The Queen City Takes Its Crown of Thorns: Western New York During The Great Depression

By:

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Introduction

On both a national and international basis, the Great Depression sparked a political, social, and economic realignment that profoundly affected industrial regions such as Western New York. During the second half of the 19th century and first half of the 20th century, the United States underwent industrialization on a massive scale and established itself as a major world power. The resulting immigration of Eastern and Southern Europeans to the United States during this period changed the face of American cities. Metropolitan areas, such as Buffalo and the surrounding Western New York region, were viewed as symbolizing the future of the nation. This might be a little hard to believe today considering Western New York's gradual decline and fall from grace.

To truly understand contemporary Western New York is to understand its history. This paper seeks to understand how Western New York adapted to the challenges of the Great Depression and to shed light on the significance of the region (if any) on the national level. Primary sources, such as Common Council hearings, personal writings from a labor priest, and Mayoral committee reports, will help to illustrate a unique picture of Western New York in the 1930s. This paper seeks to answer such questions as: How did Western New York develop as a major industrial hub during the turn of the century? What were the major industries in Western New York in the 1930s? What was the role of the Catholic Church in Western New York during the Great Depression, and how did it combat the influence of political radicals like the Communists? What actions did the City of Buffalo take to counter the worst effects of the Great Depression? These questions will collectively help to convey an image of a region that at one point contained a city that was the 8th largest in the United States. By contextualizing the political and economic

situation of the time within Western New York, the full story behind the transformation of this region will become clearer.

Background On The Industrialization of Western New York

For Western New York, the turn of the century ushered in an era that saw the region emerging as an industrial and modern city in the United States. Accompanied by outstanding natural resources, a central geographic location, and a seemingly endless supply of cheap non-unionized labor, Buffalo and the Niagara Frontier in particular, benefited from the sweeping industrialization and urbanization that had been ongoing throughout the nation. Census taken in 1870 showed that the city population stood at roughly 117,714. Thirty years later, in 1900, Buffalo was ranked the 8th largest American city with a population of 352,387.[1] Immigrants who flooded into Buffalo, mainly from Poland and Italy, contributed to this population boom. Buffalo was seen as a fast growing economic hub, full of plentiful jobs. Its strategic location on the Great Lakes, its border with Canada to the north, and its relatively equal proximity to Chicago and New York City perfectly allowed Buffalo to become a major port and rail hub. The hosting of the Pan American Exposition in 1901 cemented Buffalo's status as an emerging economic power within the United States.[2] Like most major cities of the late Gilded Age, Buffalo's advantages, gained from the occurrence of rapid industrialization, urbanization, and immigration, were countered by steep inequalities and prejudiced attitudes toward newcomers arriving from Eastern and Southern Europe.

[1] Lubinecki, Paul. "Catholic Labor Education On The Great Lakes: Fr. John Boland and the Diocesan Labor College of Buffalo." *New York History Review*. N.p., 16 Jan. 2015. Web. (1 Feb. 2015). <http://ny-hrarticles.blogspot.com/2015/01/catholic-labor-education-on-great-lakes.html>.
[2] Goldman, Mark. *City on the Edge: Buffalo, New York*. Amherst, New York: Prometheus, 2007. Print.

Much like the national "Captains of Industry" (or "robber barons" to their critics) Buffalo's own set of industrialists held much sway over the region's economic and political matters. Individuals such as Jacob E. Schoellkopf Jr., of Niagara Falls Hydraulic; John J. Albright of Ontario Power; Frank and Charles Goodyear, Frank B. Baird, of the Tonawanda Iron and Steel Company, John N. Scrathered, the developer behind the Ellicott Square Building, George Urban Jr. of the Buffalo and Niagara Falls General Electric Light and Power Company and the Urban Flour Mill, and William C. Ely, of the International Street Railroad Company, were all influential in determining the economic landscape of Buffalo and the Niagara Frontier at that time.[3] The concerted effort of these business leaders, as well as state and city government officials contributed to the arrival of the Lackawanna Steel Company in the early 1900s.[4]

By the first decade of the 20th century, it had become apparent that Walter Scranton of the Lackawanna Steel Company was eager to relocate to Buffalo because of a decrease in coal availability and increase in union activity at the company's Pennsylvania headquarters.[5] Buffalo's business leaders believed that the iron ore of Messabi, Minnesota could be shipped across Lake Erie to Buffalo because of its location as the most eastern port city on the Great Lakes. Buffalo's strategic location on Lake Erie allowed it to import iron ore, manufacture it into steel, and then transport it toward eastern cities by rail.[6] The new Lackawanna Steel Company was built on pristine property adjacent to Lake Erie just south of Buffalo. The rapid growth of this new industrial area eventually formed the independent City of Lackawanna. By 1910, roughly 150 different iron and steel factories employed more than 10,000 workers throughout Western

[3] Goldman, Mark. *City on the Edge: Buffalo, New York*, p.15
[4] Goldman, Mark. *High Hopes: The Rise and Decline of Buffalo*, New York. Albany: State U of New York, 1983. Print.
[5] Goldman, Mark. *High Hopes: The Rise and Decline of Buffalo*, p.133
[6] Goldman, Mark. *City on the Edge: Buffalo, New York*, p.16

New York. The Lackawanna Steel Company alone employed roughly 6,000 of those 10,000 workers. According to author Mark Goldman, "In 1906, the first year that the company was in full operation, Lackawanna Steel Shipped more than one million tons of steel." [7]

While the steel industry was one of the largest and most important players in Western New York in the early 20th century, other industries were also important and are worth noting. Goldman states that "more than thirty-six hundred people worked in the auto industry, thirty-four hundred people in the manufacture and repair of railroad cars, and eighteen hundred in the manufacture of copper."[8] Again, because of Buffalo's proximity on the Great Lakes, it was a busy port importing raw products from the Midwest and exporting manufactured goods to the East and South. Ships carrying lumber, livestock, and pig iron were swarming into Buffalo. Likewise, midwestern grains, corns, barley, and rye arrived in the Queen City, thus making it one of the largest grain ports in the world. Its numerous grain elevators, processing over 2 million bushels of grain per day, lined the shores of the Buffalo river area. In 1895, the H-O Cereal Company relocated to Buffalo and employed roughly 900 workers within a decade.[9] The Urban Flour Company, the largest milling company in Buffalo, "was the first major industry to be powered by electricity" in the nation. [10]

Indeed, Western New York managed to expand its growing reputation as a diverse industrial region. Mark Goldman explains that George Pillsbury, in 1894, recognized Buffalo's waterfront as being ideal with its easy shipping and storage facilities for his grains. Therefore, Pillsbury erected a grain elevator to store his valuable grain. Soon Buffalo followed in Minneapolis's

[7] Goldman, Mark. *City on the Edge: Buffalo, New York*, p.31-32
[8] Goldman, Mark. *City on the Edge: Buffalo, New York*, p.37
[9] Goldman, Mark. *City on the Edge: Buffalo, New York*, p. 38
[10] Goldman, Mark. *High Hopes: The Rise and Decline of Buffalo, New York*, p. 133

footsteps as being a grain mill city.[11] The dense German population, along with the importation of grain, inevitably led to a growing brewery industry. As an example, the Gerhard Lang Company at one time produced around 300,000 barrels of brew a year.[12] However, with the advent of Prohibition in 1919, the Western New York brewery industry felt first hand the effect of the new national law.

On top of these major industries, livestock coming in from Canada and the western states was processed at the city's East Side. Due to the availability of shipping facilities in western New York, Buffalo followed Chicago closely as one of the more significant livestock centers in the world.[13] Along with this, Western New York had one of the nation's largest lumber centers the result of the shipping of lumber pouring into Buffalo. Frank and Charles Goodyear were instrumental in purchasing large acres of timberland in Pennsylvania and used their business company, Southern Lumber Company, to help build many of the saw mills and railroads in the greater Western New York area.[14] Eventually, the brothers' business activities would lead them to the iron and steel business, forming the Buffalo and Susquehanna Iron Company, and building three different blast furnaces of their own.[15]

Despite these growing industries, Mark Goldman states that "the railroads remade the local economy."[16] Once again, the geographic location of Buffalo was ideal for becoming a national railway crossroads by connecting the Midwest to the East. It also connected southward to Pittsburgh and northward to Canada. Goldman states, "By 1910, Buffalo was served by eleven

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[11] Goldman, Mark. *High Hopes: The Rise and Decline of Buffalo, New York*, p. 143
[12] Goldman, Mark. *High Hopes: The Rise and Decline of Buffalo, New York*, p. 144
[13] Goldman, Mark. *City on the Edge: Buffalo, New York*, p.39
[14] Goldman, Mark. *City on the Edge: Buffalo, New York*, p.38
[15] Goldman, Mark. *High Hopes: The Rise and Decline of Buffalo, New York*, p.129
[16] Goldman, Mark. *High Hopes: The Rise and Decline of Buffalo, New York*, p. 40

different trunk lines and was second only to Chicago among the leading railroad termini in the United States."[17] The impact of the railroads extended far beyond just connecting Buffalo to other cities across the nation. Within Buffalo, the railroad companies essentially created a new industry. Goldman explains that the railroad companies "…directly employed 20,000 men and indirectly gave work to thousands more in the car wheel shops, palace car shops, locomotive and freight carhops, and the largest bridge company in the world."[18] The economic impact from these industries would eventually set the stage for conflict between management and labor and provide fuel for a growing radicalism amongst workers that was beginning to take shape across the nation.

As mentioned, the late Gilded Age period in Buffalo witnessed the arrival of throngs of immigrants pouring into the city mainly from Poland and Italy. In particular, the East Side of the city was swelling quickly, resulting in slums. Due to the location of the railroads, factories, and the availability of cheap housing, Polish immigrants especially populated this area. Goldman notes that by 1910, more than 50,000 members of the Polish community populated the East Side of Buffalo and "more than 50 percent of the city's labor force worked at industrial jobs with as many, if not most of them, Poles."[19] The rise in Polish immigrants was accompanied by a steady rise in Italian immigrants. The Italian population grew rapidly beginning with some 13,000 in 1890 to 20,000 in 1900, and eventually more than 50,000 by 1920. Goldman explains how many Italians left their villages eventually making their way together to Buffalo. He states "…the

[17] Goldman, Mark. *City on the Edge: Buffalo, New York*, p.40
[18] Goldman, Mark. *City on the Edge: Buffalo, New York*, p.40-41
[19] Goldman, Mark. *City on the Edge: Buffalo, New York*, p.41

Campobassini headed to Seneca and Swan streets on the East Side; the Calabrese to South Buffalo; the Abruzzese to Roma Avenue; and the Sicilians, the largest group, to the old waterfront area around Canal Street."[20] These new immigrant groups would fill the factories and mills and would face prejudices from the existing WASP establishment.[21]

The advent of industrialization, urbanization, and the immigrant labor force helped to propel Buffalo and the Niagara Frontier as the quintessential modern American city and region of the incoming 20th century. The relocation of the Lackawanna Steel Company, and the shipping port at Buffalo's harbor, made the greater Western New York region a crossroads for industry and a mecca for poor immigrants in search of a better life. The local "Captains of Industry" were instrumental in coordinating the arrival of new industrialists, but were ultimately bound to face the consequences for their exploitation of their workers. The Progressive Movement was in full swing across the country during the first decade of the 20th century, and this very movement foreshadowed the growing frustration and radicalism amongst the American labor force that would soon become apparent in later decades. Within Buffalo, this growing frustration and radicalism would introduce strange bedfellows among the Catholic Church, left-wing radicals, and politicians. This movement would become much more apparent at the height of the Great Depression during the 1930s.

Labor History In Western New York

[20] Goldman, Mark. *City on the Edge: Buffalo, New York*, p. 43
[21] Goldman, Mark. *City on the Edge: Buffalo, New York*, p. 43

As Western New York emerged as one of the nation's most productive hubs for industry, agriculture, and a unique water and rail transportation networks, Buffalo proved itself as a premier early 20th century American city. It provided not only a place for acceptance of Western and Southern natural resources, but also a starting place for Western emigration, and ample docks, grain elevators, and storage houses for "returning down-lake traffic."[22] It truly lived up to its reputation as being a "water-born city".[23] The region was earning an international reputation for producing quality products, transporting them to major destinations, and providing for America's needs. However, as employers' determination to turn out products at a faster rate and to maximize profits increased so did the employees' frustration and discontent with their work environment.

This was nothing new for the Niagara Frontier. The first known labor dispute in Western New York occurred in the mid-1760s concerning a portage trail around Niagara Falls.[24] The local Native Americans used this portage trail to bring goods from the lowlands up and over the Niagara Escarpment to the highlands for mercantile reasons. It was a labor intensive endeavor because they carried the goods on their backs. They were well compensated and knew they had a necessary job, but they feared that their relevance would be diminished with the construction of Portage Road. The new road would allow for easier and faster distribution of goods. Tension built up and eventually led to the first strike in the region and had fatalities.[25]

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[22] Boland, John P. "Labor In Buffalo And Along The Frontier," P.4 John P. Boland Collection, University of Notre Dame.
[23] Boland, John P. "Labor In Buffalo And Along The Frontier." P.4
[24] Boland, John P. "Labor In Buffalo And Along The Frontier." P.4
[25] Boland, John P. "Labor In Buffalo And Along The Frontier" P.5

Conflict between management and labor continued on the Niagara Frontier. One example of labor and management friction took place during the spring of 1899 within Buffalo's grain industry.[26] The contention began after John Dart, in 1841, designed a bucket-belt for scooping grain that was propelled by steam. It was ingenious and allowed the Buffalo refined grain to be filled into sacks on actual boats, thus quickening the rate of having grain sacks ready for transport out of town. There was no longer the need for labor to scoop the grain at the bin site into sacks, carry the sacks on their backs, negotiate the often dangerous docks and walkways onto boats.[27] The streamlining of the work involved definitely led to increased production and wealth for the owners. Nevertheless, worker's wages did not increase, nor did working day hours decrease. Eventually, the grain shovelers rebelled against their working conditions. They protested not only the low pay and the long work day, but insisted their own union be heard. Management responded by requesting militia support which resulted in extreme discourse, violence, and even deaths. The relationship between both parties of the grain industry had become volatile in the grain elevators, the docks, and the board rooms.

The fall of 1919 witnessed labor management confrontation within the Lackawanna Steel Company. The 1919 steel strike affected nearly all major industrial cities nationwide, and the City of Lackawanna became one of the many battlegrounds across the nation. Walter Scranton, of the Lackawanna Iron and Steel Company, had previously moved his steel plants to Western New York under the guise that the region was ideal because of its geographic location and job-

[26] Lubinecki, Paul. "Catholic Labor Education On The Great Lakes: Fr. John Boland and the Diocesan Labor College of Buffalo." *New York History Review*. N.p., 16 Jan. 2015. Web. (1 Feb. 2015) <http://ny-hrarticles.blogspot.com/2015/01/catholic-labor-education-on-great-lakes.html>.
[27] Lubinecki, Paul. "Catholic Labor Education On The Great Lakes: Fr. John Boland and the Diocesan Labor College of Buffalo." *New York History Review*. P.2

seeking cheap immigrant population.[28] Yet, the labor issues that really caused Scranton to move his company out of Pennsylvania would in time follow him to Western New York. Within a few years of mass producing steel in the relocated Lackawanna factory, about 50% of the workforce were immigrant Eastern Europeans. These unskilled laborers, without formal manufacturing training, were from small towns throughout Eastern and Southern Europe.

On top of the xenophobic and prejudiced attitudes of the mostly WASP Buffalo establishment, and within the labor movement itself, unskilled immigrants were in conflict with the dominance of the craft union leadership. The prejudiced attitudes amongst labor leaders toward the Eastern and Southern European immigrants flooding into the country made this conflict inevitable.[29] The often cold welcoming these immigrants faced led to their desire to one day return to their homeland. Most of these immigrants intended to work hard, save up money, and reunite with their loved ones overseas. The advent of the First World War would ultimately put these plans on permanent hold.[30]

With the outbreak of war, modern warfare dictated the need for steel weaponry, thus steel production was in high demand. Lackawanna Steel, along with other regional steel factories, fared well, and so did its immigrant labor force due to the war. The laborers received a crash course, provided mostly by the factory administration, on Americanization complete with "propaganda and education-English-language classes, workshops in civics, parades, rallies, flag-raising, and group pledges of allegiance".[31] Their world was changing as they assimilated into the

[28] Lubinecki, Paul. "Catholic Labor Education On The Great Lakes: Fr. John Boland and the Diocesan Labor College of Buffalo." *New York History Review*. P.2
[29] Goldman, Mark. High Hopes: The Rise and Decline of Buffalo, New York. Albany: State U of New York, 1983.
[30] Lubinecki, Paul. "Catholic Labor Education On The Great Lakes: Fr. John Boland and the Diocesan Labor College of Buffalo." *New York History Review*. P.2
[31] Goldman, Mark. *High Hopes: The Rise and Decline of Buffalo, New York*, p. 202

war cause. However, the most positive impact of World War I that affected them was the demanding need of more and more steel production for armaments.

During the war years, the work force had decreased, allowing the workers to be placed into a windfall situation of being able to earn not just the usual 20 cents an hour rate, but 40 cents an hour. They also benefitted when Washington, D.C. needing a steady steel supply, and desiring to avoid production delays caused by strikes, implemented "an eight-hour day...workers now earned time and a half overtime."[32] Life in America had definitely improved for them in terms of economic security. The national mobilization for war demonstrated to workers the need to continue such positive gains in a post-war environment. The economic gains made during the war prompted many to believe that such gains would continue in peacetime. The sudden end to the war, however, and subsequent demobilization, brought these hopes to a crashing end. It is rather ironic to note that the war and military mobilization caused living standards of workers in industries, like the steel industry, to actually rise. To many, the benefits of joining and becoming involved in the labor movement finally seemed to outweigh the consequences.

In September 1919, the national steel strike engulfed the nation. The Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers sought to improve working conditions and benefits nationally. This national union mainly protected the interests of skilled workers, of whom most were nativist and multiple generation American, while excluding mainly unskilled and newly arrived immigrant workers. Immigrants from Poland, Italy, and Hungary even went so far as to express their displeasure by breaking the strike and working as scabs.[33] Skilled workers received better pay

[32] Goldman, Mark. *High Hopes: The Rise and Decline of Buffalo, New York,* p. 202
[33] Goldman, Mark. *High Hopes: The Rise and Decline of Buffalo, New York,* p. 203

and were not helping the unskilled with their issues, many of which were the same issues. Nevertheless, at the turn of the century, most steel plants were becoming automated, which was bad news for the higher paid skilled laborers who were mainly American born and raised. This issue weakened Amalgamated since its members came from this type of labor background. For years, tension ensued between the skilled and unskilled. But World War I managed to unite both elements of the labor movement with a common goal of seeking better living standards.[34]

The Influence of the Catholic Church In 1930s Western New York

Both within Western New York, and nationally, religious groups slowly began to respond to the poor living standards and oppression of their devout followers. Spurred to take action by a growing sense of radicalism amongst the working classes of America, Christian faiths, like the Catholic Church, sought to use their influence to advocate for working people as a means of countering the rise radical organizations like the Communist Party. Oddly enough, the Catholic Church and radical organizations such as the Communist Party did share some similar goals in terms of supporting unionization and collective action on the part of working people across the nation. Yet the visions each organization had of a future world differed significantly. Individual's within the Catholic Church sought to do more than simply preaching from the pulpit. Some of these men devoted their lives to the Catholic Church in the form of active participation in the quest for social justice and equality. Despite their backgrounds and past histories, they all were very much living in the present with their eye on Buffalo and Western New York's future.

[34] Goldman, Mark. *High Hopes: The Rise and Decline of Buffalo, New York,* p. 203

The intervention of Buffalo's clergy was not a new matter. Many clergy, from the past, fretted that their parishioners were losing faith and trust with their religious beliefs due to the parishioners' desperate life circumstances. Therefore, some of the more vocal clergy took it upon themselves to intervene in matters of the workingmen's plight. St. Paul's Episcopal Cathedral, located in downtown Buffalo, was led by Dr. Henry Adams. In 1891, Dr. Adams was solidified his belief that Western New York workers were treated poorly by their employers. He urged other faiths and churches to "turn their eyes from heaven and worry instead about the evils on earth."[35] His words spoke volumes on his care and concern for the mistreated workers in the region.

The majority of immigrants who poured into the Buffalo and the Niagara Frontier, after the Civil War, were of the Catholic faith. They reverently believed that the Catholic Church would sustain them through their difficulties. Above all, the Catholic Church was their rock that they could rely on since they seemed to have a mistrust of their new employers and the new nation's government. It was not until August 1888 that the Vatican made an important announcement on labor issues and unions in general. The Vatican did not ban their religious followers from joining a union, but they were firm in belief that the Catholic flock not be influenced by "certain elements".[36] They cautioned against associating with any secret establishment having close ties to "inappropriate" philosophies like Socialism or Communism. In essence, "Catholics were now free to join unions without fear of excommunication."[37] Three years later Pope Leo

[35] Lubinecki, Paul. "Catholic Labor Education On The Great Lakes: Fr. John Boland and the Diocesan Labor College of Buffalo." *New York History Review*. P.2
[36] Lubinecki, Paul. "Catholic Labor Education On The Great Lakes: Fr. John Boland and the Diocesan Labor College of Buffalo." *New York History Review*. P.2
[37] Lubinecki, Paul. "Catholic Labor Education On The Great Lakes: Fr. John Boland and the Diocesan Labor College of Buffalo." *New York History Review*. P.2

"linked the Church to the workers' as the document promoted the dignity of the worker and the right to organize." in a document called the *Rerum Novarum*.[38]

Rerum Novarum certainly paved the way for Catholic clergy to become involved with the organized labor movement. It was Bishop James Quigley who initiated the Buffalo Catholic Church's standing with working conditions and organized labor. Bishop Quigley, in 1899, was instrumental in the Buffalo Longshoreman strike of the grain industry.[39] He was adamant that organized labor steer clear of any Communist or Socialist involvement as pointed out in the Vatican's *Rerum Novarum*. Bishop Quigley was mindful of the labor concerns, and he was progressive in his thinking about instituting some kind of labor education in the Diocese of Buffalo.[40] He believed that disagreeable matters could be resolved peacefully by setting up Catholic labor education. Bishop Quigley wanted to address labor concerns by having members of the two opposing sides, management and labor, work together in an educational setting of small group dynamics. He believed that order could be established in intimate group settings, that would off shoot further discord. It was in these settings that labor concerns could best be addressed.[41]

On the national scene, the Diocese of Buffalo played a significant role in the organized labor movement. Dedicated priests, known typically as labor priests, were active in advocating for workers' respect and rights.[42] Besides their public advocation for workers' rights, the labor

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[38] Lubinecki, Paul. "Catholic Labor Education On The Great Lakes: Fr. John Boland and the Diocesan Labor College of Buffalo." *New York History Review*. P.2

[39] "Archbishop Quigley of Chicago Is Dead: Prelate Finally Succumbs to Paralysis at the Home of His Brother in Rochester. Once Bishop Of Buffalo He Settled Longshoremen's Strike There After State Board Had Failed -- Head of 300 Churches." *New York Times* 11 July 1915: 15. *ProQuest Historical Newspaper: The New York Times with Index*. 17 Feb. 2015.

[40] "Archbishop Quigley of Chicago Is Dead: Prelate Finally Succumbs to Paralysis at the Home of His Brother in Rochester. Once Bishop Of Buffalo He Settled Longshoremen's Strike There After State Board Had Failed -- Head of 300 Churches." *New York Times* 11 July 1915.

[41] Boland, John P. "Labor In Buffalo And Along The Frontier" P.8

[42] Lubinecki, Paul. "Catholic Labor Education On The Great Lakes: Fr. John Boland and the Diocesan Labor College of Buffalo." *New York History Review*. P.3

priests reflected their beliefs on how humans should be treated. Their support and their advocacy sent a major message of confidence to the beleaguered work force. It spoke volumes. Many of the workers, being overwhelmingly Catholic immigrants, actually belonged in the labor priests' parishes, therefore, these men meant more to the priests than just a nameless ill-treated worker. The labor priests knew not only their names, but more importantly knew their backgrounds, their families, and their most personal needs.

One of the most well known and influential labor priests was Father John P. Boland. Boland was born in Buffalo on April 27, 1888.[43] As a child, he observed his father's working conditions as a Buffalo grain scooper. Often he would visit his father and the other men during their break time and listen to their tribulations. Although young, he learned of his father's labor concerns with management and became well aware of the dangerous working conditions endured by men such as his own father. He understood his father's role in Local 51 of the International Longshoremen's Union, the strikes, and the violent repercussions. Since childhood, Msgr. Boland realized that he wanted to be part of organized labor, and he sought the path of education and the priesthood instead of working as an actual laborer.[44] As a priest, he made it his mission to intervene between labor and management. Boland tried to act as a conciliator who could bring two conflicting sides together during times of high drama to establish improved working relations.

[43] "MSGR. Boland, 80, The Labor Priest: First Head of State Labor Relations Board." *New York Times* n.d.: 33. *ProQuest Historical Newspaper: The New York Times with Index*. Web. 10 Feb. 2015.
[44] "MSGR. Boland, 80, The Labor Priest: First Head of State Labor Relations Board." *New York Times.* P. 33

In 1937, he founded the Buffalo Diocesan Labor Management College.[45] Boland agreed with former Bishop Quigley's notion that education was the key to bringing the two sides together. He believed that Western New York's early economic development could be likened to an adventure with two serious determined partners. He considered one partner, labor, as providing the force for change that he considered essential in order to live well.[46] Labor "transformed a wilderness into a cluster of mighty cities with their homes and public and business buildings."[47] He likened the transformation of new settlements and employment opportunities encircling Western New York to a rosary. Each bead representing a home, a business, a town, or a city.[48] The other partner, business, provided the vision and the finance to achieve its goal of creating wealth and developing the Niagara Frontier. "To all of them we owe the present and a good portion of our future spiritual and temporal profits."[49] Boland himself would become heavily involved in mediating labor disputes. The passage of the Wagner Act in 1935 created the National Labor Relations Board, and inspired several states to introduce similar legislation replicating the federal example. New York State created the "Little Wagner" Act of 1937, of which Boland was appointed to head.[50]

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[45] "MSGR. Boland, 80, The Labor Priest: First Head of State Labor Relations Board." *New York Times.* P.33

[46] Boland, John P. "Labor In Buffalo And Along The Frontier" P.1

[47] Boland, John P. "Labor In Buffalo And Along The Frontier" P.1

[48] Boland, John P. "Labor In Buffalo And Along The Frontier" P.1

[49] Boland, John P. "Labor In Buffalo And Along The Frontier" P.2

[50] "'Little Wagner' Act Of State Is Upheld: Court of Appeals Rules, 4 to 3, Against Metropolitan Life in Fight on Agents' Union." *New York Times* 12 Apr. 1939: n. pag. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times with Index*. Web. 20 Feb. 2015.

In July 1937, Western New York "lieutenants" of the CIO and AFL put aside their differences to unite in support of a "virtual food embargo" against packing plants and wholesale warehouse employees.[51] Over 1,000 truck drivers walked out refusing to deliver meats to the warehouses. The truckers were joined by local packing house butchers demanding a compulsory closed shop. The scale of the walkout required instant attention from the New York State National Labor Relations Board and its chairman, Father John Boland.[52]

Boland's intervention in the strike prompted a temporary truce after four days of striking, and after the number of striking between the meat packers and truck drivers swelled to over 2,000. *The New York Times* reported an incident of a meat truck being overturned and set on fire by strikers, although the flames were quickly extinguished.[53] Additionally, the International Longshoreman's Association threatened to expand the strike by refusing to allow meat shipments to be unloaded. The truce was brokered by Boland to bide time in order to find a mutually beneficial agreement between the workers and management, although the truce did little to alleviate a food shortage.[54] The terms of the truce included an agreement by employers "not to move meats,

[51] "Wider Food Strike Faced By Buffalo: CIO., Aiding A.F.L. Truck Drivers, Threatens to Call Out Grocery Clerks; State Moves For Peace; Andrews and Boland Act as Wholesalers Address an Appeal to Lehman." *New York Times* 24 July 1937: n. pag. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times with Index*. 20 Feb. 2015.
[52] "Wider Food Strike Faced By Buffalo: CIO., Aiding A.F.L. Truck Drivers, Threatens to Call Out Grocery Clerks; State Moves For Peace; Andrews and Boland Act as Wholesalers Address an Appeal to Lehman." *New York Times* 24 July 1937.
[53] "Buffalo Strikes Halted By Truce: Truck Drivers and Meat Plant Men Will Confer With Employers Today." *New York Times* 25 July 1937: n. pag. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times with Index*. Web. 20 Feb. 2015.
[54] "Buffalo Strikes Halted By Truce: Truck Drivers and Meat Plant Men Will Confer With Employers Today." *New York Times* 25 July 1937.

butter, eggs, and staple groceries for twenty-four hours, and union leaders promised abandonment of picketing and other steps taken to prevent food deliveries."[55] Along with this, representatives from both groups agreed to meet with Boland directly to discuss closed-shop clauses in proposed contracts.

Despite the best intentions of Father John Boland and the New York Labor Relations Board, the temporary truce failed to permanently end the strike and find a settlement between the workers and management.[56] Leaders of the unions involved in the strike stated that the truce would expire 24 hours after its implementation and that they would resume their blocking of food deliveries. Regardless, Boland remained optimistic that the strikers and employers would reach a final settlement by putting forward a three-point plan (the details of which were never fully revealed) which addressed the possibility of a closed-shop contract.[57] This example of Boland's skill at mediation is one of the many types of cases and situations that Boland dealt with in his role as chairman of the New York Labor Relations Board in attempting to mediate labor disputes across the state.

The role of the Catholic Church in Western New York politics/labor activity closely parallels the approach the national and international Catholic Church took throughout the Great Depression years. The Catholic Church in Western New York was fearful of the influence of radicals and Communists infiltrating the labor movement. The rise of the Catholic Worker Movement in 1933 provided an excellent opportunity for the local and national Catholic hierarchy to

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[55] "Buffalo Strikes Halted By Truce: Truck Drivers and Meat Plant Men Will Confer With Employers Today." *New York Times* 25 July 1937.

[56] "Food Strike Truce Is Ended At Buffalo: But Boland Is Hopeful That Three-Point Plan May Lead to a Settlement Today." *New York Times* 26 July 1937: n. pag. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times with Index*. Web. 20 Feb. 2015.

[57] "Food Strike Truce Is Ended At Buffalo: But Boland Is Hopeful That Three-Point Plan May Lead to a Settlement Today." *New York Times* 26 July 1937.

back in order to undercut a growing radicalism which could potentially threaten their influence. The idea of Social Christianity was not necessarily new, but the Great Depression provided a re-surgence of the movement.

Locally, priests like Monsignor John Boland understood the economic hardships of their congregation and genuinely believed that a strong and active labor movement was the necessary solution to combat poverty and give workers a voice. Buffalo's heavy Irish, Polish, and Italian population, as well as its strong industrial base, made Buffalo fertile ground for a Social Christian message. As a result, it is important to acknowledge that one of the reasons that political radicalism never gained such a strong foothold in Western New York politics or labor movement, is that the authority of the Catholic Church heavily influenced the mainly labor Catholic population to chart a middle way between the extremes of the free-market economy and political radicalism. It would be safe to conclude that the actions of labor priest, like Monsignor Boland, did more to offset the most radical elements of the labor movement than did any of the "Red Scares" or intimidation tactics of management.

Response of the City Of Buffalo Toward The Great Depression

The 1929 Stock Market Crash that precipitated the Great Depression created not just an economic crisis, but a political and social one as well. As the Great Depression worsened throughout the 1930s, individuals and political leaders looked for new ideas and support against

a political and economic system that seemed to have failed their basic needs. The response nationally to the Great Depression varied and was not necessarily confined to just the federal governments response. Local governments throughout the country grappled with the suddenness and extremity of mass unemployment and economic depression. In many ways, the actions and inaction of local government affected people in a much more direct and fundamental way than federal or even state responses to the Great Depression.

Within Western New York, political leaders also grappled with how best to respond to the Great Depression. High unemployment placed financial demands upon the City of Buffalo, which was unprepared for mass unemployment and caught seriously off guard by the severity of the economic downturn. The city wide Board of Social Welfare put forward a request on January 6, 1930 (less than four months after the crash) requesting the appropriation of an additional $270,015 to be placed in the Department of Social Welfare.[58] This request was made just to make the estimated expenditure of the Department of Social Welfare for the fiscal year of 1930.[59] An excerpt from the City Council proceeding discussing the proposed appropriation read:

> …if demands made for outdoor and indoor relief during November and December, 1929 continue at the same rate during January and February, 1930, the general office will be obliged to face a deficit by the middle of March, while the inspector of the World War veterans relief, Mr. Edward P. Kelly reports that if conditions remain the same, they will be without any relief funds by the middle of February.[60]

[58] Board of Social Welfare. Buffalo Common Council. Proceedings Of The Council Of The City Of Buffalo: From January 1, 1930 to December 31, 1930. Buffalo, NY: Holling Press, 1930. P. 26.
[59] Board of Social Welfare. Buffalo Common Council. *Proceedings Of The Council Of The City Of Buffalo*, 1930, P. 26.
[60]Board of Social Welfare. Buffalo Common Council. *Proceedings Of The Council Of The City Of Buffalo*, 1930, P. 26.

This excerpt gives the sense of urgency that was quickly setting in throughout the political and economic community of Buffalo, even though this sense of panic was not exclusive to just Buffalo. Similar to most cities across the nation, Buffalo faced a rapidly growing unemployed labor force that was increasingly demanding more in terms of material benefit and support from local, state, and federal government.

Coupled with the economic downturn and mass unemployment, the unemployed began to organize collectively and force their own interests into the political system. The national Unemployed Council movement began as a Communist organized social movement that was active within Western New York. Unemployed Councils were formed in nearly every major American city and became a major fixture of grassroots activity for social and political change throughout the 1930s. The principal goal of the Unemployed Councils was to organize the unemployed to advocate for the interests of unemployed people across the country, and to create a new political force within the United States that sought to end the current capitalistic economic system.[61] Strategies such as "Hunger Marches", like the one that occurred in November 1931 that originated partly in Buffalo, served to raise awareness of the issues that unemployed and poor people across the nation were facing in the early 1930s.[62] The actions taken by the Unemployed Councils across the nation fermented a revolutionary feeling that was slowly growing in popularity in terms of anger and frustration against the current political and economic system to adequately address their grievances and misery.

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[61] Valocchi Steve. "The Unemployed Workers Movement of the 1930s: A Reexamination of Piven and Cloward Thesis." *Social Problems* (1990): 191-205. *JSTOR*

[62] "Communists Behind The 'Hunger March' Moving On Capital: Secret Service Unearths Orders Calling for Use of Stones in Defense." *New York Times* 29 Nov. 1931: *ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times.* P. 1.

On October 26, 1931, the Unemployed Council of Buffalo presented the City Council with a list of seventeen demands that they requested be implemented in order to offset the worst aspects of the depression on the unemployed.[63] The demands were presented by the Secretary of the Buffalo Unemployed Council, James J. Kissel, and were mainly focused on immediate relief for unemployed persons. These demands included: a referendum to request unemployment insurance from the state and federal government, the creation of "A City Unemployment Relief Fund", the ending of evictions of the unemployed, no discrimination and equal relief for African-American workers and their families, and providing free lunch, clothing, milk and other supplies for children and babies.[64] Additionally, the Unemployed Council advocated for the seizure of public buildings and vacant houses to be opened for sheltering the unemployed (providing accommodations like beds, cots, blankets and heat), and supporting the abolition of work requirements supported by the Department of Social Welfare in order to receive benefits. The practices of the city Department of Social Welfare were criticized as being corrupt and taking advantage of unemployed persons and were demanded to be reformed.[65]

On top of these immediate material benefits, the Unemployed Councils also advocated for the rights of workers to be protected and supported. As their seventeenth demand, the Unemployed Council demanded that workers have the right to be protected against police violence when protesting for that year's winter relief, and also demanded the dropping of charges against nineteen workers who had been arrested for presenting their demands to the Common Council and resisting the "brutal evictions and attacks by the city police."[66] Many of these demands

[63] Buffalo Common Council. *Proceedings Of The Council Of The City Of Buffalo*: January 1, 1931 to December 31, 1931. Buffalo NY: Holling Press, 1931. P. 1880
[64] Buffalo Common Council. *Proceedings Of The Council Of The City Of Buffalo*, 1931, P. 1880.
[65] Buffalo Common Council. *Proceedings Of The Council of The City Of Buffalo*, 1931, P. 1880
[66] Buffalo Common Council. *Proceedings Of The Council Of The City Of Buffalo*, 1931, P. 1881.

would eventually be fulfilled by the federal government in the form of the New Deal, although many would also not be fulfilled for decades to come, such as the demand that required no discrimination and equal relief for African-Americans and their families. Home evictions still occur to this day. These demands represent the evolving desperation that many workers felt as the Great Depression dragged on, and relief of any kind remained out of reach.

However, what is perhaps most interesting about this list of demands is not only that it predates the New Deal by two years, but the level of grassroots organization that was occurring within Buffalo at the time. Only two years after the Stock Market crash and the start of the Depression, the beginnings of a growing politicization of the unemployed and lower class was taking shape in the form of Unemployed Councils across the nation like the one in Buffalo. These demands were made by the rapidly increasing ranks of the unemployed but did not necessarily mean that the City Council was obliged to act immediately upon them. As the Great Depression continued to worsen, and inaction on the part of the federal government complicated the situation further, the demand for action on the local grassroots level eventually would reach a fever pitch.

The winter of 1933 witnessed a change in the political atmosphere of the country and a growing consensus that local, state, and federal government had a responsibility to respond more proactively to the economic needs of the public. This was especially true in Buffalo. In 1930, the "Mayor's Committee on Unemployment" was created by Mayor Charles E. Roesch to coordinate various relief efforts and brought together a group of unpaid volunteers from nearly every segment of the community.[67] The committee produced a pamphlet in February 1933 entitled "Outline of Unemployment Relief and Welfare Work In Buffalo". It outlined the efforts the city was taking to combat the Great Depression and the various departments involved in the relief effort.

[67] Mayor's Committee On Unemployment. *Outline of Unemployment and Welfare Work in Buffalo.* Buffalo, NY: Buffalo & Erie County Historical Society Library, 1933. P. 3-21.

The pamphlet outlined the two basic problems facing the city of Buffalo in February 1933. The first was how to provide immediate aid to the 80,000 people and families unable to buy food. The second was how to go beyond just the physical material needs that people need to just get by, and to provide both the individual and community with something more substantive and long-lasting.[68]

By 1933, New York State was paying about 40% of the cost to maintain city municipal welfare after the Common Council voted on November 1, 1931 to accept funding from the state. This vote was done in response to the rapid explosion in demand for relief and the failure of current municipal welfare and private charity to keep up with demand. To oversee the use of state funds, the state created an oversight agency called the State Temporary Emergency Relief Administrative (T.E.R.A.) although it remained the responsibility of municipalities such as Buffalo to coordinate and determine the relief effort.[69]

The pamphlet produced by the Mayor's committee pointed out that regardless of the financial strains placed on the municipality, Buffalo's longterm financial stability was in good shape despite the rapid increases in welfare spending. Compared to other cities across the country, the pamphlet states that Buffalo has "…a better record than any other major city in tax-collections, and in desirability of its bonds, the last issue selling at lowest-interest cost since 1886."[70] The Mayor's Committee on Unemployment also praised the strength of Buffalo's current Welfare agencies for helping to maintain a basic level of preparedness for the rapid rise in unemployment which has drawn national praise. As mentioned, the first of two major problems which the Mayor's Committee on Unemployment stated as threatening the city of Buffalo in

[68] Mayor's Committee On Unemployment, P. 3.
[69]Mayor's Committee On Unemployment, P. 3.
[70] Mayor's Committee On Unemployment, P. 4.

February 1933 was the "physical needs" of the population to maintain a basic living standard. These "physical needs" included support for food and shelter relief. The job of supporting these "physical needs" was carried out in three ways: "institutional care", "home-relief", and "work-relief".[71]

"Institutional care" referred to financial support in helping families stay together in their own homes, although this was not the largest element of the relief program.[72] The bulk of the "institutional care" relief went to funding the Erie County Lodging House which was primarily for homeless men.[73] Funded between the County and State, over 1,500 lodging houses were opened throughout the County providing around 4,200 free meals (two meals per individual).[74] Within the City of Buffalo, the Mayor's Committee on Unemployment sought to centralize and maintain the efficiency of the Lodging Houses in order to get the most out of taxpayer dollars as well to significantly expand the Lodging Houses within the city itself.[75]

The "institutional relief" program was followed by the "Home-relief" and "Work Relief" efforts under the unified title of "Food-and-Shelter Plan". "Home-relief" sought to provide nearly 19,000 families with the bare necessities for life including food, shelter, and fuel.[76] The "Home-relief" service was provided through City and County public agencies as well as private charities such as the Jewish Welfare Society, the St. Vincent de Paul Society, and the Salvation Army. The Mayor's Committee on Unemployment helped to coordinate action between these

[71] Mayor's Committee On Unemployment, P. 5.
[72] Mayor's Committee On Unemployment, P. 5.
[73] Mayor's Committee On Unemployment, P. 6.
[74] Mayor's Committee On Unemployment, P. 6.
[75] Mayor's Committee On Unemployment, P. 6.
[76] Mayor's Committee On Unemployment, P. 7.

private charities and the three major branches within the city government dealing with this service: the Department of Social Welfare, the World War Veteran's Bureau, and the Spanish American War Bureau.[77]

The pooling of resources of both the World War Veteran's and Spanish American War Bureaus helped to support 4,000 families of veterans in the city.[78] One of the duties of the "Home-relief" program was to place food-orders to local grocery-stores each week by the Department of Social Welfare for families struggling make ends meet. Although the size of the family depended on the amount given, the cost of the program began with $2.00 for one person and increased by $1.00 for each additional individual paid for by the Department of Social Welfare.[79] Along with this, "Home-relief" provided paid rent to over 7,000 families across the city and provided "Coke" or coal to around 12,000 homes for heat.[80]

"Home-relief" contrasted with "Work-relief" in that "Work-relief" was a program designed to provide work for those able to work including women. The "Work-relief" program was largely managed by the "Emergency Work Bureau of Buffalo" which was part of a broader state wide program, and was not the responsibility of the Mayor's Committee on Unemployment.[81] The program was divided between two sub-groups: white-collar workers and workers currently on welfare. In 1933, "Work-relief" provided employment to nearly 800 individuals with white-collar experience and was helping workers on welfare find various employment opportunities.[82] According to the committee's report on welfare and relief services in Buffalo:

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[77] Mayor's Committee On Unemployment, P. 7
[78] Mayor's Committee On Unemployment, P. 7.
[79] Mayor's Unemployment Committee, P. 7.
[80] Mayor's Unemployment Committee, P. 8.
[81] Mayor's Unemployment Committee, P. 8.
[82] Mayor's Unemployment Committee, P. 9.

Tasks performed by "White-Collar" workers include: mapping vacant property owned by the city, teaching classes of unemployed individuals, providing surveys of traffic, tax, health, and unemployment, planning for future development of city, organizing orchestras of unemployed musicians, taking inventory of all City-owned buildings and equipment, and providing nursing at overcrowded hospitals.[83]

For non-white collar workers, employment opportunities, such as the cleaning up of parks, renovating schools, removing ice and snow from sidewalks, and sanding street-intersections were some of the job opportunities available for them. By February of 1933, 2,151 men and women were assigned to twenty different "Work-relief" programs.[84]

Prior to the "Work-relief" program, beginning in 1930 and ending in 1932, a program called "Day-a-Week" which was created as a means-test program requiring individuals on "Home-relief" to complete some sort of weekly task for the City in order to qualify for benefits. To qualify for "Home-relief", individuals had to perform tasks such as raking leaves, removing snow, maintaining parks etc., which were required to be performed one day per week. This system, however, was eventually replaced by the "Work-relief" program because the work offered by "Work-relief" provided more job opportunities which were viewed as more constructive.[85] Changing attitudes about "work-requirements" were evolving as well due to the limitation of job opportunities.

The combined effects of the "Institutional-relief", "Home-relief", and "Work-relief" programs provided the unemployed of Buffalo some of the best chances they could find of maintaining a basic living standard and livelihood in their community. Although they were three of the largest and most well know relief programs, they were not by any means the only relief programs

[83] Mayor's Unemployment Committee, P. 10.
[84] Mayor's Unemployment Committee, P. 11.
[85] Mayor's Unemployment Committee, P. 10.

undertaken by the City. The Mayor's Committee on Unemployment also put together a program to maintain a clothing warehouse to distribute clothing to individuals in desperate need.[86] Yet, all of these programs symbolize the growing need at the time for more government action on the part of local, state, and federal governments to respond to the Great Depression on practical and social responsibility grounds. Considering that these programs were formed within a few short years after the *laissez faire* policies of the 1920s, it is remarkable to note how attitudes toward government intervention changed rapidly. Those who previously believed they were safe from economic hardship were forced to face the worst aspects of the Great Depression without any support.

The Great Depression did not provide much choice for inaction as unemployment swelled and a increasingly class-conscious public began to demand more from government in terms of material benefits and economic reform. The programs that began in the City of Buffalo in the early 1930s did not spring from mid-air, but developed because of the very realistic dangers that mass unemployment posed to social and economic development of the local Western New York community. In many ways, it could be argued that the New Deal was born out of local grassroots movements like the Unemployed Councils and the social welfare policies of many cities struggling to keep their heads above water during the darkest years of the Great Depression.

Conclusion

Western New York was one of many industrial areas across the country that was radically transformed by the Great Depression, and in many ways it matured the Western New York region. The rise of the City of Buffalo and the greater Western New York region began in earnest

[86] Mayor's Unemployment Committee, P.12.

during the Gilded Age where its strategic location as a port city on Lake Erie and major railroad hub turned the region into a crossroads of industry and transportation. The influx of immigrants from Italy and Poland provided Buffalo with the cheap labor force it needed to expand its industrial base and to become a premier American city of industry. Yet, these benefits came at a cost. The drive for economic growth and a diverse industrial base had its consequences in the form of extreme income inequality, and a restless working-class population eager for reform. The Great Depression brought about mass unemployment, food shortages, and deep financial insecurity.

The notion of social responsibility and a social contract was born both on the grassroots level, and surprisingly, from such old institutions like the Catholic Church. Citizen involvement in organizations like the Unemployed Councils began to argue that business and government had a moral obligation toward the workers and producers of wealth in this country. Individuals like Monsignor John Boland assumed leadership roles aimed at providing the previously ignored working people the voice needed to gain rights in the workplace. By the end of the Great Depression, the era of cutthroat profit-motivated thinking in Western New York had largely been reined in, at least temporarily. The immediate post-Great Depression years ushered in an era where the local economy largely worked for the benefit of the people and the workers.

Western New York's decline as a major American city has been attributed to countless factors that rest outside the scope of this paper. However, knowing Western New York's history is beneficial to anyone longing to know how to reinvigorate this small corner of America. At a time of increased income inequality and financial insecurity for so many people, many have argued that today's Americans are living through a "Second Gilded Age." No where is this truer than in contemporary Western New York. This is perhaps the overall significance of 1930s Western New York. By looking to this time period, today's government and business leaders can

learn from the lessons of their predecessors. To improve contemporary Western New York is to understand its history.