



Anna Sullivan

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ANNA B. SULLIVAN, 1903-83: THE FORMATIVE YEARS OF A TEXTILE MILL UNION ORGANIZER (Holyoke, Massachusetts)

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Abstract: *Heralded as “Labor’s First Lady in Western Massachusetts,” those who knew Anna Burns Sullivan (1903-83) used similar terms to describe her: she was a “dynamo,” “always the little spark plug in the crowd,” and “a real fighter for her people.” Although well-known throughout her lifetime as “the little fireball from Western Massachusetts,” her memory has been all but forgotten. No buildings, streets, parks, or rooms at the local community college are named after her. Perhaps more importantly, equally forgotten is the experience of an entire generation of textile mill workers who labored in obscurity from the Great Depression to the closing of the New England textile mills in the 1950s and 1960s. This article explores Sullivan’s pioneering work as a female labor union activist. The first part provides an introductory overview of her life and accomplishments. The following seven sections offer a detailed biographical sketch of Sullivan’s childhood, early experiences as a mill worker, and subsequent rise to local prominence as a union organizer during the national textile strike of 1934.¹*

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¹ Anna Sullivan’s life story has been pieced together from the following sources: newspaper articles; interviews with family members and colleagues; two lengthy, oral interviews she gave in the 1970s; and extensive records of her union work found in the vast files of the *Textile Workers Union of America* located at the Wisconsin State Historical Society (hereafter referred to as “TWUA Collection”). Unfortunately, none of Sullivan’s letters or personal writings have been preserved; neither were the records of her union, Local 113 (William Skinner & Sons Co.).

Overview of Sullivan's Life and Accomplishments

Anna Frances Burns, the third of seven children, was born on Oct. 18, 1903 to an Irish Catholic family in the bustling textile and paper mill city of Holyoke, located on the Connecticut River in Western Massachusetts. After her father's death in 1918, fourteen-year old Sullivan left school and went into the mills to help support her mother and younger siblings. In 1934 she and thousands of other Holyoke workers walked out in the Great Textile Strike. The largest strike in U.S. history, it ended in a bitter failure she would remember for the rest of her life. Despite this defeat, she emerged as a tireless, intensely dedicated, and fearless union advocate, organizing fellow workers at the Skinner Silk Mill, the first mill in Western Massachusetts to sign a contract with the fledgling Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), the militant industrial union that led the massive organizing drives of the 1930s. In 1938, after twenty years of mill work, she was hired as a full-time CIO union organizer, traveling throughout New England to organize textile workers.

Never one to back down from a fight, in 1940 Sullivan earned the wrath of the local Catholic hierarchy for allowing the "infamous" birth control crusader Margaret Sanger to speak at her union hall after Sanger had been denied venues elsewhere in the city. As Sullivan explained, "I was burned up that in a town of this sort where I thought we had progressed to the point where freedom of speech was accepted, a group had to fight for a place to meet." In Sullivan's view, "Our union had an important stake in the free speech issue."² In many local communities, union supporters had difficulty finding places to meet and were frequently arrested simply for handing out leaflets or exercising their rights to free speech and assembly. In 1965 Catholic Massachusetts became one of the last states to legalize birth control, although only for married women.³

In 1941, the newly-founded Textile Workers Union of America (TWUA) hired Sullivan as one of their full time organizers. Throughout the 1940s she was regularly lauded in the pages of *Textile Labor* for her organizing successes and given credit for the remarkably innovative social programs

² Sullivan, quoted in Kenneth Underwood, *Protestant and Catholic: Religious and Social Interaction in an Industrial Community* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), p. 19. Underwood's in-depth study of religion in Holyoke was sparked by the "Sanger incident."

³ For Sullivan's account of the 1940 "Sanger incident" and the long-term repercussions she suffered, see Brigid O'Farrell, "Oral History Interview with Anna Sullivan," c. 1976, pp. 44-46. The sixty-page transcript is located in the "Anna Sullivan" folder, Holyoke History Room, Holyoke Community College. Sullivan later supported abortion, arguing that a woman should "have a right to say what she should do with her own body." (O'Farrell, 46.)

implemented by her union local. In 1946 fellow workers elected her Joint Board District Manager, despite the vehement opposition of the national TWUA leadership, who consistently failed to support women in high-level staff positions (even though they were two-thirds of the nation's mill workers). In 1950 Sullivan ran for Congress as a labor candidate. Although waging an extremely aggressive campaign, she lost in a landslide defeat.

As TWUA Joint Board District Manager (1946-66), Sullivan was responsible for serving five thousand members in twelve union locals covering two hundred square mills, which expanded to 360 square miles in 1958.⁴ Her schedule was grueling: seven days a week she was on the road, often from early morning until late at night. Daily she met with workers at their mills and held conferences with management. She attended almost every meeting of every union local in her district, negotiated all union contracts, and served on a myriad governmental commissions, boards of community and social service agencies, Democratic Party campaign committees, and state and local labor coalitions, including vice president of the Massachusetts State C.I.O. (1943-1976). When mill closings accelerated in the 1950s and 1960s, the plight of older, unemployed workers, primarily women, broke her heart. In 1966 the closing of the region's last textile mills forced the elimination of her position and the eventual demise of the TWUA. Aged sixty-three, she took a job as a field representative for the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination until her retirement in 1972.

In 1975, at a testimonial dinner attended by 250, keynote speaker Senator Ted Kennedy proclaimed that "the strength of this country was built on the strength of people like Mrs. Anna B. Sullivan." Referring to her as "labor's first lady," he praised her forty years of work in the labor movement and noted that when his brother, Senator John F. Kennedy, traveled to Western Massachusetts, "Anna was the one who took him through factories and plants." A major Democratic Party activist, she played an important role in the future president's first Congressional victories in Western Massachusetts.⁵

Sullivan remained a tireless labor activist until her death in 1983. At the age of seventy-seven, she could still be found passing out leaflets on a

⁴ The TWUA's Western Massachusetts "Joint Board" office served Holyoke and the Greater Springfield area. At its height in 1945 it had 5,000 members. In 1958 it merged with the Berkshire office in Pittsfield, which once boasted 8,500 members. When the office closed in late 1966, it represented only 225 workers.

⁵ Senator Kennedy, quoted in *Holyoke Transcript-Telegraph* (hereafter abbreviated as *HTT*), Jan. 8, 1973, p. 16.

strike picket line in front of a local grocery store, ever defiant. “The cops kept saying that they were going to take me down to jail. I told them to go right ahead because I knew they’d just have to let me go. I knew we had the right [to leaflet].” For forty years she had fought for the right to organize, to leaflet, to picket, and for free speech. Every weekday she spent a few hours volunteering at the offices of Springfield’s Central Labor Council. She remained deeply connected to the grassroots. Her best friends at the end of her life, the women she called to chat with weekly or meet for lunch, were the mill workers she had labored alongside of for twenty years.⁶

In Holyoke, Sullivan’s home town, most of the enormous brick mill complexes and the company-built tenement housing remain standing in the city’s canal district, yet no public testaments exist to the workers themselves. Other historic mill centers, such as Lowell (MA), Lawrence (MA), and Woonsocket (RI), have commemorated and preserved their histories through notable national parks and museums created in the 1980s and 1990s, some of the few national historic sites dedicated to the experiences of working people. In contrast, the experiences of textile mill workers in Western Massachusetts remain largely uncommemorated.⁷ In Holyoke, most popular histories (from local newspaper columns to the city’s website) celebrate the alleged benevolence and paternalism of the mill owners, championing Holyoke as a city where class conflict did not exist after 1900. The fact that 5,000 Holyoke workers participated in the 1934 national textile strike is rarely mentioned. The city’s main museum, Wistariahurst, is the former home of a mill owner. For fifty years, this museum has focused on preserving and telling the “Skinner family story.” By coincidence, it was the William Skinner and Sons silk mill where Sullivan labored for fifteen years (1923-1938) and where her youngest sister worked until its closing in 1963. Sullivan’s words and experiences, explored in the course of this article, offer a very different perspective on working conditions and mill life than those of the Skinner family descendents.⁸

⁶ Ross Connelly, “Labor for labor is a labor of love for former textile worker,” *HTT*, Jan. 8, 1983, 13-14.

⁷ A small but informative “Holyoke Heritage State Park” does exist. However, it focuses on the city’s paper manufacturing and industrial/ technological history, not the lives of workers.

⁸ For more on the Skinner family see the Kate Navarra Thibodeau’s lavishly-illustrated *Holyoke: The Skinner Family and Wistariahurst* (MA: Arcadia Publishing; 2006). However, these mill photos were, most likely, staged. Sullivan’s son commented that the women workers in the photos “looked like they were dressed for a tea party” rather than a typical work day (author’s interview with William Sullivan, April 17, 2007). For a more nuanced perspective, see Emelie M. Plourde, “From Paternal-

Family and Formative Years: Holyoke, 1903-1918

On both sides of her family tree Sullivan descended from exceptionally committed labor rights activists. Like Sullivan, all of her siblings would grow up to be lifelong union supporters. Her younger brother, Thomas F. Burns, became vice-president of the United Rubber Workers Union and served on the national executive board of the CIO in the 1930s and 1940s. When asked years later what had influenced her the most in life, whether there was any particular person, book, or, event, she replied, "I think just my father and mother more than anything... They always talked about elections... [The children were] always hearing it, there were always discussions we had, both my mother and father. Our dinner table was always a political rally."⁹

Anna's father, Thomas F. Burns (1868-1918), was the youngest of fourteen children. Although born in Ireland, his family emigrated to Philadelphia when he was only one year old. Thomas eventually became a loom-fixer, working in Philadelphia's textile mills until 1890, when, according to family lore, he was forced to leave town due to his union organizing. Thomas moved to Chicopee, a textile town directly across the Connecticut River from Holyoke, where he met Anna's mother, Elizabeth Jane Bleasius (1872-1934). Elizabeth was the daughter of a second-generation Irish mother and a German immigrant father, a weaver in the textile mills who eventually prospered enough to buy a plot of land which he farmed and upon which he built a tiny house. Like many of her generation, Elizabeth quit school at the age of nine to work in a textile mill and continued working until her marriage to Thomas Burns in 1895.

The couple's marriage started off prosperously. Thomas had left his trade as a loom fixer and was working as an insurance salesman. He built a small house but soon lost his job due to illness. Upon his recovery he was forced to return to the mills and quickly resumed his union organizing, which had negative repercussions in terms of the family's livelihood. Sullivan recalled that her father "was always coming home with his tools,

ism to Professional Management: The Skinner Silk Mills, 1880-1938," (Vols. I and II), Smith College Honors Thesis, 1989. Vol. II includes transcripts of interviews with Skinner mill workers.

⁹ O'Farrell, 4. A shorter, edited version of this interview was published as "Excerpts from Oral History Interview: Anna Sullivan," in *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, Vol. II (2), Summer 1977, 29-36 and reprinted in *Working Women Roots: An Oral History Primer*, edited by Joyce L. Kornbluh and Brady Mikusko, published by the University of Michigan-Wayne State University, Program on Women and Work, Institute of Labor and Industrial Relations (Second Edition, 1980), 23-28 (Note: Sullivan is listed as "author.").

[fired] you know. Those were the days when you talked union, you only had to talk it and you were let out. There was no protection.”¹⁰ Shortly after her birth, the family moved from Chicopee to Holyoke’s teeming “Flats,” a crowded district of company-owned tenements and mills built along a canal system in the industrial heart of the city. Thomas finally found steady employment as a loom fixer at Farr Alpaca, which employed 3,000 and was one of the largest woolen mills in the country. In any mill, loom fixers, machinists, and “mule spinners” were the highest paid and most skilled positions, filled entirely by male workers who formed their own, highly exclusive craft unions. Yet like all mill workers, her father worked a twelve hour day, from six in the morning to six at night, six days a week, with a twenty-five minute walk to and from work.¹¹

Holyoke, founded in 1847, was a planned industrial city modeled after Lowell, Massachusetts. With a population of 58,000 in 1910, it was the sixteenth largest city in Massachusetts and the state’s fifth largest textile producer.¹² From the 1880s through the 1930s Holyoke’s tenement districts were particularly notorious for their overcrowding and unsanitary character. Infant mortality and infectious disease rates remained appallingly high. Although nicknamed the “Paper City,” Holyoke’s textile plants (silk, cotton, wool, and worsted) employed far more workers than did the less labor-intensive paper mills. The textile industry also employed more women (50-60% of workers) at far lower wages than the higher paid, more unionized, and predominantly male workforce employed by the city’s paper mills.¹³

¹⁰ Sullivan, quoted in O’Farrell, 3. Sullivan’s family history was pieced together from interviews she gave in the 1970s. However, her recollections may not be completely accurate. For example, census records reveal that her father was born in Ireland, a fact that she appears not to have known. She was always referred to by friends and family as “Anne.” In this paper I refer to her as “Anna” when discussing her childhood and “Sullivan” after her 1926 marriage.

¹¹ Thomas Burns was fortunate to work at Farr Alpaca. From 1903-23 the company enjoyed unparalleled prosperity. It avoided the frequent economic downturns of this period which effected cotton more than wool companies. However, in 1938 it closed, throwing three thousand out of work. See Constance McLaughlin Green, *Holyoke, Massachusetts: A Case History of the Industrial Revolution in America* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1968), reprint of 1939 original (Yale University Press), pp. 239-42 and Florence Cornell Hunter, “The Farr Alpaca Company: A Study in A Business History,” *Smith College Studies in History* 37 (1951).

¹² The fact that Holyoke was the state’s smallest and most isolated textile city was a critical factor in understanding the relative lack of textile worker militancy (compared to Lowell, Lawrence, Fall River and New Bedford). See L. Mara Dodge, “A Comparative Framework for Analyzing Textile Mill Worker Militancy and Demographics in Five New England Mill Towns, Focus on Holyoke, Mass. 1900-1940,” unpublished paper, 2008.

¹³ Similar to textiles, until 1900, 62% of the workers in Holyoke’s paper mills were women. Due to new technology their numbers declined to roughly 33% by 1915. Although they were largely an unskilled and transient workforce, women played key roles in the early paper unions. See Hartford,

Anna's family's move to the Holyoke flats represented a decline in economic status. By 1900 most Irish had left the textile mills and moved out, replaced by more recent French Canadian and Polish workers, along with smaller numbers of Germans and Italians. However, even a skilled loom fixer would have had difficulty supporting seven children on his salary. Unlike most Polish and French Canadian mill hands, who relied heavily on family labor for their survival, Irish wives, like Anna's mother, were far less likely to work outside the home than women from other ethnic groups. Thus, the family was totally dependent upon its male breadwinner for economic survival.¹⁴

Despite their poverty, Anna's family was loving, close-knit, and consumed by politics. She described both her parents as "solid Democrats" and "very active, progressive people." Her mother's brother, John P. Bleasius, was widely recognized as "one of the more prominent labor leaders in the city." President of the machinists union at Farr Alpaca, he served as secretary of Holyoke's Central Labor Union for many years.¹⁵ Another uncle worked for Al Smith in New York City, the first Irish Democrat to run (unsuccessfully) for president in 1928.¹⁶ Anna's mother was a strong supporter of women's suffrage who regularly worked the polls on election days and canvassed beforehand to turn out Democratic voters.

Anna recalled that in the 1910s the unusually liberal owner of a small printing company allowed workers to meet in his building. Various referred to as the "Dynamiters Club" and the "Holyoke Labor College," the men brought in speakers from local colleges and engaged in heated political debates. Both Anna's father and her Uncle John belonged to the group. In order to get into the meeting, they had to use a special knock and also had to "have five union labels on their clothing." One of Anna's earliest memories involved the children's job of checking that their father had the requisite five union labels on his clothing before he

pp. 31, 132-134. The role of women's participation in Holyoke's paper industry appears to have gone unrecognized. Green claims that "paper making was largely a men's job." However, her own statistics show 71% female workers in 1865 (p. 101).

¹⁴ In 1900 approximately 36% of Holyoke's textile mill workers were of Irish background in contrast to 87% of paper mill workers. See William F. Hartford, *Working People of Holyoke: Class and Ethnicity in a Massachusetts Mill Town, 1850-1960* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 38. On the "family wage ideal" of Irish male trade unionists, see Hartford, 126-132.

¹⁵ Peter Gamage, "Labor Leader Mrs. Anna Sullivan to Be Honored at Retirement Party," c. Jan. 1973. Undated article found in TWUA Collection, Micro 631, Reel 4, Frame 679 "Anna Sullivan."

¹⁶ Sullivan, quoted in O'Farrell, 11. Her uncle, John Bleasius, also began working at age nine. The mill superintendent threatened to fire Anna's grandfather if he did not permit his two young sons to work. See Green, 199.

left home for the meeting – “we had to check him all out: the shoes, hat, suit, underwear, and shirt.” In 1918, her father succeeded in organizing a loom fixers union at Farr Alpaca. Two weeks before his death in the great influenza epidemic, the loom fixers bargained their first contract.¹⁷

Anna inherited both her parents’ keen interest in politics, resilient spirits, and tough but easy-going temperaments. Although she described a childhood of little money, it was a warm and loving, rough and tumble world of three girls and four boys born between 1896 and 1914. There were always “slews of kids” to play with as “everybody had huge families.” Extremely sociable and outgoing, Anna developed lifelong friendships with her childhood companions, similar to those she would form with the mill women she worked alongside for twenty years.

Even though protected by a large and loving family, Anna grew up in a world of overcrowded tenements, unusually high death rates, painful deprivations, and periodic recessions. In 1918 infant mortality in Holyoke was shockingly high: only thirteen cities in the U.S. had higher infant death rates. Given that 86% of these deaths occurred in three of Holyoke’s seven wards, Anna would have been exposed to much maternal grief, even though her immediate family escaped its ravages. 1916 saw an epidemic of polio, or infant paralysis, sweep the city, followed by the influenza epidemic of 1917-1918 which took her father’s life. Anna reminisced, “Most everybody was losing somebody in the area we lived in. You waited in line at the church for a funeral. It was a horrible thing to go through.”¹⁸

This was the world of Anna’s youth. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s Holyoke had a death rate from tuberculosis that was 20-25% higher than that of the state as a whole, and significantly higher than the national average.¹⁹ Tuberculosis often went untreated among mill workers, who, as Sullivan later noted, could not afford a doctor’s care. In 1943 the Skinner Mill union local (which Sullivan first organized) developed an innovative campaign to screen and treat mill workers for tuberculosis.

High death rates were directly connected to the severely overcrowded living conditions and lack of affordable health care. In 1920 Holyoke continued to have some of the worst and most overcrowded tenement housing in the state, if not the nation. Overcrowding was further exacerbated by the lack of parks and playgrounds. Before 1920 these were

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 4. For more on the Dynamiters Club, see Hartford, 125-26 and Wyatt E. Harper, *The Story of Holyoke* (Holyoke, MA: Centennial Committee, 1973).

¹⁸ Green, 386. Sullivan, quoted in O’Farrell, 3.

¹⁹ Green, 385.

almost non-existent in the central city area with its estimated population of 25,000 per square mile. Even the schools lacked yards. It was not until the 1920s that a movement to create city parks succeeded.²⁰

As a child, Anna was also exposed to the suffering and deprivation generated by periodic recessions and depressions. During the Depression of 1908, thousands of Holyoke residents were thrown out of work when all the major mills – paper and textile – shut down. At age five, Anna probably was not old enough yet to fully appreciate its effects, but the years 1913-1914 witnessed another severe, nationwide recession. Workers flooded the city's relief department with requests for assistance, which was sparing at best. Hunger and malnutrition stalked the central city. Although both textile and paper production revived dramatically during WWI, the winter of 1920-1921 brought another round of widespread cutbacks in production, with most workers employed only two or three days a week throughout the year. Indeed, Anna was extremely fortunate that her father's death occurred in 1918, when war orders boosted demand for textiles and the mills were running overtime. Only during such a period could a child of fourteen, a tiny wisp of a girl barely four feet ten inches tall, easily secure a job. During recessionary times child labor declined dramatically as adults monopolized scarce employment.²¹

The only regret Sullivan ever expressed about her childhood was the fact that she went to a parochial school, "much to my sorrow." Even worse, from second to seventh grade, Sullivan had the same nun for a teacher, a terrible instructor who was poorly-educated herself. According to Sullivan, this was "one of the worst things that could have been done" to a child. Notwithstanding her parent's progressive politics, both were deeply religious Catholics who never questioned the teachings of the Church. Sullivan's one criticism of her parents was that they failed to challenge the appropriateness of her having had the same teacher for all those grades. "They never questioned; you never questioned a priest, you never questioned a nun."²²

Anna also suffered from the fact that she followed in the shadow of her older sister, Mary, who always received the highest grades on all exams and "won all the prizes and all that." Anna felt that she "had to follow in her footsteps and I never was as high." Twice she repeated bluntly, "I don't think I was good in anything." When asked at age seventy-three if there

²⁰ Ibid., 387-388.

²¹ Ibid., 279, 314. For Holyoke's overcrowded and unsanitary tenements and living conditions, see Green pages 115-121, 280-284, and 384-388.

²² Sullivan, quoted in O'Farrell, 10.

were any school subjects she had particularly liked, she responded, “No, I think we had catechism drilled into us too much to ever like anything.” Although she “loved to read anything,” especially history,” school itself offered no intellectual or emotional rewards.²³

Even though both her parents were “very anxious for us to have an education” and were “always drilling this into us,” all of Sullivan’s siblings (except Mary, the oldest) would drop out of school after eighth grade to help support the family. At the time of her father’s death in 1918, Mary (age 22) was already married while brother Robert (age 19) was fighting overseas. Thus, it fell to fourteen-year old Anna, the third oldest of the seven children, to bear the burden of supporting her mother and four younger siblings, who ranged in age from three to twelve.²⁴

Mill Work: Cotton and Silk, 1918-1934

Despite the fact that her mother was strongly opposed to mill work, “it was the only thing you could get into” in 1918. Sullivan’s first job was in the card room at American Thread. The city’s largest cotton mill, it employed over 3,000. Raw cotton, arriving at the factory in large, debris-infested bales, went through several stages of cleaning before it could be spun into yarn. In the carding room, 45 pound rolls of cotton were fed into a large carding machine, which both disentangled and cleaned the fibers so that they could be spun into yarn. Inside the machines rows of tiny saw-like teeth and wire brushes stripped the raw cotton. The final stage involved twisting the cleaned cotton fiber into a ropelike strand about the thickness of a broomstick. After several intermediary steps the cotton was wound onto a bobbin. Like many textile workers, Sullivan’s first job involved removing the large wooden bobbins spun full of yarn from the machine and replacing them with empty ones.²⁵

The card room was large, employing several hundred. At American Thread it was mostly recent Polish immigrants who worked there. Few spoke any English. Sullivan did not remember any others her own age:

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 5.

²⁵ This description of the cotton mill is drawn from Mary Blewett’s wonderful oral history collection, *The Last Generation: Work and Life in the Textile Mills of Lowell, Massachusetts, 1910-1960* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1990), 9-20. For more on American Thread, see Hartford, 194-196. In 1942 Sullivan won acclaim for her leadership of a successful organizing drive at her former mill, which closed a decade later.

I don't think many kids went for this work. You came out looking like Santa Claus. Your hair was covered with cotton, your clothes with cotton, you ate cotton. It was, you know, all cotton... They didn't have such things as vents [ventilation] in those days. Believe me, you just swallowed the cotton... It was, always was, a bad job.²⁶

It was also dangerous work for someone of her small size and stature. Sullivan continued: "The machines were huge. When your bobbins filled up, we had to doff [remove] them and put them in a truck. And the truck was as big as me." Not only were the bobbins heavy, when reaching in to place them at the bottom of an empty truck, she would practically fall into it. She worked at American Thread for only a few months before her boss decided that this was too dangerous a job for such a tiny girl.

Sullivan recalled, "One day he came by and said, 'I can't let you work on this job anymore. I'm afraid you're going to end up in the bottom of the truck.' 'Well, I said, but I *have* to work. I've *got* to have a job.'" She pleaded for her livelihood, adamant that she simply "*had* to have a job." Her determination, self-confidence, and willingness to stand up to male authority were already apparent at an early age. Eventually her boss sent her to a job in the packing room where she would not "have trucks to fall into." The packing room was quiet and clean; no cotton lint filled the air. She packed darning cotton (for darning socks), and was now able to make about \$12 week (compared to \$2.50 in her previous position). This was "fairly good pay... It was a big difference for me. And it was a big difference for my mother."²⁷

In the cotton mill, working conditions were grueling and physical hazards abounded. The air was perpetually stuffy, overheated, and full of lint that got into hair, eyelashes, and lungs. Respiratory problems were common. Piece rates wages prevailed. Most jobs required workers to be on their feet all day. Breaks were few and far between. Sullivan never forgot the unrelenting noise and heat:

The noise alone in a textile mill is tremendous. Walk through the weave room and you can't hear yourself think. The people that you worked next to were stone deaf and

²⁶ Ibid., 18. Under a 1907 state law, women and children worked fifty-four hours per week; the year after Sullivan was hired this was reduced to forty-eight.

²⁷ Ibid., 18-19 (emphasis added). Anna was fortunate. Marthy Doherty, who was equally small in build, tells the story of rupturing her appendix and almost dying from the strain of her job in the card room as a young girl. Blewett, 65.

you didn't know it 'til you met them outside because you had to either mouth talk or scream your lungs out [for them to hear].²⁸

In many mills women had little protection against sexual harassment.²⁹ The authority of the male boss was absolute. As Sullivan stated bitterly in interviews throughout her life, "Bosses were kings." Before unionization, foremen had complete power over hiring, firing, and promotions. No grievances or appeals were possible. A boss could make one's life easy or make it hell. "Before the union the boss had absolute power to lay off. If he liked the color of your hair today you were alright. If he didn't like it tomorrow, good bye."³⁰

Already in the 1920s and 30s, before unionization took root, New England textile mills were looking elsewhere for cheaper labor. In 1923 American Thread closed down its carding department and laid off workers throughout the mill. That year Sullivan went to William Skinner & Sons, one of four silk mills in Holyoke. Often referred to by the local press as the "largest silk mill in the world," the plant constituted a "veritable Skinner city-within-a-city." Since 1874 it had "sprung up and overspread several industrial blocks," employing approximately three thousand when Sullivan first began. Her two sisters, Mary and Alice, would also work at Skinners.³¹

Silk could be more difficult to work with than cotton thread. As historian Mary Blewett explains, "Silk was troublesome yarn for weavers; it was delicate, slippery, and full of static electricity. It reacted to the weather and broke easily." However, the Skinner Mill installed humidifiers in the ceiling which maintained a "beautiful humidity." Compared to working at Farr Alpaca or American Thread, the physical environment at Skinners was described as "immaculately clean" and "pleasant." Most workers

²⁸ Sullivan, quoted in Daniel Czitrom, "The Hidden Holyoke: An Historical Introduction, 1870-1940," p. 16. This is an unpublished manuscript located in the folder, "Holyoke-History, 1870-1940," at the Holyoke History Room, Holyoke Community College. For more on the terrible conditions in Holyoke's early cotton mills, see Green, 101-105.

²⁹ Blewett, 38.

³⁰ Sullivan, quoted in Dodge transcription, 8. This refers to my transcription of a college student interview conducted with Anna Sullivan, c. 1974. The original cassettes are located at the Oral History Center, American International College Library, Springfield, MA (Tape #P6).

³¹ Skinners was unusually large for a silk mill, most of which were far smaller than cotton or woolen mills. Holyoke had three other silk mills. In 1934 they employed 176 workers combined to Skinners 800: Mabson Silk (80), Jennings Silk (80), and Clinton Silk (16).

concurred that, “The silk mill by far had better working conditions [than cotton or wool mills]. It didn’t have the dust and lint in the air.”³²

The Skinner mill produced extremely high-quality, finely-woven silk, that often required 40,000 delicate warp threads per length of cloth, as opposed to 1-5,000 coarser threads in wool or in cotton. As one worker explained, “It was a pretty high class operation, Skinner silk. It was premium silk.” However, a weaver noted, “At the silk mill, it was harder because you had to concentrate. You had to look all the time; you couldn’t lift your eyes off [the loom]. Because if a thread breaks, you had trouble.”³³ In compensation, experienced silk weavers received better wages than wool or cotton weavers. Indeed, some former Skinner workers (interviewed in the 1980s) described their positions as “good jobs” and their pay as “top wages” for the time.³⁴

At William Skinner & Sons, Anna asked specifically for a weaving job, the most skilled position available to women. However, her short stature was a hindrance.

Well, of course they gave me a run-around about my height and all this stuff. I said, “Yeah, but I know weavers who use platforms [to stand on].” So the boss said he’d take me and try me out and see if I could learn to be a weaver.³⁵

Again Anna had successfully stood up to a boss. She became a silk weaver and, over the next fifteen years, mastered two other skilled positions in the weave room: “loom girl” and “drawing in” or “reed girl.”

³² Blewett, 26. Dennis Riley, quoted in Plourde, 54. Note: Plourde interviewed former Skinner mill workers. However, many of her interviewees only worked at Skinners for a few years in the early 1920s when they were young and single. All lived at home. The “top wages” some remembered would not have been enough to support a family.

³³ *Ibid.*, 54. Lucie Cordeau, quoted in Blewett, 78-79. Weaver Blanch Manuello left Skinners to work at Farr Alpaca, preferring wool to silk weaving: “Skinners was a little rough. You had to know what you were doing. You worked two sides of the satin [with] double shuttles.” Plourde, Vol. II, 126.

³⁴ See Plourde, 71-73 on better working conditions at the Skinner Mill. Sullivan acknowledged that “at one time [silk] weavers could make good money,” but only in 1923-1924. Moreover, “You had to be in with the boss to make good. Because they used to have to pay him for a warp, that would be [to receive] a good warp.” A “bad warp” resulted in many defects during weaving (Dodge transcription, 10). Sullivan offered this as another example of the rampant favoritism that took place before workers were unionized. Sullivan always believed that one of the union’s main accomplishments was to establish seniority rights and impartial procedures for dividing up the work. During her years as joint board manager, she took pride in the impartiality and fairness of her dealings with both workers and management. Foremen, managers, and workers alike characterized her as “tough but fair.”

³⁵ Sullivan, quoted in O’Farrell, 19.

The fact that Anna learned several skilled jobs is intriguing. It was rare for women to switch jobs in the mill, as they typically received no pay while they were being trained in a new skill. Anna's small build may indeed have proved a lasting disadvantage, enough to make the job of weaver too physically burdensome, despite its higher pay. Or she may simply not have liked the work. As silk weaver Narcissa Hodges explained, weaving was a difficult job that "you had to like":

When you ran a Jacquard [specialized silk loom], you really had to know it; if you didn't, the Jacquard was very, very hard. But I liked weaving...It was intriguing; you had to give it a lot of attention... [But] if you didn't like it, it was a hard job. Many people never became weavers.³⁶

Sullivan resented the fact that weavers at Skinners were paid only after they had produced a set amount of cloth, and were fined for any defects, whereas other workers received a regular weekly paycheck.³⁷ She may have also resented the constant "speed up" and "stretch out" -- which could refer to any increase in an individual's workload -- whether tending more looms, shuttles, spindles, bobbins, or dyeing vats. Although the "stretch out" impacted all workers, weavers were the most directly affected. For them it meant an ever-larger number of looms to tend. According to mill owners, more modern looms operated automatically and thereby required less supervision, a claim which workers strenuously contested. Weaver Narcissa Hodges recalled:

They were making satin, which is a very delicate product, very, very, delicate, but at the same time they speeded up the looms. The newer looms came with different speeds and new gears. Then they replaced the belts and pulleys with electric motors. Then they gave us more than six looms, right up to twenty-seven. And then they used double shuttle looms...If you had two bobbins [and two shuttles]...you could operate more looms. As the work load increased, it had to be accepted if you wanted

³⁶ Narcissa Hodges, quoted in Blewett, 83.

³⁷ Sullivan, quoted in Plourde, 102.

to work. You couldn't just say no, because if you said no, they'd just tell you to go home [i.e. fire the weaver].³⁸

New synthetic materials such as rayon, introduced in the late 1920s, caused additional problems. A Skinner mill worker explained: "And then it came to rayon. And that wasn't so hot. Oh we didn't like that. From the silk to crepe to rayon! Ugh. It was harder to work with...The material wasn't that good...But it was better than nothing you know."³⁹

At the Skinner silk mill, both working conditions and management-labor relationships deteriorated significantly by the end of the 1920s due to new technology (automated looms), new products (rayon), and a new generation of college-educated managers.⁴⁰ Although some workers spoke of enjoying aspects of their jobs, particularly the satisfaction of working with silk and creating beautiful cloth, in none of her interviews did Sullivan ever speak positively about any facet of her work experiences. Sullivan's last position in 1938, before she was hired as a full-time union organizer, was as a drawing in girl. This skilled task involved threading the warp yarn onto the loom frame before the weaving began. In Sullivan's words, the drawing-in process for silk production was "where you had to know about 40,000 ends [threads] and where each end went." She had only this to say about the experience: "I worked like heck. You couldn't lay down on that job."⁴¹

Finding little satisfaction in her work, and chafing over the many injustices she witnessed daily on the shop floor, the 1920s was, in some ways, a bleak decade for Anna, as it was for the union movement overall. Despite its romanticized image as the "Roaring '20s" and the "Jazz Age," most Americans continued to struggle at the level of basic survival. While some workers benefited from the surge in productivity and plethora of new consumer products – radios, irons, washing machines, refrigerators, the relatively inexpensive Ford Model T automobile – the typical working class family still struggled to make ends meet.⁴²

In Massachusetts, the 1920s were particularly lean years. Between 1920 and 1941 the state lost 45% of its textile production jobs. In Western Massachusetts, 25 mills closed between 1908 and 1933. In Holyoke the first major concern to close was the famed Lyman Mills, which threw

³⁸ Narcissa Hodges, weaver, quoted in Blewett, 84.

³⁹ Lilian Gable, quoted in Plourde, 77.

⁴⁰ Plourde, 75-97, 110-111, and 125-127.

⁴¹ Sullivan, quoted in Dodge transcription, 8 and O'Farrell, 36.

⁴² See Irving Bernstein, *The Lean Years: A History of the American Worker, 1920-1933* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972).

nearly three thousand out of work in 1927. In his pioneering study, *Working People of Holyoke: Class and Ethnicity in a Massachusetts Mill Town, 1850-1960*, William F. Hartford reports that “Holyoke workers suffered major pay slashes in 1921 and 1925, while statewide, cotton-mill wages fell 26 percent between 1920 and 1928.” As in other textile cities, in Holyoke “many firms never fully recovered from the 1921 recession.” In 1928 local industries employed 18% fewer workers than in 1920 and were paying them less. Overall wage disbursements had declined 27%.⁴³

Sullivan repeatedly characterized the 1920s as “bad times” economically: “The twenties were bad. Jobs were hard to get. And you hung on and hung on.” She must have also felt extremely vulnerable as she watched the Skinner workforce cut from three thousand to one thousand (eventually falling to five hundred during the depression). In such a situation Sullivan would have felt enormous pressure to “keep her mouth shut.” Speaking out against workplace injustices, being perceived as an outspoken or uncooperative worker, threatened not only her own livelihood, but that of her family.⁴⁴

Turning twenty in October of 1923, Anna had little time to enjoy her youth. She worked a forty-eight hour work week, when there was work. Yet by nature Anna was outgoing, fun-loving, and high-spirited: never prone to self-pity, moodiness or depression. If life was tough, it was equally difficult for most of those she knew. A colleague who worked next to her in the weave room characterized her as, “Very, very cheerful. Full of laughs. Overall a great person.”⁴⁵ Moreover, Anna could still dream of escaping mill work through marriage and motherhood: few third-generation Irish women worked in the mills after marriage.

After eight years of work, Anna married in October, 1926 at the age of twenty-three. She quit the mill, but was soon forced to return after discovering that her husband, William Sullivan, suffered “shell shock” (post traumatic stress syndrome) as a result of his service in WWI. Within a year of their marriage he had a breakdown and was sent to a state mental hospital and then permanently committed to the Veteran’s Hospital. He had “completely lost his mind” and “never knew nobody” after that. In January 1928, Sullivan went back to Skinners, working until she was eight months pregnant. She gave birth in October to her only child, William, and then

⁴³ Hartford, 190 and 157-158. See also Alice Galenson, *The Migration of the Cotton Textile Industry from New England to the South, 1880-1930* (NY: Garland Press, 1985).

⁴⁴ Sullivan, quoted in O’Farrell, 16. Also see Plourde, 60 for the lack of work in the 1920s.

⁴⁵ Author’s interview with Henry F. Albonesi, Aug. 2, 2006. Weave room worker (1935-1941) and foreman (1945-early 1950s) at the Skinner Silk Mill.

returned to work a few months later. She also returned to live with her mother and two youngest siblings in a small apartment. She was twenty-five, a single mother with an infant son to support, and few job prospects: “By this time 1928, we were on very short time. We worked one week and then you were one week out [laid off]... We got lots of vacations but no pay. In ’29 and ’30, we often worked just ten days a month.” In the fall of 1930 William Skinner and Sons shut down for three full months due to a lack of orders. Fortunately, by 1930 three of her younger brothers were working full-time and could help out financially. Bill, Thomas, and Charles would be her “mainstays” over the next decades, while her mother and youngest sister Alice took care of her son while she worked. Her husband, William, remained institutionalized until his death in 1973. Sullivan never remarried. Her *de facto* status as a “single” woman with only one child gave her far greater independence to pursue a career as a labor organizer. At the same time, her siblings provided significant financial, emotional, and political support.⁴⁶

The Great Upsurge: Textile Union Organizing in the 1930s

Historically, textiles was a notoriously difficult sector to unionize. A highly competitive, volatile, and unstable industry, its workforce was typically drawn from the most easily exploited: women and children; the least skilled; the most recent of immigrant groups. In many areas workers were dependent on the mill owner for housing; the South’s “company towns” were particularly infamous. The workforce was also extremely diverse and divided by competing interests: dye shop workers, mechanics, loom fixers, weavers, bobbin tenders, carders, combers, quillers, slashers, spinners, twistors, warpers, drawing-in girls, and a dozen other classifications (primarily filled by women and children), all of which were further divided by different types of production: cotton, silk, wool, worsted, rayon, hosiery, and carpets along with the more specialized thread, twine, and elastic.⁴⁷

Founded in 1901, the United Textile Workers (UTW) was organized along traditional craft lines: only the most skilled (and overwhelmingly male) workers were eligible for membership. Adding to the confusion,

⁴⁶ Sullivan, quoted in O’Farrell, pp. 16 & 19. Sullivan’s siblings were: Mary E. (1896-1972; married name Leary), Robert S. (1899-1971), Thomas F. (1907-1965), Charles N. (1909-1986), William M. (1905-1989), and Alice B. (1914-1976; married name Beaulieu).

⁴⁷ Clete Daniel, *Culture of Misfortune: An Interpretive History of Textile Unionism in the United States* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press), 2001.

separate branches existed for hosiery, cotton, silk and rayon, and thread workers. This “craft model” of organization, embraced by the American Federation of Labor (AFL) divided workers in the same factory into dozens of different, often competing, unions. Even though her father’s loom fixer’s union had succeeded in organizing and winning a contract at Farr Alpaca, Holyoke’s largest woolen mill in 1918, according to Sullivan no union had ever existed at the Skinner Silk Mill. Sullivan explained that it was a “closely-knit family affair. Once they heard any talking, I mean it would be, that was the end of that worker, you know.” Later she added, “If you talked [union], you were on the list with your head chopped off.”⁴⁸

Despite this atmosphere, Sullivan played a central role in organizing a Weaver’s Union at Skinners in 1932. When asked why employed workers risked their livelihoods to form unions in the midst of a depression, when they could so easily be fired and replaced, she replied simply, “It couldn’t have gotten any worse for us. We were already at rock bottom.”⁴⁹ Moreover, weavers, as skilled workers, were in a particularly favored and strategic position. Unlike the handful of loom fixers and mechanics, each mill had hundreds of weavers. At Skinners in the mid-1930s there were 250 weavers out of a workforce of 500. Nor could they be easily replaced: weaving, particularly in silk, required months of training and a special disposition that only some mastered.

Around the time she was organizing the Weavers Union, Sullivan had her first major confrontation with mill superintendent William Hubbard, who was William Skinner’s nephew. She was incensed by the fact that the mill closed for ten days every Christmas. Even more galling, Hubbard genuinely thought he was bearing good news the day he came to make the announcement – blithely assuming that the workers would be delighted to hear of the impending holiday shutdown. Sullivan, knowing full-well that most workers were unable to buy even the smallest of gifts for their children and could afford only hamburger for their Christmas dinner (if they could afford meat at all), reacted viscerally. Despite having experienced “years of barely suppressed outrage over the injustices inflicted on workers,” she had remained silent until this point.⁵⁰ She told the following story in

⁴⁸ Sullivan, quoted in Dodge transcription, 4, 6. In 1886 weavers at the Skinner mill first attempted to organize and went on strike (see Green, 205). For Joseph Skinner’s anti-union stance in 1903, see Hartford, 110-111. According to Hartford, in Holyoke the 1885-1905 period of worker militancy and insurgency ended in “crushing defeat” (156).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁵⁰ Blewett, 115. This is an apt description of another textile worker who became a shop steward and, like Sullivan, a fierce union loyalist.

all her interviews; a defining moment in her transition into an outspoken activist. Each time her anger was palpable:

Christmas, ten days off, no pay, you always felt so bad. Men with families and women like me got hit. Imagine trying to plan for two weeks out...your rent and your food, when you don't have enough money for one week, you never get back on your feet, always in debt, always behind.

The superintendent came up to me and said, "Well, we're all set. We're shutting down for ten days." And I said, "This place? This is the worst thing in the winter time you can do to the people...In the summer time, we manage. In winter they can't manage. They'll never get [back] on their feet...You know I don't think any one of them could buy a ten cent toy for their kids at Christmas. You talk about Christmas," I said. "There's no charity in you people. All you think of..." and, you know, all of a sudden I said an awful lot of things I maybe shouldn't have said, but I did say...I got it off my chest that day in no uncertain terms.⁵¹

Hubbard left abruptly, but returned that afternoon, admitting, "I never realized this. I never realized what was happening." That day he canceled the plant closing. Sullivan took great pride in the fact that "we never had ten days shut down again." When questioned about the reason for his obliviousness to the impact of a Christmas shutdown on workers, she replied:

I don't know really what it was...foremen [and managers] were on salary...I don't suppose he ever did consider it, maybe never had to, you know. He didn't

⁵¹ Sullivan, quoted in O'Farrell, 26. Mill worker Frank Folta tells this exact same story about Sullivan speaking up for the workers to Hubbard. His account confirms that the Skinner mill never again shut down for the Christmas holiday and the widespread respect that Sullivan had earned (Plourde, 113). Blewett also discusses the hardship that even a three-day Christmas shut down could cause (37, 67). Hubbard worked at Skinners until its closing and appears to have developed good relationships with Sullivan and the TWUA, often admitting his mistakes (see Plourde, 74-76, 93-99, and 112-113). In 1957 he attended a banquet honoring Sullivan.

know what it was to be without anything. And just that morning, it just hit home. It was going to be damn hard for me. And I just couldn't take it. And, of course...he was so happy, you know. I took all his happiness away.

Her courage to speak out had proven worthwhile:

Everybody felt he [Hubbard] was a bear and they couldn't you know, talk to him in any which way. But he'd come in to me and say, "How are things going?" because I was the head of the union for the shop. And so this day he came in very chipper and he just happened to say the wrong thing. Or the right thing... Yeah [laughing], I think he said the right thing.

Another story, passed down through her family, also suggests the depth of her resentment against the cloistered life of the privileged. Unlike many textile mills, which were owned by absentee owners, trusts, or conglomerates, the Skinner family lived in Holyoke and was known for their community service and philanthropic contributions. Historian William Hartford aptly described them as "the most self-consciously paternalistic of mill owners."⁵² In 1930, at the same time that his workers were experiencing wrenching wage cuts and work shortages, Joseph Skinner gave a \$50,000 donation to nearby Mt. Holyoke College, where he served as chairman of the Board of Trustees. Indeed, Skinner family members would give periodic large gifts throughout the Great Depression. Later that decade a hall was named in their honor. In Sullivan's view, the funds for Skinner's philanthropic donations came directly out of worker's paychecks. On more than one occasion she wryly remarked that, "Whenever we heard the Skinners were about to make another donation, we knew our wages would be cut." She harbored no illusions about her employer's benevolence.⁵³

⁵² Hartford, 168.

⁵³ Sullivan, quoted in Plourde, 102. In the 1920s the Skinners gave several equally large donations to Vassar College for scholarships and for the Belle Skinner Hall of Music. Belle Skinner had raised over a million dollars in the 1920s to help reconstruct a French village destroyed during WWI. In Holyoke, from 1902-1942 the Skinner family financed a four-story settlement house in Holyoke's "Flats" district, known as the Skinner Coffee House. It served as a community center and housed classrooms, a theatre, public baths, a cafeteria that served inexpensive lunches, and rooms that could be rented short-term by women in need. The mill also had a medical clinic. See Plourde, 55-56 and Thibodeau, 115-20.

Sullivan's passionate resentment against "you people" – mill owners, managers, and foremen who had almost no awareness of the harsh realities of their workers' lives, yet who exercised total control and unchecked authority over them – never left her. She was of a generation of union leaders who had risen from the grassroots; who had labored for decades under intolerable conditions in America's mines, fields, and factories. Her burning sense of "us" versus "them," and complete identification with the workers whom she represented, were among her greatest strengths as a union organizer and community activist over the next five decades.

1934 National Textile Strike

In May of 1933 Congress passed President Roosevelt's National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA), the most far-reaching New Deal measure to date. The NIRA called for the establishment of special commissions to set "fair labor codes" addressing minimum wages and working conditions in each industry. More significantly, the NIRA's Section 7(a) guaranteed workers the right to organize and bargain collectively – the first time in U.S. history that workers were legally granted this basic right under federal law. Section 7(a) unleashed a nationwide surge in unionization. Nationally, the nearly-defunct United Textile Workers Union (UTW) exploded from 20,000 to 400,000 members in less than a year. The NIRA's Cotton Commission was the first to meet, devising a Cotton Code that raised the hopes of textile workers and fanned the flames of their fervent belief that a change was, at last, at hand. When these hopes were dashed over the next year as mill owners brazenly subverted the code, their outrage was expressed at a special UTW convention in August 1934. A Holyoke editorialist summed up their plight:

There was and is a textile code -- and it amounts to about as much as a drop of water in hell. In the code there was and is a minimum wage clause...In practice it has become a maximum wage...There was also a shortening of hours...from ten or more to eight. But the employees speeded up the speed-up system even more than before. They have speeded it up until it is practically impossible for workers to make production. They are fired if they can't make it; or else they are required to work overtime without pay...

The stretch-out system has been stretched out until it is unbearable and it has thrown thousands out of work because the others were overworked. In the South the workers live in shacks owned by the companies. Most of them are not fit for human habitation....⁵⁴

Like their counterparts nationally, Holyoke textile workers had quickly seized upon the new law and began organizing. That August, UTW convention delegates chose to endorse an unprecedented nationwide general strike. The September 1934 strike, which involved 400,000 workers from Maine to Alabama, quickly became the “single largest industrial action in the history of American labor.”⁵⁵ In Holyoke, the local *Times-Transcript* was initially sanguine. The week before the strike it purportedly surveyed local workers, concluding that they were “not enthusiastic about going out on strike” and averring that the “hated ‘stretch-out,’ the bone of contention with the working conditions throughout [sic] the nation, does not prevail in Holyoke.” The strike was scheduled to begin at midnight on Saturday, September 1st. However, in Holyoke mills were closed for the Labor Day weekend. That Friday bold headlines proclaimed, “Local Textile Plants Will Open Tuesday.” A smaller headline repeated the claim that Holyoke workers were “not any too anxious to leave their job” as “the greater majority of them are satisfied with working conditions, and many of them believe that their wages are satisfactory.”⁵⁶

Over the weekend mill workers met in tumultuous mass meetings. On Saturday Holyoke’s silk, rayon, and cotton workers voted to participate and immediately began organizing pickets. According to the *Times-Transcript*, “The action came without warning.” On Monday, Labor Day, over one thousand unionized weavers met at Acadia Hall; no doubt Sullivan was among them. The *Springfield Union* described the weaver’s meeting as “the greatest turnout of that section of the textile trade in the annals of the labor movement here.” On Tuesday, the first full day of the strike, 1,800 Holyoke textile workers walked out. By then newspapers around the country were already referring to the event as the “greatest labor

⁵⁴ Mr. Domurad, “Safety Valve” Editorial, “Textile Strike Points to ‘New Deal’ Failure,” *HTT*, Sept. 11, 1934, 10.

⁵⁵ John A. Salmond, *The General Textile Strike of 1934: From Maine to Alabama* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2002). Note: The story of the 1934 Textile Strike in Western Massachusetts has never been fully told or explored. Salmond’s definitive study fails to include any coverage of strike events in Western Massachusetts. Green omits any discussion of it while Hartford discusses the event in a single page (178).

⁵⁶ See Hartford, 177-178. *HTT*, Aug. 30, 1934, 10 and *HTT*, Aug. 31, 1934, 1.

uprising in the nation's history." Within the first few days 3,500 Holyoke textile workers joined the strike, shutting down eleven mills. The *Times-Transcript* quickly proclaimed it "the largest industrial strike in the history of the city." By the second day, it was estimated that 45% of New England mill workers had participated; within the week this figure rose to 85%.⁵⁷

Sullivan's mill was the first to shut down. Holyoke's mill owners quickly recognized the nearly-unanimous sentiment in favor of the strike and sought to avoid trouble outside their gates. The Wednesday morning headline blared: "Skinner Mills Close as Strike Paralysis Cripples Holyoke's Textile Industry." Company president Joseph A. Skinner issued a revealing statement to the press, "These mills were open Tuesday for regular operation," he reported. However, "Not enough reported for work to warrant keeping open. Therefore, these mills are closed indefinitely."

Mill-hands rushed to set up pickets around plants whose workers had not yet joined the strike (later fanning out to mills in neighboring towns). Weavers such as Sullivan played a key role: if they walked out, the whole plant followed. Triumphant groups of workers paraded down the streets by the hundreds and attended mass meetings of one to two thousand. Anna's younger brother, Thomas Burns, then twenty-seven, was nearly always among the featured speakers. He had recently been elected president of the first rubber workers union at Fisk Tire Company in neighboring Chicopee, where he had led a successful strike the previous year. Charismatic, dynamic, and tireless, he "worked night and day as a draft member of the strike committee and appeared as a speaker at many meetings." Unlike many other textile centers, Holyoke's political and economic elites were supportive. The mayor offered the strikers the use of the city hall auditorium for large meetings and made arrangements to allow striking workers to secure relief. Indeed, the Springfield newspaper deemed Holyoke the "chief strike point in Western Mass.," noting that the "eyes of organized labor in the area" were turned towards Holyoke.⁵⁸

Women's participation in the strike was especially noteworthy, both in Holyoke and nationally. In Holyoke, photos of women congregating and picketing outside factory gates bore such titles as "These Girls Didn't Go to Work." Elsewhere, women were captured in more confrontational and desperate poses, behind barbed wire fence or facing armed police and national guard. There was the "girl in green" facing down the commander of a Rhode Island National Guard detachment and the "hat pin" girls of

⁵⁷ *HTT*, Aug. 31, 1934, 1; *Springfield Union* (hereafter abbreviated as *SU*), Sept. 4, 1934, 7; *HTT*, Sept. 4, 1934, 1; Salmond, 88.

⁵⁸ *SU*, Sept. 28, 1935, 12; *SU*, Sept. 4, 1934, 1.

Pennsylvania who stuck strikebreakers as they tried to enter the mills. In historian John Salmond's assessment, the strike represented "a decisive step in the politicization of America's female textile workers."⁵⁹

Unfortunately, news coverage of the role of women in Holyoke is too limited to draw such broad conclusions. However, the 1934 strike was the very first time that weavers – whose ranks were equally divided between male and female -- had played such an active and decisive role in local events. On Labor Day, over one thousand had met in a tumultuous meeting at Acadia Hall and voted to walk out. This had to have been an empowering experience. Although nearly all official union speakers at the various mass meetings were male, Holyoke's women workers were also experiencing the power of collective action.

In contrast, events in neighboring towns were more violent and volatile. Nationally over two dozen strikers would lose their lives. Locally, on Sept. 21 National Guard troops were sent into neighboring Easthampton, where strikers and police had skirmished for weeks. Union supporters had not succeeded in shutting down the enormous Hampton Mills plant which dominated the small town economically and politically. For two weeks Holyoke strike leaders had attempted, unsuccessfully, to send "flying squadrons" to increase the ranks of the strikers. Several had been arrested. The contrast between events in Holyoke and Easthampton, as well as nearby Ludlow, and Chicopee, is illuminating. Holyoke textile workers were more unified and better organized. Within the first few days of the three-week strike they succeeded in closing down nearly every mill in the city. The fact that Holyoke's economic and political elites conceded defeat so quickly is significant. The tensions at neighboring factories, such as Hampton Mills, Ludlow Manufacturing, and Chicopee Manufacturing Company, persisted over the next decades. All three mills were a constant source of frustration for Sullivan during her years as TWUA district manager (1946-1966). In Ludlow it took two major strikes (1944 and 1947) before management agreed to bargain collectively, and even then deep tensions persisted. Throughout the 1950s and into the 1960s Sullivan's monthly *Organizer's Reports* bemoaned the problems she had negotiating with mill managers at Ludlow Manufacturing.

⁵⁹ Salmond, 240, 242. For Sullivan's generation of women labor leaders and their distinct brand of "labor feminism," see Dorothy Sue Cobble *The Other Women's Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004); Dennis Deslippe, *Rights, not Roses: Unions and the Rise of Working-Class Feminism, 1945-80* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000); and Annelise Orleck, *Common Sense and a Little Fire: Women and Working-Class Politics in the United States, 1900-1965* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

However, in 1934 the thought of becoming a union official had not entered into Sullivan's consciousness, although it might very well have if she had been male. While Anna remained completely anonymous during the 1934 strike; her name never appearing in print, her younger brother, Tom, was quickly emerging as a "power among the younger school of labor leaders." In 1935 he was elected a national vice president of the United Rubber Workers Union and became an organizer for the US and Canada. He left Holyoke, never to return for more than brief stays.⁶⁰

While her brother quickly attained national stature, Sullivan remained in Holyoke and continued to work full-time at the silk mill. Despite the overwhelming support of textile workers throughout the country, the 1934 Textile Strike failed to produce any clear cut victory. Instead, many mill workers blamed the UTW leadership for accepting a compromised agreement that brought no gains despite the cost of several dozen strikers' lives. Mill owners steadfastly refused to recognize their worker's right to unionize and fired thousands. Sullivan always described the strike's demise with unusual bitterness. In future years she repeatedly asserted that the strikers had acted like "sheep" or "little birds" by blindly following the AFL's ineffective and cowardly leadership. As Sullivan explained to one perplexed interviewer: "When we walked out on strike in '34 we were like sheep." Their exchange was revealing:

Interviewer: Well then how come you walked out on strike? I mean, what got...

Sullivan: Well, things were so bad. I mean, conditions were so bad.

Interviewer: But if conditions were so bad, wouldn't it be scarier to be out on the street with ...nothing?

Sullivan: We couldn't have gone any lower. I think this was the feeling that we had, and we thought we were going to be able to win something. But we got left high and dry. The AFL just ended the strike...It was one of the reasons it was very, very hard to try and organize in the

⁶⁰ In 1937 Thomas Burns returned to New England to help direct the CIO's organizing drive among textile workers. "Burns Is Leader for CIO Drive," *SU*, Jan. 11, 1937, 1 and March 11, 1937, 4.

South afterwards for a good many years. There was deep resentment towards the AFL...⁶¹

Sullivan, along with many textile workers, concluded that, “The AFL really cared just for the trades [skilled craft workers], this was really their feeling...They didn’t think much of the textile worker or unskilled worker.” Sullivan was already thinking as a union organizer and feared the long-range repercussions: “My feeling at the time was that we’d never be able to organize Skinners after what had happened. Because we went back with wage cuts after the strike.” But, much to her delight, Skinner workers would respond with equal enthusiasm during the next textile drive in 1937. Indeed, they were the first mill in Western Massachusetts to win a union contract under the auspices of the CIO, the newly-formed and militant rival to the moribund AFL.

Sullivan’s Union Organizing, 1934-46

Despite the disappointing results of the 1934 Strike, Sullivan never lost hope. When asked at the age of seventy-three what had gotten her “really excited enough to spend a lot of energy in union organizing,” she responded:

Well, fact of the matter, I knew it had to come some day. It just couldn’t go on the way it was. I felt very deeply about that...And I think that we had been taught so much too. My father and mother really, this was something that we knew.

In 1937 the fledgling CIO, flush from its historic victories organizing auto, steel, and rubber workers, created the Textile Workers Organizing Committee (TWOC). For the first time, a powerful national union was willing to commit the financial resources and personnel necessary to undertake a nationwide organizing campaign in textiles. In 1937, TWOC hired 200 organizers, growing to 600 at its height in 1939. Activists flooded textile centers North and South. Holyoke, with its twelve mills and 5,500 workers, was an important regional target. During these years Sullivan was, on her own initiative, traveling throughout the region, helping to organize nearby mills at the end of her workday.

⁶¹ Sullivan, quoted in Dodge transcription, 9. See also O’Farrell, p. 22 for the 1934 strike.

In 1938 Sullivan was officially hired as a full-time CIO organizer. Two years later she was hired by the newly-formed Textile Workers Union of America (TWUA), one of only six women out of 94 national organizers.⁶² As Sullivan told the story, it was TWUA President Emil Rieve who personally persuaded her to accept her first organizing position. According to Sullivan, Rieve argued that she couldn't continue working "twenty hour days," first in the mill and then attending union meetings on her own time. "We need you, you need it, you've got to come," he pleaded.⁶³

From the written records it would seem that Sullivan was favored by TWUA leadership. Although based in Western Massachusetts, she was sent from Maine to New Jersey to organize mill workers. During the 1940s her accomplishments were frequently profiled in the union's magazine, *Textile Labor*; more so than most local organizers. Indeed, one takes away the impression that she was perceived as a "rising star."⁶⁴ Moreover, she was friends with Emil Rieve and other top-level TWUA officials and staff, most of whom came from New England. Yet an inter-office memo written shortly after her election as TWUA Joint Board Manager casts doubt on this interpretation. Dated Jan. 26, 1946, TWUA President Emil Rieve wrote:

Anne Sullivan has accepted the managership [sic] of the Holyoke Joint Board against the counsel and advice of this office. We do not think that she is capable of handling this work. She is to be given no more help than would ordinarily be given any other Joint Board manager in the performance of their duties. Please take note of this memorandum.⁶⁵

Although Sullivan may have remained unaware of Rieve's own personal opposition to her election to District Manager, she recognized that others deeply resented it: "They weren't too anxious to put a woman

⁶² Daniel, 132.

⁶³ Sullivan, quoted in O'Farrell, 33. Although she never credited him, it is possible that her brother, Tom Burns, then on the national CIO Executive Board, helped obtain her first CIO organizing position.

⁶⁴ For articles on Sullivan, see *Textile Labor*: March, 1942 (p. 9); Sept., 1942 (1, 9-10), October 1945 (7), and Nov. 8, 1947 (2).

⁶⁵ Rieve Memo, TWUA Micro 631, Reel 4, Frame 679. Sullivan's son told the same story. He recalled that at one point in the 1940s "the union itself tried to oust her. Women were not accepted then. Some people from the union came in from the outside." They were seeking to nominate a male as manager. "People who knew her knew that she was a fighter for them. It would be stupid to vote against her. Especially for an outsider from Lawrence they didn't know." William Sullivan, author's interview, Aug. 11, 2006.

manager in. First they sent a man in, who was going to take over. But the people just didn't care for him so I was the first manager of the elected joint board... That was, I was elected manager.⁶⁶

She continued, "They thought I would fall on my face, but I worked twice as hard and showed we could do it. Men never really liked it, the other Joint Board Managers." She added that, "For a while I was the only woman, then two or three more developed, eventually there were five." Although women were a majority of TWUA members, they were barely represented in staff and national leadership positions. Aside from trustee (a fairly powerless position), women would never serve among the nationally-elected or appointed leadership; nor would women ever serve in any high-ranking national staff positions at the New York office.⁶⁷

Nothing in Sullivan's record suggests that she was anything other than an outstanding organizer and negotiator, completely dedicated to the workers she served. Those who knew her, both her supporters and opponents, invariably described her as "tough but fair." Indeed, by 1950 the TWUA national leadership was sufficiently impressed by her abilities to pressure her into running for the U.S. Congress as a state representative. She won the Democratic primary by a two-to-one margin but lost the general election in a landslide defeat.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Sullivan, quoted in O'Farrell, p. 30.

⁶⁷ The TWUA offered Sullivan the position of national trustee, but she rejected it saying she "couldn't stand that... Trustees [did] not take part in policy making." The job was "just time consuming with nothing to it." As a woman, Sullivan had limited options. Whereas male unionists, such as her brother Tom, might be recruited into better-paying jobs in management after WWII, Sullivan remained one of the TWUA's longest serving district (or "joint board") managers. Sullivan, quoted in O'Farrell, pp. 49-50.

⁶⁸ The 1950 campaign was fierce and bitter. Sullivan ran as the "People's Candidate" against a moderate Republican incumbent, John Hesselton. Aside from its mill towns, the district was predominantly rural and overwhelmingly Republican. The Catholic Church actively campaigned against her, never forgiving Sullivan for her support of birth control crusader Margaret Sanger in 1940. The campaign, in which charges and counter-charges flew fast and furiously, received extensive coverage in Western Mass. newspapers (Sept.–Nov. 1950). Although the Holyoke *Transcript-Telegraph* endorsed Sullivan, its editorials suggest that she lost some support due to the aggressiveness of her campaign. Renowned historian William Leuchtenburg, then a professor at nearby Smith College, served as her campaign manager. In a 2006 interview he spoke glowingly of Sullivan but acknowledged that she had little hope of winning due to her gender and working-class background. She was "not the kind of person that a Protestant businessmen in Pittsfield would vote for."

Indeed, the district hadn't elected a Democratic representative in decades. Sullivan later supported Williams College philosopher James MacGregor Burns in his equally unsuccessful run for Congress in 1958. Burns wrote that "Sullivan was one of the highlights of my candidacy... She was a remarkable person – one of the greatest woman leaders I have known." (Letter to author, Aug. 3, 2006).

Sullivan's Unique Position as a Woman Trade Unionist

Many factors contributed to Sullivan's success as a labor union organizer despite the TWUA's strongly male-dominated leadership. Her temperament, leadership skills, and willingness to challenge authority from a young age were obviously important factors. And, after twenty grueling years of mill work, she had won the respect of her fellow workers. However, other factors also placed her in a unique position and gave her far more independence than the average working woman.

Unlike most women, Sullivan had limited marital responsibilities. Essentially single due to her husband's institutionalization, she could still claim the mantle of marital respectability. With only one son, she had fewer childcare responsibilities. In 1934 her ailing mother passed away, removing an additional responsibility. At the same time, Sullivan's younger siblings, all of whom were life-long union supporters, provided tremendous material and emotional support. Her brother William and his wife were childless. They happily provided childcare and insisted that she and her son share their apartment during the worst years of the Great Depression. This enabled Sullivan to throw herself into labor activism. Later they helped pay for her son to go to boarding school when he was experiencing a difficult adolescence. Meanwhile, her brother Charles loaned her the money to buy her first car, a prerequisite to work as a paid staff organizer. In 1938 her brother Tom's position as the New England leader of the CIO's textile organizing campaign may have been pivotal to her initial hiring.⁶⁹

Other factors also contributed to Sullivan's success. The fact that she was Irish was significant; in Holyoke the Irish dominated both the Democratic Party and union leadership. Moreover, Sullivan was a native English speaker whereas most textile mill workers were more recent immigrants (French Canadian and Polish).⁷⁰ The Skinner Silk Mill was also a particularly opportune place from which to launch a career in labor activism. Weavers were key to fine silk production and thus had unique power; over half were female. Because skilled male workers were *not* unionized at Skinners, women workers had greater opportunities to take

⁶⁹ Sullivan, quoted in O'Farrell, 20-22. In 1937 Sullivan received her husband's "bonus" which Congress finally paid to World War I veterans. This allowed her to move into her own separate apartment for the first time. Later her brother bought a two-family and she rented the first floor apartment for twenty-five years until she bought a modest house in the late 1960s.

⁷⁰ Holyoke's population in 1930 was: 28% foreign-born, 24% native-born of native-born parents, and 48% native-born with at least one foreign-born parent. In terms of the ethnicity, I estimate that roughly 1/3 of the city's population was of Irish ancestry and 1/3 French Canadian in 1930.

on active leadership roles. Moreover, despite the company's previously strong anti-union stance, Skinners' managers quickly realized the value of cooperating with and even using the union to their benefit (as revealed through their extensive correspondence with the TWUA's National Research Department). Because the mill's workers were among the first in Holyoke to successfully unionize, Sullivan gained a strong base and was freed to venture out to assist in organizing at other mills, thereby earning widespread local recognition. Indeed, throughout the 1940s Skinner Local 113 played a key role in supporting fiercely contested regional strikes and organizing efforts. At Skinners, a group of strong, female grassroots leaders emerged who remained important to Sullivan throughout her career (including her sister, Alice). Sullivan also nurtured female union leadership in other mills. Finally, Holyoke itself was an opportune location. The CIO targeted the city due to its strong showing in the 1934 national strike. As a result, Sullivan was able to meet and work closely with most of the national leadership of the future Textile Workers Union of America (TWUA).

The TWUA and the Demise of the Textile Industry

When asked at age seventy-three what she considered to "the most exciting parts of her life," Sullivan replied without hesitation, "The organizing. Being able to give people who *never had nothing*...the right to bargain, to talk, to feel free, and that they had guaranteed wages, hours, and conditions. That was the [greatest] highlight of anything you can get. Because we had *nothing* (emphasis added)." The TWUA brought dramatically improved wages, benefits, and working conditions to the nation's first industrial workers. By the end of WWII, mill workers received sick pay, one-week vacations, paid holidays, seniority rights, and (by 1950) health insurance, along with grievance procedures. Yet, in all of the interviews Sullivan gave throughout her life, she rarely dwelled upon the oppressive nature of the working conditions themselves. Instead it was the arbitrary power of the bosses and the total lack of human rights – "to bargain, to talk, to feel free" – that embittered her the most. As she frequently stated, before the union "bosses were kings."⁷¹

Despite its many accomplishments, however, the TWUA never succeeded in raising wages above the minimum. Mill workers remained the lowest-paid industrial workers in the U.S., never coming close to the

⁷¹ Sullivan, quoted in O'Farrell, 55.

wages and benefits achieved by their sister trade unionists in auto, rubber, and steel. Moreover, textile workers continued to be paid piece rates, based on how much they produced, while periodic down times meant frequent lay-offs or months of working “short time.” As more modern and more efficient machinery was introduced, such as faster looms, management sought to reduce piece rates even further while assigning workers an ever-increasing number of looms to run. The constant “speed up” and “stretch out” generated ongoing dissatisfaction and resistance. After World War II, other industries began to offer far greater opportunities, better paying jobs and working conditions for the younger generation. Unlike auto or steel workers, few textile workers wanted their children to enter the mills. Labor shortages plagued the industry. These shortages would have been far worse had not the TWUA succeeded in modestly raising wages while dramatically improving working conditions. Even so, the industry increasingly relied on a new generation of immigrants, often Polish and Puerto Rican immigrants with few other options, as older Irish and French Canadian mill hands retired.⁷²

The textile industry had stood at the center of the New England economy since before the Civil War. Slave-grown cotton from the South was shipped to mills in the North, laying the foundation for the nation’s first industrial revolution. Although textile mills had begun moving south as early as the 1890s, followed by a second major wave in the 1920s, as late as 1954 textiles remained New England’s leading industry, employing 178,000. That year a committee appointed by New England’s governors reported that one in every eight manufacturing jobs was “directly or indirectly dependent on the welfare of the textile industry.” Yet even as this report was being prepared, Massachusetts was experiencing its second massive wave of mill closings. Between 1950 and 1958 textile employment declined from 113,000 to 46,000. As William F. Hartford concludes, during the 1950s “the New England textile industry had entered its final days as a major employer of regional labor.” Once thriving textile centers such as Fall River, New Bedford, Lawrence, and Lowell would soon be little more than severely depressed ghost towns.⁷³

While many have blamed unions for the flight of New England’s textile mills to the South, the story is much more complex. As we have seen from the Holyoke experience, many of the largest mills left in the 1920s

⁷² On the aging of the textile workforce and reluctance of young people to work in mills after 1940, see Hartford, 200-209, Blewett, 295-318, Plourde, 125-130.

⁷³ *Progress Report of the New England Textile Committee to the New England Governors*, TWUA Collection MS 396, Box 104. Folder: New England Textile Committee, 1953, 1. Quote from Hartford, 199.



Anna Sullivan (2nd from right) with presidential candidate John F. Kennedy, surrounded by Holyoke textile mill workers. 1960 TWUA Convention, Chicago.

and 1930s, well before unionization ever took root. By the mid-twenties New England's textile industry was already "a 'sick giant,' crippled by intense competition and massive overproduction." Between 1920 and 1941 Massachusetts lost 45% of its textile production jobs. Instead of blaming unions, one could argue equally persuasively that unionization helped prolong the life of textile industry in the North. The TWUA was fully committed to the survival of the New England textile industry and clearly recognized the threat posed by many company's failure to modernize and upgrade (factors rarely mentioned in the press as factors in the industry's decline). At the same time, it recognized the equally real threat posed by the low wages of Southern mill workers. The TWUA repeatedly attempted to organize the South, but was continually stymied by the fierce and frequently violent resistance of Southern mill owners.⁷⁴

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Sullivan's life illuminates the struggles and experiences of a generation of urban industrial workers. Growing up in overcrowded tenements and disease-ridden streets of early twentieth-century cities, as teenagers they quickly left their childhoods behind to enter the nation's mills and factories. Few saw improvements in their economic status during the "roaring '20s." Fiercely committed to unionization, they went from "absolutely nothing" during the Great Depression to a very modest slice of the "American Dream" during the post WWII years, only to see their economic foundation destroyed as textiles, the first great American industry to de-industrialize, went South and then abroad, engaged in capital's single-minded quest for ever-cheaper sources of labor.

Ironically, many Holyoke residents portray the city's history as the story of a precipitous decline from a lost "Golden Age" when poverty, crime, gangs, and ethnic conflict allegedly did not exist. Long forgotten is the fact that life in Holyoke, as in other mill towns, was desperately hard for most residents until 1940. Indeed, the statistics presented in this article -- on rates of poverty, overcrowding, substandard housing, disease, and infant mortality -- suggest that Holyoke may have actually been one of the worst cities in the state for its working-class residents. The "Golden Age" that some fondly recall existed, in reality, for only a relatively brief and

⁷⁴ Ibid., 189 and 194. See William F. Hartford, *Where Is Our Responsibility? Unions and Economic Change in the New England Textile Industry, 1870-1960* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996).

unique historical period: the wartime and postwar economic boom years of 1940-70. By 1970 not only had all the textile mills closed, but so had Holyoke's famed paper mills.

HJM