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Ethan D. Beck

Cedarville University, ethandavidbeck@cedarville.edu

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The Rise and Fall of the Knights of Labor: A Gilded Age Tale (1869-1949)

Ethan Beck

The Noble and Holy Order of the Knights of Labor was one of the foremost labor unions during some of the most turbulent years of the Gilded Age labor movement. During this period, labor organizations were not only struggling for livable wages, but for regulations on child labor, safer working conditions, and an eight-hour workday to replace the average twelve-hour day. The Knights fought in the thick of these and other labor issues of the Gilded Age. Over the history of the organization, the Knights of Labor battled against the typical perceptions of labor in America and foreshadowed the coming changes to the labor movement through its revolutionary tactics and relentless efforts for the betterment of workers.

The Noble and Holy Order of the Knights of Labor sprung out of the demise of the Philadelphia-based Garment Cutters Association (GCA). In 1869, Uriah Stephens, frustrated by the failings of this defunct group, resolved to form a new labor organization. Carrol Wright, a contemporary of Stephens, wrote that on Thanksgiving Day, 1869, Stephens gathered several former members of the GCA to propose a new organization designed to capitalize on the few successes and learn from the many mistakes of the Garment Cutters Association (139).

According to Stephens, one of the principle causes for the failings of the Garment Cutters had been public reprisals and personal attacks against its members. Stephens resolved to remedy this issue with strict secrecy, which he believed was the only way to protect labor organizations from the backlash of both the public and the interests of business. He borrowed from his training as a Freemason to create complicated initiation rituals and passwords (Wright 142). However, there was a double purpose to the secrecy: Stephens believed that secrecy and ceremony would not only help

protect members of the society, but also foster cohesion and a sense of fraternity between members.

The idea of secrecy Stephens borrowed from the Freemasons; however, he did have several ideas that would make his organization truly unique. Besides secrecy, Stephens proposed two other major pillars to his organization. He based the second pillar on his belief that the strike was not the most efficient or ethical way for labor to handle its disputes with business management. Stephens advocated the use of the boycott rather than the strike. He saw boycotts as a way for the laborers to show their displeasure as consumers and citizens rather than as rebellious workers (Wright 141).

The third pillar of Stephen's organization was his revolutionary advocacy of inclusive policies. During this period of history, it was extremely uncommon for unions to include unskilled workers in their ranks. Because unskilled workers were easily replaced, they were perceived as having less bargaining power. By including unskilled workers, arguably, Stephens was weakening the organization. However, Stephens saw the benefit of increased numbers as a force that outweighed the perceived cost. In his book on the Knights of Labor, Craig Phelan postulates that, by including all skill levels in their organization, the group's leaders were attempting to form a "grand army of the discontented," which by its sheer size could not be overcome once set to a common purpose (2).

Stephens served as the undisputed leader of the Knights of Labor until, in 1879, a coalition of Knights under the leadership of Terence Powderly began challenging one of Stephens' major pillars. At this time, the cardinals of the Catholic Church had declared it forbidden to join any secret society (Phelan 35). Powderly, a Catholic himself, argued that more Catholics, a large percentage of the industrial workforce, would join the organization if it lost its secrecy element. Supported by the growing dissatisfaction with Stephens' policy of secrecy, Powderly became the new leader of the organization.

Although the organization did not remain secret long after Powderly assumed leadership, Powderly did retain many of the Knights' original policies. He had the same aversion to the strike as did Stephens, and attempted many alternatives to striking. When many of the Knights expressed a desire to join the eight-

hour workday strikes, Powderly proposed an essay contest as an alternative to striking (Yard 446). Although it is possible that this proposal was simply an attempt to distract the sometimes malcontented and aggressive Knights, an essay contest was entirely consistent with Powderly's general strategy (447). Powderly, much the same as his predecessor, did not think that strikes were effective. He argued that the battle for the eight-hour workday could be won not by striking, but by courting public opinion. Powderly claimed that the essay contest was "a grand success," saying that through the contest a "healthy public opinion" was created (245). Powderly's emphasis on public opinion directed the prospective strategy of the organization. Under his leadership, the Knights did not actively petition the government to step in and impose a mandatory eight-hour workday. In fact, Alexander Yard notes, "The Knights of Labor had minimal radical demands and expectations" of government intervention (444). The Knights were more intent on petitioning business executives than the executive branch, and the court of popular opinion than the Supreme Court.

Under the direction of Terence Powderly, the Knights of Labor underwent massive growth. When Powderly took over leadership from Stephens in 1879, the Knights of Labor were a "small secretive group of less than 10,000 members" (Phelan 1). At the height of its membership, just seven years later, the Knights of Labor boasted over 700,000 members (Gourevitch 181). Theories postulating the reasons for this surging growth abound. One popular theory is that the two successful strikes against the business enterprises of Jay Gould prompted the membership increase (Case 222). As these strikes occurred in the early 1880s and the union experienced rapid growth during this time, this theory is plausible. However, Donald Kemmerer and Edward Wickersham in their article "Reasons for the Growth of the Knights of Labor," assert that the two "successful" Gould strikes were only moderate successes to which neither the organization itself nor the newspapers of the day paid much heed (214). The article further asserts that the impetus behind the growth was actually the fallacious association of the Knights of Labor with the eight-hour workday movement and the Federation of Trades and Unions (218). While the eight-hour workday was a goal of the Knights of Labor, members of the organization's leadership, such as Powderly, discouraged any of the members from participating in the

eight-hour workday strikes (Kemmerer 219). However, even with its prominent leaders opposed to the Federation of Trade and Labor's tactics, both laborers and the press often confused the Knights of Labor, the most well-known union of its day, with other, lesser-known labor organizations agitating for the eight-hour workday (Phelan 1). Summarizing this confusion in his autobiography, Powderly wrote, "Men were rushed into the order so rapidly ... that they, in many instances, did not know that the Federation of Trades and the Knights were [not] identical" (143). Kemmerer and Wickersham postulate that this confusion contributed to the organization's surging growth in the 1880s (219).

Just as rapid as the organization's rise to prominence was its precipitous fall. On May 4, 1886, the Knights of Labor were involved in a series of protests in Chicago. Near the end of a rally in Haymarket Square, police arrived to disperse the crowd (Messer-Kruse et al 39). As the crowd of workers began to dissolve, an unidentified individual threw an explosive device at the oncoming police officers. The square erupted into chaos as the police attempted to assess the situation and the panicked crowd fled the area. By the end of the night, seven police officers were dead and several more had been wounded (39). In the following weeks, the police arrested several members of an anarchist group in connection with the bombing. The newspapers and political figures of the day generally associated the Knights of Labor with the incident, although the organization was in no reasonably discernable way connected to the anarchists. As the fallacious stories of the Knights' anarchist tendencies spread, thousands of workers abandoned the metaphorically sinking ship.

Under attack by business interests, and plagued by internal power struggles and dissension, the organization began to lose popularity among workers. Powderly's notable charisma was ultimately not enough to keep the Knights together as the organization began to disintegrate in the 1890s (Phelan 230). Just as it was the misconception of the Order as the organization behind the eight-hour workday strikes that first propelled the Knights into the spotlight of the labor movement, it was the misconception that the Knights were part of an anarchist movement that caused its downfall. Thus, almost poetically, the eventual demise of the Knights of Labor came at the very hands that delivered it into fame. The Knights of Labor, which Uriah Stephens began as a small organization in 1869, became famous through the leadership

and charisma of Terence Powderly, who ultimately lost control of the organization and watched it fall from national prominence. Although the Knights of Labor limped on until the middle of 1900s, it never exercised a notable role in later labor disputes.

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