and one Holyoke mill, the Winona Paper Company, failed, though it had not been known by Holyokers as one of the best or safest places in which to work. Laborers dubbed the mill “the slaughter house,” and its demise was not mourned by them.²² Mill

¹⁸ *Outlook*, February 10, 1894.

¹⁹ Czitrom, p. 9.

²⁰ *New York Times*, June 12, 1892.

²¹ *New York Times*, June 12, 1892.

²² Allyn, “Sketch of Holyoke.”

owners were more concerned, however. Paper magnates from Holyoke and elsewhere convened an emergency meeting at the Fifth Avenue Hotel in New York City in September 1892. There they resolved to increase the market price of book paper via an agreement to operate their mills on greatly reduced work time and by cutting their workforces.²³

Conditions in Holyoke were already on the decline when the United States economy went into a protracted and sharp depression beginning in 1893, just as Whiting had predicted. Historian William Hartford reports that in Holyoke, “a general tightening of credit . . . marked the onset of hard times, though it soon became apparent that the economy faced problems considerably more serious than a liquidity crunch.” Across the Paper City and the nation, mills reduced hours and wasted little time “lightening pay envelopes.”²⁴ Mills laid off workers or shut down completely. Even the Albion Paper Company, regarded by the *Washington Post* as “one of the most stable in the country,” floundered.²⁵ Mills began burning scrap pieces of wood in order to save their coal.²⁶ As conditions worsened, the *Transcript* reported that unemployed men and women would go from mill to mill in search of work. One woman showed up looking for lodging at a boarding house, her “feet blistered from traveling in search of work.”²⁷

The depression dragged on. In 1896, the Overseers of the Poor reported that “Many strong and able bodied men and women, able and willing to work, for the first time applied for aid, forced to do so because of their inability to procure employment to support themselves and families.” The following year, Holyoke spent one-tenth of its budget on poor relief, and 2,608 people received assistance.²⁸ According to Hartford, children “could be found doing their part to aid ailing families in the city’s back alleys, rummaging through garbage boxes and trash bins, hunting for potato parings and rags.”²⁹ As workers and families became desperate and hopeless, suicide and infanticide visited Holyoke. A newborn child and a recently unemployed woman from the Farr alpaca mill were found drowned in a city canal, an apparent suicide. Another woman, Kate Sullivan, was found floating in the river. Reportedly, she had been “despondent for weeks

²³ *New York Times*, September 23, 1892.

²⁴ Hartford, pp. 99, 100.

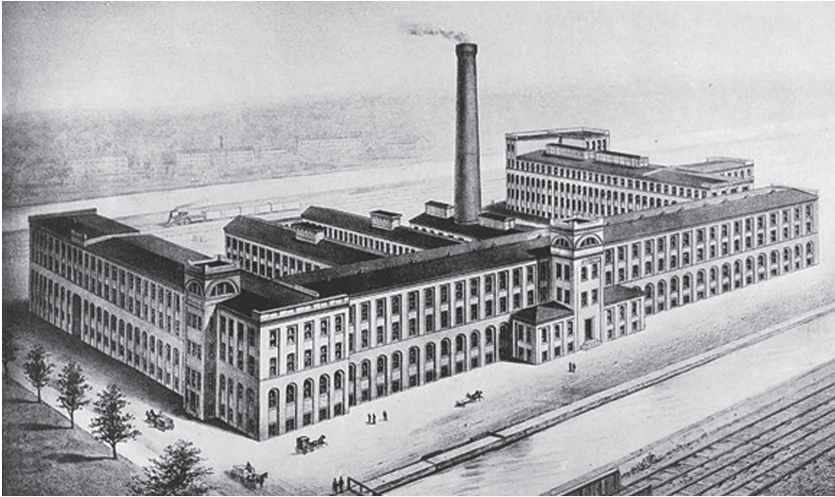
²⁵ *Washington Post*, March 10, 1896.

²⁶ *Holyoke Labor*; June 9, 1894. This newspaper was published by the Socialist Labor Party beginning in April, 1894. It can be found on microfilm at the Holyoke History Room, currently located in the library of Holyoke Community College.

²⁷ *Transcript*, August 29, 1874.

²⁸ Czitrom, p. 9.

²⁹ Hartford, p. 102.



Parson's Paper Mill, c. 1891.

Holyoke's longest running paper company (1853-2005), Parsons Paper Co., produced fine writing paper, safety paper used in making checks, and high-quality art and resume paper. The mill was located between the First and Second Level Canals. It is typical of nineteenth century mill construction with its W shaped layout and plain facade.

Source: Digital Treasures: A Central and Western Massachusetts Digital Library Project. Website: <http://dlib.cwmars.org/index.php>.

over losing her job.”³⁰ A body of yet another infant was pulled from a canal. Before the depression ended, it exacted “a staggering toll in human misery.”³¹

THE SOCIALISTS

Jobless, reliant on relief and charity, and growing angry, some workers began to look for solutions and hope in radical ideas. To some, socialism became an attractive alternative to the unmitigated pain of capitalism’s dark side. As one laborer in a Holyoke paper mill put it: “Capital is like a heap of manure in a farmer’s barn yard. By itself it is a stinking nuisance and of no earthly use to anyone, but spread out over the land where it belongs it performs its natural functions and becomes a blessing to all.”³² The rise of socialism in Holyoke happened quickly, and while it existed had a significant effect on the minds and imaginations of restless Holyokers. In April 1894, *Holyoke Labor*, a publication of the Socialist Labor Party (SLP), began to be printed in the Paper City. The newspaper made no attempt to hide its intent, which was nothing less than agitating for the overthrow of capitalism and the rise of a worker state. In one of its first issues, *Holyoke Labor* reported:

The Beebe & Holbrook Paper Mill is running on half time. The Catholic churches have started a subscription list to aid the unemployed of this city. They will soon tire of carrying water in a sieve. The labor problem will never be solved by charity. John B. McMahon of Fitchburg was found in a starving condition here and died of hunger. “Something will drop” in this city before long. The people are getting desperate.³³

But socialism was a new idea for many Holyoke workers, and most were uncomfortable with and suspicious of its ideals. Rumors that socialists in Holyoke’s German neighborhoods were regularly drilling in preparation for armed rebellion frightened some residents.³⁴ The city’s workers were clearly unhappy with their state of affairs and wanted reform, but armed rebellion was another thing all together. *Holyoke Labor*’s writers quickly

³⁰ *Union-News*, June 15, 1995.

³¹ Hartford, pp. 100, 101; *Transcript*, March 8, 1873.

³² *Holyoke Labor*, April 21, 1894.

³³ *Holyoke Labor*, June 23, 1894.

³⁴ Allyn, “Sketch of Holyoke.”

grew frustrated with what they saw as the stunted political education and spinelessness of the city's proletariat. The newspaper occasionally chided laborers for being too soft. For example, working men at the city's new trolley system were known to work seven days a week for twelve to eighteen hours at a time for little pay. *Holyoke Labor* reasoned that the "industrial slave's" plight was "the people's fault" because they did not "demand that such affairs be owned and controlled by the public." In the same issue, the paper commented that the workers in the Germania Mill were too "afraid of scabs" to stand up for themselves.³⁵ When the Lyman Mills enacted a sharp wage cut, the paper argued that "if the workmen had only sense enough to abolish capitalist competition and establish the Cooperative Commonwealth they would never more be obliged to ask the capitalist robbers to give them back part of their stealings."³⁶

Much to the disappointment of the socialists, Holyoke did not become a hotbed of labor agitation. The *Transcript* reported on one strike of women millinery workers, that, although not entirely typical, was not singular. The newspaper noted, somewhat mysogynistically, that a dozen "girls" had "determined to strike" at a meeting held in a boarding house. The girls marched "to the place of rendezvous arm in arm . . . the meeting was amusing. No attempt was made to observe parliamentary forms of procedure. The girls called each other by their *Christian* names, and once in a while kissed a newcomer." The girls resolved to strike until their demand for a ten-cent-a-day pay raise was met. The newspaper alleged that even though the women "were resolved never to resume work till the addition was made, . . . the next morning they were in their places at work as usual."³⁷ As was the case during previous decades, the strikes that did occur in the city remained infrequent and small affairs affecting just a few dozen workers, usually women. All were short-lived. Considering that the country as a whole witnessed over 18,000 strikes between 1881 and 1897, Holyoke's labor front was remarkably quiet.³⁸ *Holyoke Labor* and the SLP were anxious for class struggle and wholly impatient with the city's workers.

As could be expected, *Holyoke Labor*, despite its exasperation with the city's quiescent proletariat, covered most labor stories with far more sympathy for the workers than did the *Transcript*. Part of the *Transcript's*

³⁵ *Holyoke Labor*, May 26, 1894.

³⁶ *Holyoke Labor*, April 21, 1894.

³⁷ *Transcript*, November 14, 188.

³⁸ Priscilla Murolo and A. B. Chitty, *From the Folks Who Brought You the Weekend: A Short, Illustrated History of Labor in the United States* (New York: The New Press, 2001), p. 121.

generally unfavorable view toward unions and strikes was no doubt in part due to the newspaper's occasional conflict with its own workers. After the Typographical Union, Local 253, had sent thirty members to negotiate a union scale for the *Transcript's* employees, the newspaper not only refused to negotiate, but fired all thirty of the printers. The *Transcript's* socialist competitor, *Holyoke Labor*, reported that the discharge was an "arbitrary action so characteristic of the big and little tyrants of capitalism."³⁹

A boycott of the *Transcript* began, supported by many of Holyoke's unions and even the newsboys. The Bricklayers' Union and the Protective Labor Union each donated \$100 to the striking printers, and other unions gave smaller amounts.⁴⁰ Organized labor was still a token fraction of the city's workforce though, and its influence was proportional to its size. Although local unions aided the printers, Holyoke's manufacturers gave "the *Transcript* proprietor . . . the assurance of unlimited principal support in his battle against Organized Labor." *Holyoke Labor* responded by stating of the "bitter fight": "All we've got to say is that this is likely to require all the assistance [the *Transcript's* owner] can get, and then he'll probably get licked."⁴¹ The boycott was ineffective, however, and was soon given up as hopeless.

The SLP attempted to support the rights of workers through bread-and-butter unionism and by educating the masses. It brought notable socialists to Holyoke, including infamous German-American anarchist and incendiary orator Johann Most, Eleanor Marx (Karl Marx's daughter), and Wilhelm Liebknecht, the German socialist leader.⁴² The party was also active through the ballot box. *Holyoke Labor* warned:

While the working men of Holyoke are discussing independent labor politics, the capitalists are perfecting a new gatling gun at

³⁹ *Holyoke Labor*, May 26, 1894.

⁴⁰ *Holyoke Labor*, June 9, 1894.

⁴¹ *Holyoke Labor*, June 23, 1894.

⁴² Marianne Pedulla, "Labor in a City of Immigrants: Holyoke, 1882-1888," *Historical Journal of Massachusetts*, Vol. 13 (1985), pp. 147-161, 154. Editor's Note: It's intriguing that Johann Most was invited to speak in Holyoke. According to historian Paul Avrich, Most was the "most vilified social militant of his time. Portrayed in the daily press as a wild, militant fanatic bent on chaos and destruction, he became the cartoonist's stereotype of the bewhiskered, foreign-looking anarchist with a bomb in one hand and a dagger or a pistol in the other. In an editorial published after his death in 1906, the *New York Times* called him a 'mad dog' and an 'enemy of the human race. That Most was an uncompromising agitator, an apostle of revolutionary violence and propaganda by the deed can not be denied. And yet he was far from being the rabid, maniacal figure of caricature." Review of *The Voice of Terror: A Biography of Johann Most (1980)* by Frederic Trautmann in the *American Historical Review* (June 1981) Vol. 86: 659-660.

Springfield for the special purpose of protecting workingmen when they become too independent. It would not do to have gatling guns brought into Holyoke; that would look too suspicious. So they store them away at Springfield for future use. Let workingmen use the ballot boxes as gatling guns. They will annihilate any and all enemies of labor.⁴³

The SLP did field candidates in Holyoke, throughout the state, and nationally. The *Washington Post* reported on May 17, 1896, during the midst of the depression, that the SLP nominated candidates for governor of Massachusetts, secretary of state, treasurer, and lieutenant governor. The *Post* reported that the socialist slate was running on a platform that “calls for legislation that will bring about the establishment of the co-operative Commonwealth.” The candidate for lieutenant governor was a Holyoke labor activist, Moritz E. Ruther.⁴⁴ Ruther had grown cynical of the Democrats, proclaiming “they oppose trusts but elect trust-owners to office.” Of the Republicans he wrote: “their history is written in blood.”⁴⁵ Ruther exhibited the same kind of high-handed impatience with Holyoke’s working people as *Holyoke Labor* did. In an editorial, Ruther explained that “there is one thing that I dislike above all others, and that is the cowardice of some of my fellow wage-slaves towards Socialism.”⁴⁶

Across the river in Chicopee, the SLP was successful in getting several members onto the city council, and narrowly lost the mayoralty.⁴⁷ In 1898, Max Ruther (no relation to Moritz), an outspoken socialist from Holyoke who had contested (and lost) every aldermanic election since 1884, won a seat from Ward 3 on a platform that advocated municipal ownership of the city’s gas and electric facilities. Eugene V. Debs, who had spoken in Holyoke on the steps of City Hall several weeks before, no doubt helped Ruther’s campaign. In his speech, Debs promoted the virtues of a socialist revolution, which he claimed was in the not-too-distant future. Debs was a powerful speaker; Ruther, on the other hand, was not nearly as charismatic.⁴⁸

Unfortunately for Eugene Debs, Max Ruther, and Moritz Ruther, socialism as a significant force in Holyoke was short-lived. The local chapter

⁴³ *Holyoke Labor*; April 28, 1894.

⁴⁴ *Washington Post*, May 19, 1896.

⁴⁵ DiCarlo, *Holyoke-Chicopee*, p. 229.

⁴⁶ *Holyoke Labor*; May 18, 1895.

⁴⁷ DiCarlo, *Holyoke-Chicopee*, p. 253.

⁴⁸ *Holyoke Labor*; September 3, 1894.

of the SLP was dominated by the city's German immigrants who preferred to distance themselves from the city's other inhabitants and stay in South Holyoke near the Germania mill.⁴⁹ Protestant Germans were estranged from the city's Catholic immigrants and "rather despised the uncouth 'Paddies' and poverty stricken French Canadians about them."⁵⁰ As a result of these ethnic tensions, few Irish were attracted to the movement and French-Canadians were all but absent from the SLP.⁵¹ Although the city's skeletal labor movement and the party shared frustration at the working conditions in the city's mills and at the periodic economic depressions, the two groups had sharp ideological differences. As socialism began to lose its allure, the city's more conservative labor movement, struggling to exist at all, began to distance itself from the party. Most SLP officeholders lost their bids for reelection, as did Max Ruther, the "uninteresting and monotonous" Paper City labor leader, who was relieved of his position as Holyoke alderman in 1899.⁵²

THE PAPER TRUST

The lengthy depression that had begun in 1893 eventually ended. In the wake of the economic wreckage the depression had wrought, "consortiums of financiers created holding companies beyond the reach of anti-trust legislation."⁵³ A wave of consolidations and mergers took place across the country and throughout the Paper City. Local independent manufacturers from various industries were swallowed up by national competitors. Holyoke's Deane Steam Pump Company was brought into the fold of the International (Worthington) Steam Pump Company; the Holyoke Envelope Company became part of the United States Envelope Company; and the Merrick Thread Company and the Hadley Mill were brought into the American Thread Trust.⁵⁴ When the American Writing Paper Company was incorporated in July of 1899 as a combination of paper mills, trusts were already playing a growing role in American and local capitalism.⁵⁵

By 1900, sixteen of Holyoke's twenty-two fine-writing paper mills had been sold to the combine, including the Parsons Paper Company, the city's oldest paper manufacturer. In all, the trust controlled an intimidating

⁴⁹ Allyn, "Sketch of Holyoke."

⁵⁰ Underwood, *Protestant and Catholic*, p. 212.

⁵¹ Hartford, *Working People of Holyoke*, p. 81.

⁵² Green, *Holyoke, Massachusetts*, p. 111.

⁵³ Murolo and Chitty, p. 141.

⁵⁴ Czitrom, p. 9; Hartford, p. 103; DiCarlo, *Holyoke-Chicopee*, p. 224.

⁵⁵ Hickey, p. 5; Green, pp. 192, 193.



Women Rag Room Workers, Holyoke, c. 1900

Women in hats and bonnets sorting rags in large baskets. Even after most mills switched to using pulp paper, Parsons Paper Co. continued the tradition of creating paper with cotton rags. It had its own rag room, an anomaly during a time when most received their rags from southern companies. Source: Digital Treasures: A Central and Western Massachusetts Digital Library Project. Website: <http://dlib.cwmars.org/index.php>.



Eugene V. Debs

75% of the writing paper output of the United States. From the beginning, Holyoke was at the center of the trust and served as the location of its head office.⁵⁶ The idea behind the American Writing Paper Company was larger than simply the control of the writing paper market. As the *New York Times* wrote, “There is a movement a foot [in Holyoke] which, if it succeeds, will mean a trust of trusts.” The American Writing Paper Company planned to incorporate scores of companies manufacturing all kinds of paper-based products in order to compete against the newly formed International Paper Company. The “trust of trusts” would include the United States Envelope Company, “itself a powerful organization,” as well as companies making tissues, cardboard, and more.⁵⁷

Such an audacious and powerful trust needed the management of a competent paper industry mind, hence it courted ex-Congressman William Whiting and offered to purchase his Whiting Paper Company.⁵⁸ In an ominous move for the combine, however, Whiting declined both offers, preferring to remain in “the independent rank.”⁵⁹ Whiting, in turn, became the largest independent paper producer in the United States and did quite well. *Time* magazine later described Whiting’s mill as a “monster factory moated by a tributary to the Connecticut River.”⁶⁰ Control of the American Writing trust instead passed into less capable hands than Whiting’s and was handicapped by incompetent management. Unlike successful combines such as the United States Steel Corporation, the push for consolidation of the paper industry did not come from within the industry or from calculating manufacturers, but rather from opportunistic financiers who knew little about the industry. Consequently, financial institutions such as Massachusetts Mutual Life Insurance Company pulled strings and voiced competing interests within the trust. As Hickey has pointed out, “Both the original promoters [of the trust] and the final agents were brokers and not paper manufacturers. The result was that these men were primarily interested in marketing the stocks and bonds, and not one was concerned with the manufacture of paper.”⁶¹

Although it was hoped consolidating the paper industry would reduce “the ruinous competition of the Gilded Age,”⁶² the American Writing Paper Company faced immediate difficulties. Noted local historian Constance

⁵⁶ Hickey, pp. 6-9.

⁵⁷ *New York Times*, September 10, 1899.

⁵⁸ *Washington Post*, April 7, 1899.

⁵⁹ *New York Times*, January 19, 1911.

⁶⁰ *Time Magazine*, September 3, 1928.

⁶¹ Hickey, *The Holyoke Area Paper Industry*, p. 5.

⁶² Murolo and Chitty, p. 141.

Green concludes, “With the cessation of the independence . . . of Holyoke’s great paper companies, one era of Holyoke’s history – the period of vital growth — [came] to an end.” Holyoke paper mills that were brought into the trust retained their management at first, but since managers’ direct financial stake in the mills’ performance was reduced, so too was their incentive to see the mills succeed. Veterans of the industry “shrugged their shoulders, accepted their salaries, and departed on vacations in a fashion hitherto unheard of.”⁶³ Hickey noted that the local “manufacturers gave up trying to do things the way they thought best and simply took orders or dropped out of the ‘trust’ to take other jobs.” Some went into banking and finance; others started new paper mills, many of which did very well.⁶⁴ The city’s original founders, the Boston Associates, had long before proven management-by-absentee financiers was unsuitable for Holyoke, and now it was proven again by the stockholders of the American Writing Paper Company.⁶⁵

HOLYOKE’S UNIONS

While capital was organizing, so too was labor. The depression had been hard on workers and many had begrudgingly accepted the wage cuts and reduced hours they had been told were necessary to keep the mills operating. When business began to recover in the late 1890s, many workers felt that it was only fair their loyalty should be rewarded and that their employers should make amends for sacrifices made by the workers. Nationally, disparities between rich and poor were striking; the top 1% of Americans had an annual income larger than the combined total of the bottom half of the country. The *Hartford Courant* argued that “There are too many millionaires and too many paupers.”⁶⁶ In Holyoke, this divide was striking. Consolidations and trusts had also helped to foster the belief that capital was aligned against labor and that workers needed to protect themselves against their bosses. Stories of “certain irregularities” and cooked books at some of the city’s mills further supported workers’ convictions that Holyoke capitalists had grown unacceptably greedy.⁶⁷ Nonetheless, the Paper City proved hard to organize.

⁶³ Green, pp. 138, 193.

⁶⁴ Hickey, p. 8.

⁶⁵ Green, pp. 138, 193.

⁶⁶ Quoted in Murolo and Chitty, p. 111.

⁶⁷ *New York Times*, November 17, 1903.

The first permanent union in Holyoke had been established by bricklayers in 1880, but it died quickly and no attempts were made at forming another union in the city for several more years. The Knights of Labor (KOL) organized Local Assembly 2322, in late 1882, but it had only fourteen members at its inception. Although its membership rose slightly, it never went much above forty. Other KOL assemblies were organized in the city, representing everyone from unskilled laborers and artisan blacksmiths to policemen; but locals never had more than a few dozen members each, and they operated largely as secret societies. Local assemblies announced their meetings with “cabalistic figures” written in chalk on mill walls and in alleyways. In addition to their small numbers, KOL assemblies divided along ethnic lines. Local 2322 was “overwhelmingly Irish in membership,” and another assembly was known as the “German Knights of Labor.” Recognizing their weakness in numbers, the Holyoke Knights focused their efforts on specific small goals, such as instituting weekly pay in the mills instead of the monthly pay that was in practice at the time.⁶⁸ Even this seemingly innocuous proposal was viewed with apprehension by many, including the *Transcript*, which reasoned: “With a certain class of employees, weekly pay means a chance to get drunk once a week instead of once a month.”⁶⁹ Nevertheless, the Holyoke Knights, working with other labor groups across the state, were successful in getting a law passed mandating weekly payments. Holyoke labor celebrated this victory, declaring it a “result of the agitation of organized labor, coupled with the growing sentiment among the masses of people that it would be both beneficial and just.” It was one of the few concrete victories the Knights enjoyed.⁷⁰

Soon after, workers at the Skinner silk mill went on strike when management had refused to arbitrate their grievances. The *New York Times* reported that the Holyoke Knights called a boycott and requested help from the Central Labor Union of New York, which in turn endorsed the boycott and began “pushing it hard.” The Knights then attempted to create “a general boycott.”⁷¹ A crushing defeat came after a strike of several months, and Skinner employees returned to the mill on the company’s terms. Whatever clout the Knights had earned previously quickly eroded. Local assemblies disappeared just as quickly as they had appeared, and

⁶⁸ Pedulla, pp. 148-150.

⁶⁹ *Transcript*, May 21, 1881.

⁷⁰ Myfanwy Morgan and Hilda H. Golden, “Immigrant Families in an Industrial City: A Study of Households in Holyoke,” *Journal of Family History*, Vol. 4 (Spring), pp. 59-68, 59.

⁷¹ *New York Times*, April 24, 1886.

the boycott vanished with them. The longest lasting assembly, Local 2322, dissolved just six years after its founding.⁷²

The lack of permanent unions in Holyoke did not mean that workers were necessarily at the mercy of management. Particularly in the textile mills, where the French-Canadians dominated, close-knit kin networks assisted newly arrived French-Canadian immigrants in securing jobs in the textile mills and in finding accommodations in the tenements. In the mills, these same kinship networks protected workers from any mistreatment and “generally eased one through the day.”⁷³ But ethnic support groups proved unable to improve bread-and-butter issues such as wages, and they were rare in the city’s other mills, particularly in the paper industry. In 1884, however, an association of paper makers was founded called Eagle Lodge, which emerged from older workers’ fears of being replaced by younger, unskilled workers as manufacturing processes became increasingly mechanized and streamlined.⁷⁴ Eagle Lodge agitated for shorter hours for the skilled beater engineers and machine tenders who regularly worked twelve hours a day, six days a week, though it would be several more years before working hours were reduced.⁷⁵ At the turn of the century, Eagle Lodge membership remained small. In 1900, it became Local 1 of the United Brotherhood of Papermakers of America union, but still represented only a small fraction of the workforce. The union’s quarterly report noted that after one member had been “expelled” and another member was “suspended,” the local was left with just twenty-nine dues-paying members in Holyoke and had just \$400 in its treasury.⁷⁶ Despite less-than-inspiring resources J. J. O’Connor, secretary-treasurer of the international, proudly recalled of the lodge’s early days:

Acting largely in the City of Holyoke, we were with that limited membership able to strike the first blow for shorter hours in the paper and pulp industry. And at that time I will say that in the City of Holyoke there were 27 paper mills and three pulp mills and every one of them were forced through that

⁷² Pedulla, pp. 148-150; Morgan and Golden, p. 59. For more on Holyoke union history see numerous articles published in this journal, including L. Mara Dodge, “Anna Sullivan, 1903-1983: The Formative Years of a Textile Union Organizer (Holyoke, MA),” *Historical Journal of Massachusetts*, Vol. 36 (2008), pp. 184-225.

⁷³ Czitrom, p. 11.

⁷⁴ DiCarlo, pp. 214, 215.

⁷⁵ Czitrom, p. 8.

⁷⁶ United Brotherhood of Papermakers of America, Quarterly report: March 31, 1900. Located in Collection #6046, Box 295 at the Keel Center (Cornell University).

small organization to acknowledge the justice of our cause, the justice of our request, and we struck off the disagreeable Sunday night work for all paper and pulp mills in the City of Holyoke.⁷⁷

Because Holyoke's labor movement was small, most early activities of the city's unions revolved around education and politics. The local labor movement was able to elect a representative to a seat in the Massachusetts House of Representatives. The city's labor movement also continued to agitate for more worker-friendly legislation, to which manufacturers responded as they did elsewhere.

We are firmly of the conviction that the supremacy of the State as a manufacturing community is already jeopardized; that well-intended, but ill-advised so-called "labor reform" agitation has already touched the danger line, and that a renewal of confidence which will secure adequate investments in new enterprises can only be reached by the most conservative statesmanship.⁷⁸

To that, the labor movement argued that "these conditions are brought about, not because we have invited them, but because of the organization of capital."⁷⁹

Despite great efforts on the part of trade unionists, Holyoke remained largely unorganized in 1900. Holyoke's labor movement was handicapped by three main factors. First, mill-sponsored paternalism had worked well to build employee loyalty to the mills, primarily through sports. In addition to mill baseball teams, Holyoke's industrialists created other athletic clubs to solidify comradery, cohesion, and bonds with their employers. The Farr Alpaca Company was particularly good at embracing paternalism and turning competition into an asset for the firm. While the company gained loyalty from its workers through profit-sharing plans, annual bonuses, and a worker welfare fund, the company also did more than any other Holyoke mill to encourage the growth of competitive sports. When state laws limited the number of hours youths could work, the Farr mill built a basketball gym to keep its young workers from going to the saloons, loitering, or

⁷⁷ Address Delivered by Secretary-Treasurer J. J. O'Connor of the Paper-Maker's Union, Located in Collection #6046, Box 295 at the Keel Center (Cornell University).

⁷⁸ Green, p. 205.

⁷⁹ From speech by J. J. O'Connor.

joining street gangs. Under the watchful eye of Joseph Metcalf, head of the Farr concern, the mill's 4,000 workers also formed the Farr Alpaca Company Athletic Association (FALCO). The association was funded and encouraged by the company, but it remained a worker-run organization. The company also donated athletic fields and a gymnasium to FALCO.⁸⁰

Second, craft exclusiveness made collaboration between the skilled and unskilled workers very difficult. Skilled workers guarded their crafts well, and the clannishness of workers in certain trades meant that joining in common cause with unskilled workers was nearly unthinkable. In the paper industry, machine tenders were considered "the aristocrats of labor," and did not mingle with the Paper City serfs. A pamphlet of the National Loom-Fixers Association warned not to "explain to a weaver or anyone who is not a member of the union the reason why you did so and so to a loom to make it run." The pamphlet also suggested holding "a good distance socially from unskilled workers."⁸¹

Finally, ethnic conflict among Holyoke's people made workplace solidarity among them quite rare. At times "workers exhibited a greater readiness to attack each other than to confront the bosses."⁸² In the early twentieth century, neighborhood clannishness and ethnic rivalry only intensified. William McFadden was brought to Holyoke by his Canadian parents when he was an infant. Later president of Eagle Lodge, McFadden recalled:

I was brought up on the toughest street in the city; it was just like the Bowery in New York. Union Street. They called it Canada Hill in those days. All French people there. It was awful rough. The Irishmen couldn't come down below High Street. If the Frenchmen go up the hill there'd be a fight. I was half and half, so I was getting along good. But it was a very tough neighborhood.⁸³

A "dead line" existed between the Irish and French-Canadians of the city, and crossing that line still meant "a scrap in about four seconds."⁸⁴

⁸⁰ DiCarlo, p. 267.

⁸¹ Hartford, p. 43.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁸³ Czitrom, p. 12.

⁸⁴ Allyn, "Sketch of Holyoke."

Getting workers to cross the “dead line” and find common cause with their fellow workers proved to be an epic struggle in itself.⁸⁵

As Underwood noted previously, whereas the Irish took jobs away from the Yankees, the Irish in turn “yielded to the French Canadians, Germans, Scotch, and English and these groups were by the turn of the century making room for Polish workers.”⁸⁶ At the cusp of the twentieth century, Holyoke saw the coming of “new” immigrant groups, and the city’s ethnic makeup became more eclectic. Italians, Russians, Poles, and other southern and eastern Europeans were coming to Holyoke, as part of a global search for employment. These new immigrants were comprised mostly of single laboring men, unlike the Irish and French-Canadians who migrated to Holyoke as families. Newer immigrants, with the exception of the Poles, were even more transient than their predecessors and rarely arrived in Holyoke with the intention of staying for long.⁸⁷

For new immigrants “late arrival made it necessary for them to take the most menial jobs . . . Polish women replaced the French, who had replaced the Irish, in the mill rag-picking rooms.” Each successive wave of immigration strained existing inter-ethnic relations and created new threats and challenges. As one Irish-Holyoker put it in regards to the city’s new Italian and Polish immigrants: “They’re after our jobs, and they’ll work cheaper than us [sic].”⁸⁸ Unscrupulous mill foremen and labor contractors took advantage of these tensions to play one immigrant group off another and stoke rivalries. In one incident, a local contractor hired a group of French-Canadians to replace thirty Irish laborers on strike for a pay increase. When the French-Canadians showed up to begin work, the Irish pelted them with rocks and bricks. Similarly, when Irish laborers constructing a new canal in the city went on strike demanding \$1.75 for a nine-hour day, they were all fired and replaced by French-Canadians. Enraged, the Irish marched to the canal and shouted “Get the Canucks Out!” Soon after, French-Canadian laborers earning \$1.75 on a different construction project were replaced by Italians willing to work for \$.40 a day less.⁸⁹ Consequently “heated exchanges” and “clashes at work between

⁸⁵ Michael Jacobson-Hardy and Robert E. Weir, “Faces, Machines, and Voices: The Fading Landscape of Papermaking in Holyoke, Massachusetts,” *Massachusetts Review*, Fall 1992 Vol. 33 (3), pp. 361-385.

⁸⁶ Underwood, p. 207.

⁸⁷ Steve Dunwell, *The Run of the Mill: A Pictorial Narrative of the Expansion, Dominion, Decline and Enduring Impact of the New England Textile Industry* (Boston: David R. Godine, 1978), p. 116.

⁸⁸ *Union-News*, June 15, 1995.

⁸⁹ DiCarlo, pp. 227, 228.

ethnic groups” were frightfully common. As Hartford has aptly noted, “The road to class cohesion was not paved with the stones and brickbats of intra-class ethnic violence.”⁹⁰

LABOR CONFRONTS THE TRUST

Despite great obstacles, workers did occasionally form unions. Holyoke’s labor movement, still small, fractured, and preoccupied with distancing itself from the Socialist Labor Party, found itself confronted by the rapid consolidation of capital and power. J. J. O’Connor, recognizing the danger these powerful trusts posed to labor, remarked that “owing to various combinations which have been brought together by capital, the workers, today more than ever before, need to be solidly organized and united with one another in such solidification that each and every one of them can clasp hands with his fellow-worker and trust him and work with him as a brother.”⁹¹ As Czitrom suggests, the sudden confrontation with powerful trusts “lent a greater urgency to labor organizing” and agitation. H. L. Bliss added that the rapid consolidation of capital resulted in windfall profits for a few fortunate Holyoke capitalists who reaped rewards through the “power to plunder possessed by the trusts and combines that have waxed numerous and powerful.”⁹²

Several large strikes took place on a scale previously unheard of in Holyoke. In June of 1901, the *New York Times* reported that thousands of paper workers had gone on strike in Holyoke, led by Eagle Lodge. The only mills unaffected by the strike were the Whiting Paper Company and the Valley Paper Company, both of which had promptly agreed to the union’s demands. Workers in Holyoke’s textile mills followed the lead of the paper workers and presented their employers with similar demands. Two weeks later, the *Washington Post* reported that the American Writing Paper Company settled the strike in an outcome “favorable to [its] 3,000 employees.”⁹³ Paper workers won a 66-hour work week and a 20% pay raise.⁹⁴ The gains primarily reinstated past practices in place prior to the depression, but it was still a considerable victory for the city’s labor movement. Confidence was quickly inflated and, for a brief period, the

⁹⁰ Hartford, p. 30.

⁹¹ From speech by J. J. O’Connor.

⁹² H. L. Bliss, “Our Misleading Census Statistics,” *American Journal of Politics*, October 1984, Vol. 5 (4), pp. 417-429, 426.

⁹³ *Washington Post*, June 16, 1901.

⁹⁴ Czitrom, p. 9.

city's labor movement was quite vibrant. That Labor Day, some 25,000 people turned out in Holyoke to watch 6,000 workers parade through its streets.⁹⁵ Women also remained active in the city's labor movement. Servant girls working in the homes of Holyoke's elites established a union of their own and pushed for higher wages and shorter hours. The union only survived for a year before dissolving when homeowner-employers refused to recognize the organization, but it was nonetheless a considerable achievement given the circumstances.⁹⁶

In 1903, the *New York Times* reported that another large strike had begun in Holyoke, led by the Pulp and Sulfito Workers Union and Eagle Lodge. Union membership had grown very rapidly in Holyoke and rose to nearly 8,000, spread over 45 unions by the time the strike began, and this gave the city's fragile labor organization the appearance of formidable strength. The strike began with a walkout of a few hundred women from the rag rooms of the paper mills, led by a rag sorter at the Albion paper mill, Nellie Boland, who "wrapped her working apron around her head" and led her fellow female workers out. The strike spread quickly, as the *Union News* reported, "Within hours, most female workers in the city were on strike, shutting down nearly all the mills, and the city ground to a halt."⁹⁷ The action was in response to a pay raise given to the male employees, but denied to their female counterparts. Women demanded a wage increase and a closed shop.

After the strike had been underway for nearly a month, the *New York Times* reported that Miss Nellie Boland, leader of the strike and apparently the person who had organized the Pulp and Sulfito Workers Union, requested that Helen Gould, daughter of billionaire capitalist Henry J. Gould, serve as mediator in the dispute. Boland reasoned that "if the paper mills refuse to accept a person so fair-minded as Miss Gould, it will prove that they do not intend to treat us fairly." She went on to say that "We working girls have the utmost confidence in [Miss Gould], and feel that she will act as arbitrator when she sees how much she can do by settling this strike."⁹⁸ The mediation (if it occurred at all) did not work, and the strike continued another month before the *New York Times* reported, "A dispatch from Holyoke says: 'the strike of Holyoke paper makers will be declared off this week. What was generally believed to be the beginning of the end developed today.'" When workers returned to work, Boland and

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 9, 10.

⁹⁶ *The Independent*, February 18, 1904.

⁹⁷ *Union-News*, June 15, 1995.

⁹⁸ *New York Times*, August 4, 1903.

other union leaders were blacklisted, the upstart union was financially ruined, and both Eagle Lodge and the city's Central Labor Union suffered a significant blow. As Czitrom notes, "By 1905 Holyoke's labor movement was in retreat," and the "standoff showed that strike funds and workers savings were no match for the vast resources of the paper trust."⁹⁹

CONCLUSION

For some, the difficulty of improving conditions was greater than the likely rewards, and many people left Holyoke. After the city's cotton mills cut thousands of worker's wages by 10% in 1908, a "wholesale exodus of Polanders to Europe" began.¹⁰⁰ Even more ominously, Holyoke's cotton mills began to struggle. As was true across New England by 1910, cotton mills began closing. Those that remained reduced hours, cut wages, and laid off workers. In September 1910, the *New York Times* reported that "the 1,400 employees of the Lyman Cotton Mills of Holyoke will be idle, the entire plant having closed" temporarily; it was the fourth shutdown at Lyman that year.¹⁰¹ Across Massachusetts, 18,000 textile workers were idled.¹⁰² Even the hereto phenomenally successful Skinner silk mill closed for a while.¹⁰³ In many cases, idled mills never reopened. This foreshadowed the deindustrialization that would occur in the 1920s, by which time numerous New England mills were shuttered by capitalists who relocated in the non-union South. From the 1880s to the 1910s, Holyoke's fortunes waxed and waned with the wild fluctuations of the national industrial economy. The first part of the period coincided with the city's glory era, when it was still young and possibilities seemed unbounded. By 1900, however, Holyoke's future as an important industrial city was uncertain and her image as the "Queen of Industrial Cities" was quickly fading. Socialism had risen quickly and fallen even faster. The city's labor movement had experienced a timid birth and crushing defeats, and Holyoke's independent paper tradition was destroyed by a poorly run trust. In retrospect, it was a transitional period for Holyoke that portended troubles ahead. Though few realized it at the time, Holyoke's first wave of deindustrialization had begun.

HJM

⁹⁹ *New York Times*, August 18, 1903, and Czitrom, p. 10.

¹⁰⁰ *New York Times*, March 21, 1908.

¹⁰¹ *New York Times*, August 30, 1910.

¹⁰² *New York Times*, September 4, 1910.

¹⁰³ *New York Times*, July 23, 1910.