

Opposition to the Knights of Labor ^[1]

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The editorial below appeared The Tobacco Plant, a Durham newspaper in February 1887. In the editorial, the author expressed concern about the Knights of Labor, a labor organization founded in Philadelphia in 1869. Read the excerpts printed here to understand the author's concerns and how these concerns reflected attitudes among some whites of the time.

The "Pauper Labor" of the South

Some of the Northern newspapers are devoting more space than brains to alleged ^[2] "discussion" of the "pauper labor of the South." As a rule, the men who indite ^[3] these editorials are as ignorant of Southern institutions, the people of this section and the relations existing in Dixie between employer and employed as a razor-back hog is of artillery practice; but, like the meddling abolitionists ^[4] of a quarter century ago, these Northern pencil-pushers are very sure that we are not capable of regulating our own affairs, and they are equally certain that we should accept the teachings and obey the instructions which proceed from the omniscience ^[5] of their infinite minds and pens...

Now, the writer has seen a good deal of the North and its "institutions" of late years. It is a great country -- a very great country, in many respects. There are a great many things, animate ^[6] and inanimate ^[7], to be seen there which we do not have in North Carolina or in the South. Their cities are larger and their business buildings are bigger than ours. Their hotels are conducted on a more "extensive" scale -- we stopped at one in Ohio where whites and blacks occupied adjoining ^[8] rooms, sometimes the same room, and ate at the same table. At another hotel in the same State, the proprietor ^[9] was found to be a very black man and his wife a very white woman, and the "guests" of both races were waited on by tolerably white servant girls. That is one of the "animate" things which we do not have here, to the chagrin ^[10] of District Assembly 49, be it said. It is a matter of taste. But our "guardians" of the North are slow to concede ^[11] that we have a right to taste as we do. Indeed, some of them tell us we have no business to taste at all unless taste as they taste. Social equality has a bitter taste to us, although it is a sweet morsel to some people of the North, and because it is not palatable ^[12] to our social stomachs they want to force it down our throats...

We dispute the right of no man to join any labor organization, and it is clearly his privilege to say what he will and what and who he will not work for, and to exercise himself in any honorable and lawful way to obtain the maximum price for his labor. But we do say, and we say emphatically ^[13], that it is not his right to set a price on the labor of other men, and it is not his privilege to decree whether or no his neighbor -- who does not happen to be a member of, and is unwilling to join his order -- shall work for an employer for wages which and the members of his organization decline to accept. On the same principle we submit that no employer or other representative of capital has a right to say what wages his competitors in business shall pay or whom they shall employ.

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THE "PAUPER LABOR" OF THE SOUTH.

Some of the Northern newspapers are devoting more space than leisure to an alleged "discussion" of the "pauper labor of the South." As a rule, the men who initiate these editorials are as ignorant of Southern institutions, the people of this section and the relations existing in 1887 between employer and employed as a man-of-war is of artillery practice; but, like the meddling abolitionists of a quarter of a century ago, these Northern pencil-pushers are very sure that we are not capable of regulating our own affairs, and they are equally certain that we should accept the teachings and obey the instructions which proceed from the omphaloscope of their infinite minds and pens. It never occurs to these journalistic missionaries that their own neighborhoods furnish the largest unworked theoretical fields, nor that they could find more work than they could perform in their own cities and States by getting down off their theoretic stilts and undertaking the job of practicing and making their neighbors practice what they preach. This anti-bellum Pharisaical attitude of assumed infallibility is, to us, as disgusting as it is ridiculous. It is a chestnut, and not a don't-like-it-stunts.

Now, the writer has seen a good deal of the North and its "institutions" of late years. It is a great country—a very great country, in many respects. There are a great many things, animate and inanimate, to be seen there which we do not have in North Carolina or in the South. Their cities are larger and their business buildings are bigger than ours. Their hotels are conducted on a more "extensive" scale—we stopped at one in Ohio where whites and blacks occupied adjoining rooms, sometimes the same room, and ate at the same table. At another hotel in the same State the proprietor was found to be a very black man and his wife a very white woman, and the "guests" of both races were waited on by tolerably white servant girls. That is one of the "animate" things which we do not have here, to the chagrin of District Assembly 49, he it said. It is a matter of taste. But our "guardians" of the North are slow to concede that we have a right to taste as we do. Indeed, some of them tell us we have no business to taste at all unless we taste as they taste. Social equality has a bitter taste to us, although it is a sweet morsel to some people of the North, and because it is not palatable to our social stomachs they want to force it down our throats, *velociter*. By "they" we mean an element, a radical element, in the North. We know many most conservative and estimable people in the North—the majority of our Northern brethren are such, perhaps; but this meddling, radical element is already too large and constantly growing, and a man with half an eye can see the tendency of the effort that is now making to sow the seeds of dissension and unrest among the negro laborers of the South, and some of the Knights of Labor assemblies of the North, we are sorry to see, are mixed up in the nefarious plot. We use the word "plot" advisedly, for it is a deliberate attempt on the part of somebody to disrupt the entire labor system of the South, the farm hands included, and to take this class of negro farm labor that this article has special reference.

Now, we desire to have it clearly and distinctly understood, in the beginning that THE TOBACCO PLANT is the friend of the workingman, as such, and that this paper is kindly disposed towards the Knights of Labor, as an organization designed (as is claimed) to better the condition of the workingman. We dispute the right of no man to join any labor organization, and it is clearly his privilege to say what he will and what and who he will not work for, and to exercise himself in any honorable and lawful way to obtain the maximum price for his labor. But we do say, and we say emphatically, that it is not his right to set a price on the labor of other men, and it is not his privilege to decree whether or no his neighbor—who does not happen to be a member of, and is unwilling to join his order—shall work for an employer for wages which he and the members of his organization decline to accept. On the same principle we submit that no employer or other representative of capital has a right to say what wages his competitors in business shall pay or whom they shall employ. Such a position, whether taken by an employer or an employe, is unjustifiable under ordinary circumstances, and any attempt on the part of either on any occasion to put into practice such views would be, not only an unreasonable and unfair undertaking—it would be an UNLAWFUL proceeding.

In the next issue of THE PLANT we will follow up the subject by publishing the concluding portion of this editorial.

[27]

The entire article, "The 'Pauper' Labor of the South," from the February 2, 1887 edition of *Tobacco Plant* .

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