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Primary Source: The Knights of Labor [1]

During the late nineteenth century, many workers joined unions in hopes of improving their working conditions and wages. In just three years between 1877 and 1880, the number of national unions grew from three to eighteen.

The Knights of Labor was one early labor union, organized in Philadelphia in 1871 by garment cutters. In its early days, the Knights of Labor was a a secret society, which fueled rumors in the press that they were dangerous or violent. The rumors were encouraged by factory owners who feared that organization of their workers would lead to strikes.

Within a few years, the Knights of Labor expanded and allowed all workers to join. In 1878, they released this public statement about the goals of their society. No longer a secret society, the Knights of Labor grew into one of the largest labor unions in the United States. By 1886, the Knights of the Labor boasted 500,000 members.

In this 1878 statement of goals, the Knights of Labor expressed concern about the accumulation of wealth by some people and the possible "pauperization," or impoverishment, of workers. It called for the reduction of the workday to 8 hours; the prohibition of the employment of children under age fifteen in factories, workshops, and mines; equal pay for men and women; and other labor laws that we take for granted today. It also called for the use of arbitration, or negotiations, rather than strikes, to settle labor disputes.

The Knights of Labor opened its first assembly in Raleigh in 1884 and expanded into most counties in North Carolina, but made little progress toward its goals in the state. Resistance from business managers limited its effectiveness. In addition, the fact that the union was open to both whites and blacks made it unpopular among many white southerners, who resisted the idea of social equality between blacks and whites.

Preamble and Declaration of Principles of the Knights of Labor

The alarming development and aggressiveness of great capitalists and corporations, unless checked, will inevitably [2] lead to the pauperization [3] and hopeless degradation [4] of the toiling masses. It is imperative [5], if we desire to enjoy the full blessings of life, that a check be placed upon unjust accumulation, and the power for evil of aggregated [6] wealth. This much-desired object can be accomplished only by the united efforts of those who obey the divine injunction, "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread." Therefore we have formed the Order of the Knights of Labor, for the purpose of organizing and directing the power of the industrial masses, not as a political party, for it is more -- in it are crystalized sentiments [7] and measures for the benefit of the whole people, but it should be borne in mind, when exercising the right of suffrage [8], that most of the objects herein set forth can only be obtained through legislation, and that it is the duty of all to assist in nominating and supporting with their votes only such candidates as will pledge their support to these measures, regardless of party. But no one shall, however, be compelled [9] to vote with the majority, and calling upon all who believe in securing the greatest good to the greatest number, to join and assist us.

Declaration of Principles

We declare to the world that our aims are:

1. To make industrial and moral worth, not wealth, the true standard of individual and national greatness.
2. To secure to the worker the full enjoyment of the wealth they create, sufficient leisure in which to develop their intellectual, moral and social faculties [10]; all of the benefits, recreation and pleasures of association; in a word, to enable them to share in the gains and honors of advancing civilization.

In order to secure these results we demand of the State:

3. The establishment of bureaus of labor statistics, that we may arrive at a correct knowledge of the educational, moral, and financial condition of the laboring masses.
4. That the public lands, the heritage of the people, be reserved for actual settlers; not another acre for railroads or speculators, and that all lands now held for speculative purposes be taxed at their full value.
5. The abrogation [11] of all laws that do not bear equally upon capital and labor, and the removal of unjust technicalities, delays, and discriminations in the administration of justice.
6. The adoption of measures providing for the health and safety of those engaged in mining, manufacturing, and building industries, and for indemnification [12] to those engaged therin for injuries received through lack of necessary safeguards.
7. The recognition by incorporation of trades unions, orders, and such other associations as may be organized by the working masses to improve their condition and protect their rights.
8. The enactment of laws to compel corporations to pay their employees weekly in lawful money for the labor of the preceding week, and giving mechanics and laborers a first lien [13] upon the product of their labor to the extent of their full wages.
9. The abolition [14] of the contract system on national, state, and municipal works.
10. The enactment of laws providing for arbitration between employers and employed, and to enforce the decision of the arbitrators.
11. The prohibition [15] by law of the employment of children under fifteen years of age in workshops, mines and factories.
12. To prohibit the hiring out of convict labor.
13. That a graduated income tax be levied.

And so demand at the hands of Congress:

14. The establishment of a national monetary system, in which a circulating medium in necessary quantity shall issue direct to the people, without the intervention of banks; that all the national issue shall be full legal tender in payment of all debts, public and private; and that the government shall not guarantee or recognize any private banks, or create any banking corporations.
15. That interest-bearing bonds, bills of credit, or notes shall never be issued by the government, but that, when need arises, the emergency shall be met by issue of legal tender, non-interest-bearing money.
16. That the importation of foreign labor under contract be prohibited.
17. That, in connection with the post-office, the government shall organize financial exchanges, safe deposits, and facilities for the deposit of the savings of the people in small sums.
18. That the government shall obtain possession, by purchase, under the right of eminent domain [16], of all telegraphs, telephones, and railroads, and that hereafter no charter or license be issued to any corporation for construction or operation of any means of transporting intelligence, passengers or freight.

And while making the foregoing demands upon the State and national government, we will endeavor [17] to associate our own labors to:

19. To establish co-operative institutions, such as will tend to supercede [18] the wage system, by the introduction of a co-operative industrial system.
20. To secure for both sexes equal pay for equal work.
21. To shorten the hours of labor by a general refusal to work for more than eight hours.
22. To persuade employers to agree to arbitrate all differences which may arise between them and their employees, in order that the bonds of sympathy between them may be strengthened, and that strikes may be rendered unnecessary.

Primary Source Citation:

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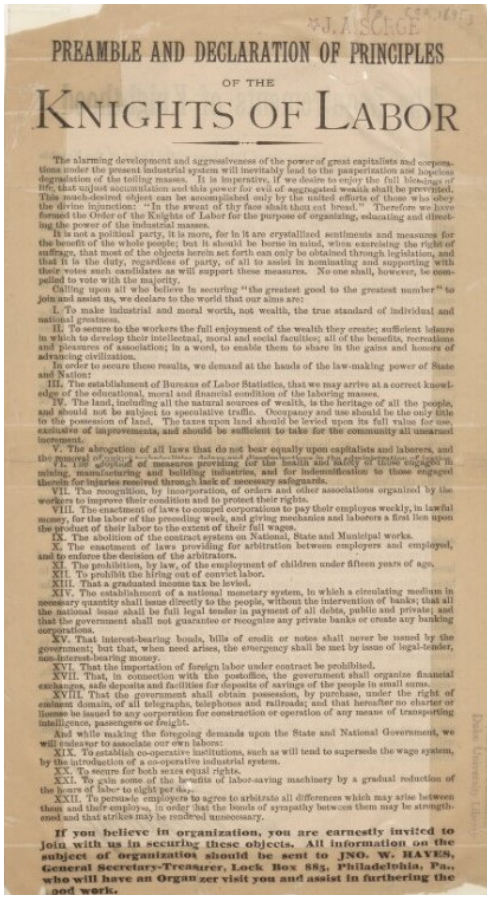


PREAMBLE AND DECLARATION OF PRINCIPLES

OF THE

KNIGHTS OF LABOR

The alarming development and aggressiveness of the power of great capitalists and corporations under the present industrial system will inevitably lead to the pauperization and hopeless degradation of the toiling masses. It is imperative, if we desire to enjoy the full blessings of life, that unjust accumulation and this power for evil of aggregated wealth shall be prevented. This much-desired object can be accomplished only by the united efforts of those who obey the divine injunction: "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread." Therefore we have formed the Order of the Knights of Labor for the purpose of organizing, educating and directing the power of the industrial masses.

It is not a political party, it is more, for in it are crystallized sentiments and measures for the benefit of the whole people; but it should be borne in mind, when exercising the right of suffrage, that most of the objects herein set forth can only be obtained through legislation, and that it is the duty, regardless of party, of all to assist in nominating and supporting with their votes such candidates as will support these measures. No one shall, however, be compelled to vote with the majority.

Calling upon all who believe in securing "the greatest good to the greatest number" to join and assist us, we declare to the world that our aims are:

I. To make industrial and moral worth, not wealth, the true standard of individual and national greatness.

II. To secure to the workers the full enjoyment of the wealth they create; sufficient leisure in which to develop their intellectual, moral and social faculties; all of the benefits, recreations and pleasures of association; in a word, to enable them to share in the gains and honors of advancing civilization.

In order to secure these results, we demand at the hands of the law-making power of State and Nation:

III. The establishment of Bureaus of Labor Statistics, that we may arrive at a correct knowledge of the educational, moral and financial condition of the laboring masses.

IV. The land, including all the natural sources of wealth, is the heritage of all the people, and should not be subject to speculative traffic. Occupancy and use should be the only title to the possession of land. The taxes upon land should be levied upon its full value for use, exclusive of improvements, and should be sufficient to take for the community all unearned increment.

V. The abrogation of all laws that do not bear equally upon capitalists and laborers, and the removal of [illegible] of measures providing for the health and safety of those engaged in mining, manufacturing and building industries, and for indemnification to those engaged therein for injuries received through lack of necessary safeguards.

VI. The establishment of bureaus of labor and [illegible] in the administration of [illegible]

VII. The recognition, by incorporation, of orders and other associations organized by the workers to improve their condition and to protect their rights.

VIII. The enactment of laws to compel corporations to pay their employes weekly, in lawful money, for the labor of the preceding week, and giving mechanics and laborers a first lien upon the product of their labor to the extent of their full wages.

IX. The abolition of the contract system on National, State and Municipal works.

X. The enactment of laws providing for arbitration between employers and employed, and to enforce the decision of the arbitrators.

XI. The prohibition, by law, of the employment of children under fifteen years of age.

XII. To prohibit the hiring out of convict labor.

XIII. That a graduated income tax be levied.

XIV. The establishment of a national monetary system, in which a circulating medium in necessary quantity shall issue directly to the people, without the intervention of banks; that all the national issue shall be full legal tender in payment of all debts, public and private; and that the government shall not guarantee or recognize any private banks or create any banking corporations.

XV. That interest-bearing bonds, bills of credit or notes shall never be issued by the government; but that, when need arises, the emergency shall be met by issue of legal-tender, non-interest-bearing money.

XVI. That the importation of foreign labor under contract be prohibited.

XVII. That, in connection with the postoffice, the government shall organize financial exchanges, safe deposits and facilities for deposits of savings of the people in small sums.

XVIII. That the government shall obtain possession, by purchase, under the right of eminent domain, of all telegraphs, telephones and railroads; and that hereafter no charter or license be issued to any corporation for construction or operation of any means of transporting intelligence, passengers or freight.

And while making the foregoing demands upon the State and National Government, we will endeavor to associate our own labors:

XIX. To establish co-operative institutions, such as will tend to supersede the wage system, by the introduction of a co-operative industrial system.

XX. To secure for both sexes equal rights.

XXI. To gain some of the benefits of labor-saving machinery by a gradual reduction of the hours of labor to eight per day.

XXII. To persuade employers to agree to arbitrate all differences which may arise between them and their employes, in order that the bonds of sympathy between them may be strengthened and that strikes may be rendered unnecessary.

If you believe in organization, you are earnestly invited to join with us in securing these objects. All information on the subject of organization should be sent to JNO. W. HAYES, General Secretary-Treasurer, Lock Box 885, Philadelphia, Pa., who will have an Organizer visit you and assist in furthering the good work.

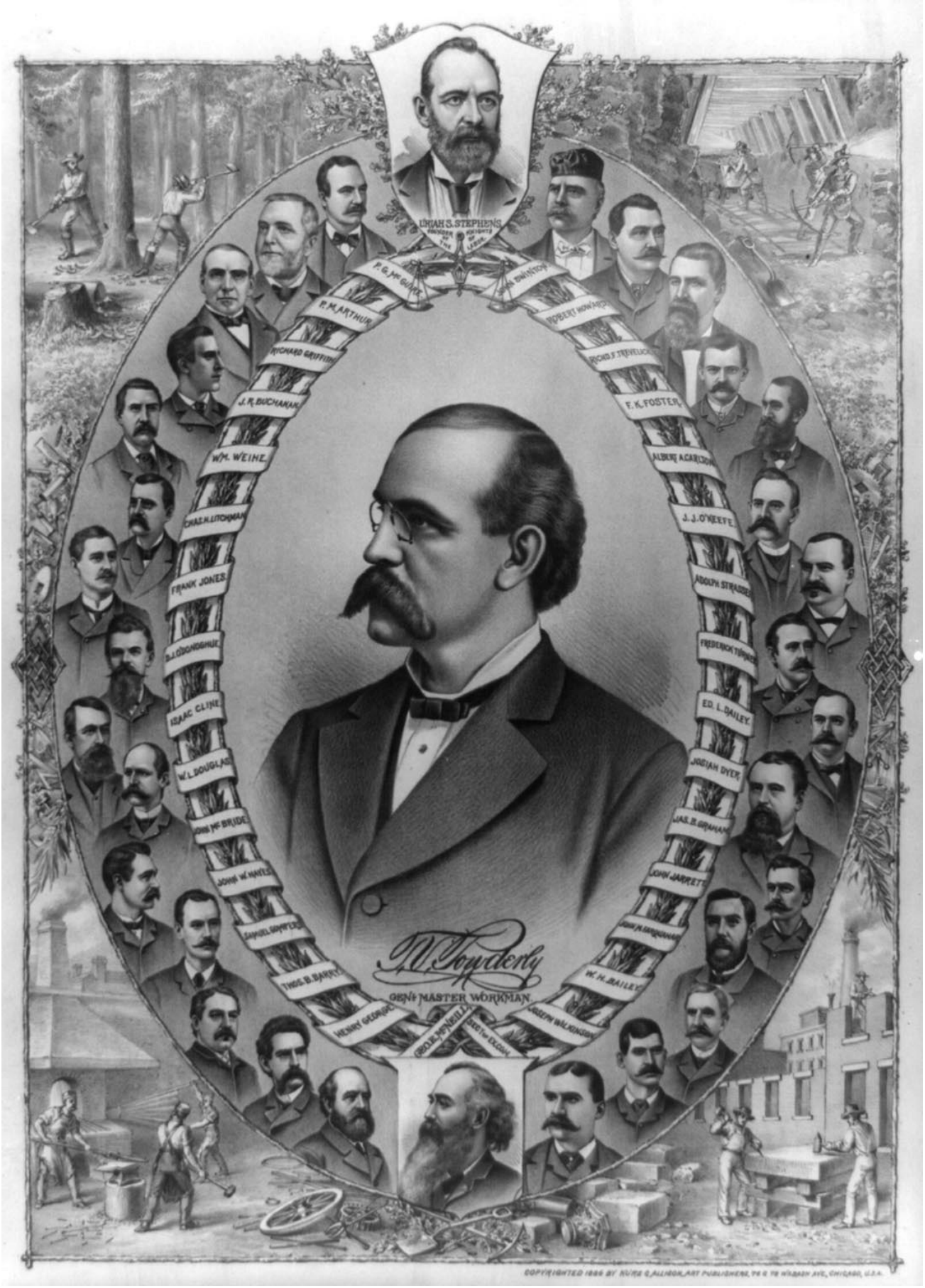
[19]

A broadside with the Knights of Labor preamble and declaration of principles in Duke University Library's collection.

[32]

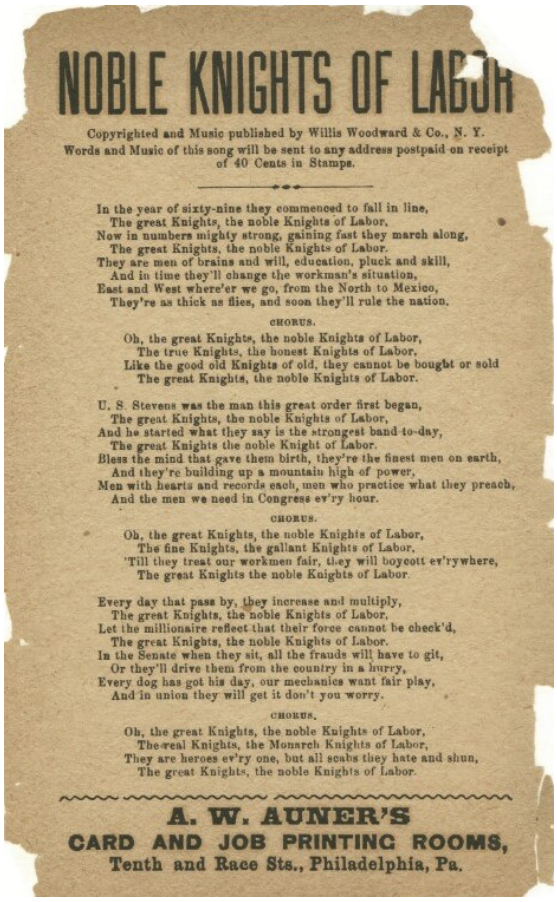
An 1886 photograph of eight women delegates to the General Assembly of the Knights of Labor at Richmond, Virginia. From the collection of The Catholic University of America.

Artifacts:



[33]

This 1886 poster displayed portraits of leaders of the Knights of Labor, along with scenes of workers.



NOBLE KNIGHTS OF LABOR

Copyrighted and Music published by Willis Woodward & Co., N. Y.
Words and Music of this song will be sent to any address postpaid on receipt of 40 Cents in Stamps.

In the year of sixty-nine they commenced to fall in line,
The great Knights, the noble Knights of Labor.
Now in numbers mighty strong, gaining fast they march along,
The great Knights, the noble Knights of Labor.
They are men of brains and will, education, pluck and skill,
And in time they'll change the workman's situation,
East and West where'er we go, from the North to Mexico,
They're as thick as flies, and soon they'll rule the nation.

CHORUS.

Oh, the great Knights, the noble Knights of Labor,
The true Knights, the honest Knights of Labor,
Like the good old Knights of old, they cannot be bought or sold
The great Knights, the noble Knights of Labor.

U. S. Stevens was the man this great order first began,
The great Knights, the noble Knights of Labor,
And he started what they say is the strongest band-to-day,
The great Knights the noble Knight of Labor.
Bless the mind that gave them birth, they're the finest men on earth,
And they're building up a mountain high of power,
Men with hearts and records each, men who practice what they preach,
And the men we need in Congress ev'ry hour.

CHORUS.

Oh, the great Knights, the noble Knights of Labor,
The fine Knights, the gallant Knights of Labor,
'Till they treat our workmen fair, they will boycott ev'rywhere,
The great Knights the noble Knights of Labor.

Every day that pass by, they increase and multiply,
The great Knights, the noble Knights of Labor,
Let the millionaire reflect that their force cannot be check'd,
The great Knights, the noble Knights of Labor.
In the Senate when they sit, all the frauds will have to git,
Or they'll drive them from the country in a hurry,
Every dog has got his day, our mechanics want fair play,
And in union they will get it don't you worry.

CHORUS.

Oh, the great Knights, the noble Knights of Labor,
The real Knights, the Monarch Knights of Labor,
They are heroes ev'ry one, but all scabs they hate and shun,
The great Knights, the noble Knights of Labor.

A. W. AUNER'S
CARD AND JOB PRINTING ROOMS,
Tenth and Race Sts., Philadelphia, Pa.

[34]

Songsheet for "Noble Knights of Labor" in Duke University Library's collection.

3 January 2018

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