A.J.P. Taylor wrote of Napoleon III that, ‘like most of those who study history, he learnt from the mistakes of the past how to make new ones.’¹ The early leaders of the Knights of Labor also drew a number of very important lessons from the history of the American labour movement in the 1870s. The strikes, protests and occasional riots in the United States during that decade ended with the destruction of many trade unions and the decimation of many others after their repression by employers, their hired private detectives, local police, state militias and, especially in 1877, the United States Army. Even when workers won their strikes, their gains often failed to make up for the wages lost during them. Uriah Stephens, Terence Powderly and most other leading Knights concluded that strikes were best avoided wherever possible. Arbitration and negotiation with employers, they argued, would settle the wage disputes of the future. Over time, workers would educate and then emancipate themselves from the wage system altogether through a network of cooperative enterprise.²

The struggles of the 1880s put these lessons to a severe test. The staggering growth of the Knights of Labor from 100,000 members in 1885 to nearly 1 million in 1886 came about as the result of widespread strikes, especially the victory of Knights over Jay Gould, the most notorious speculator of the day, in a strike against his Southwestern railroad system in 1885. American workers entered the assemblies to strike and win, or they struck first and joined the Knights afterwards. Many Knights conducted boycotts, a tactic adapted from the struggles of the Irish Land League at the beginning of the decade, to bring their employers to heel without leaving work. During the Great Upheaval, American workers seldom

² Ware, Labor Movement, p. 117.
had the patience or the desire to submit their grievances to arbitration. American employers also remained unwilling to deal with organised labour unless the threat of successful strike action left them no choice. They desired mainly to wipe out the labour movement altogether, and their attacks on the assemblies were a major cause of the Order’s decline. Only the leaders of the Knights of Labor seemed interested in replacing conflict with conciliation. At the same time, the Order’s experiments in cooperative enterprise generally failed because of either a lack of capital or the obstruction of rival corporations. Powderly recognised these contradictions when he wrote to a friend that as a

Teacher of important and much-needed reforms, [the Order] has been obliged to practice differently from her teachings. Advocating arbitration and conciliation as first steps in labor disputes she has been forced to take upon her shoulders the responsibility of the aggressor first and, when hope of arbitrating and conciliation failed, to beg of the opposing side to do what we should have applied for in the first instance. Advising against strikes we have been in the midst of them.¹

Like Napoleon III, the General Master Workman found that the lessons of previous decades did not always solve the problems of the present.²

The Knights applied the same lessons in Britain and Ireland. They preached arbitration as the solution to industrial conflict, and if that failed they practised the boycott instead of strikes wherever possible. They also planned cooperative establishments that would slowly emancipate local workers from their dependence on employers. Most of these tactics were already part of the landscape of British industrial relations. Formal arbitration procedures and informal negotiations between workers and management had existed for some time in major British industries, and Britain was the home of the cooperative movement. British workers had not yet adapted the boycott from Irish agrarian struggles to industrial conditions, as American Knights had, but the tactics of the Land League were well known across Britain and Ireland. Yet Knights found the same contradictions awaiting them there as in the United States, between their desire for arbitration and the unwillingness of many employers and workers to submit to it, and between their attempts to build cooperative enterprises and their lack of the funds necessary to make them successful.

These contradictions shaped the Order’s British and Irish history. The glassworkers’ assembly, LA3504, faced stern opposition from management at the largest British glass manufacturer, Pilkington Bros in St Helens,

¹ Quoted in Ware, *Labour Movement*, p. 375.
which curtailed the growth of the assembly and contributed to its downfall. At Hartley’s in Sunderland, and Chance Bros in Spon Lane, Knights established cordial relations with management but as economic conditions in the glass industry worsened over the course of the 1880s, those relations also worsened and the assembly collapsed after several long and fruitless strikes. Employers were not the only opponents of arbitration. Dockers in Liverpool, hollowware turners in the Black Country and stove-grate workers in Rotherham all left the assemblies after Knights insisted that they submit to arbitration rather than embroil the Order in costly and risky strikes. The British and Irish Knights also failed to take account of changing economic circumstances, and the changing expectations of British workers, towards the end of the 1880s. In the depressed economic conditions that prevailed during the middle of the decade, when the prospects for a successful strike remained slim, an order that practised arbitration, often quite successfully, could prove popular. As economic conditions improved, and workers consequently developed a more militant attitude towards industrial relations, they flocked instead to organisations – particularly the ‘new unions’ – more willing to lead them on strike.

Conflict and competition between the Knights and the new unions is explored in more depth in Chapter 6. We deal here with the ways in which the Knights implemented or failed to implement their preferred industrial tactics, with the role that employers played in the successes and failures of the British and Irish Knights and with the effects that both had on the growth and then the decline of the Order in Britain and Ireland. This chapter also builds on the previous one. There we saw how British and Irish Knights faithfully followed the cultural and organisational prescriptions of their order, although misunderstandings and contextual differences meant that they never organised women as American Knights did. Here we find that British and Irish Knights were equally faithful to the instructions of their American leaders when it came to industrial relations, even when doing so was unpopular among their own members or among workers they hoped to organise. Both cases, moreover, provide insights into the reasons why British and Irish workers joined the Knights and why they followed its prescriptions so closely, even at the cost of their own success.

Arbitration, Boycotts and Cooperation

The British National Assembly of the Knights of Labor, as its framers made clear in 1891, sought ‘no conflict with Capital.’ They assured employers that the Assembly would not sanction ‘any unreasonable or unjust demands made by any of its members,’ but that ‘if conflict becomes necessary, in defence of their interests, the responsibility will be carried on as long as necessity
or ability exists. These lines stated perfectly the attitude of the American Knights of Labor, or at least the attitude of most of its leaders, towards individual employers. Their desire to substitute negotiation for conflict was based on more than an understanding of the defeats of the 1870s: they wished to see reason replace force as the decisive factor in industrial relations. Workers, they felt, never possessed the strength and resources available to employers; as Knights educated themselves in political and economic principles, and as the growth of Bureaus of Labor Statistics across the United States provided workers and employers with the empirical evidence needed to negotiate fairly, reason would become a more powerful ally than force. This was an article of faith for Terence Powderly and his associates. It also became a guiding principle, almost a dogma, of Knights on the other side of the Atlantic.

Arbitration had a long history in British industry. After the repeal of the Combination Acts legalised trade unions in 1824 and 1825, unions and employers in a number of trades slowly began to meet to fix wages and hours, and to settle other grievances before they resulted in open conflict. The joint board of workers and employers, formed in the Nottingham hosiery trade in 1860 with an equal number of representatives from each side and a chairman from outside to break any deadlock, became the model for formal arbitration in a growing number of trades. The boot and shoemaking, cotton spinning, iron foundry and coal mining industries all established joint boards of employers and employees in the 1870s and 1880s. Trades Union Congresses in the latter decade passed resolutions declaring, in one example, that these boards were ‘very necessary and would bring about a better understanding between them and secure settlement of vexed questions affecting the interests of both.’ Liberals agreed that arbitration and conciliation remained the best method of resolving any industrial dispute. Even socialists, who might have been expected to want and support as many strikes as possible, generally regarded them as unhelpful distractions from more important tasks. They argued that the money and energy spent on strikes was much better spent on agitation for socialism; the logic of market forces, they added, meant that any gains made through strikes were only temporary, and only complete social transformation could ensure workers a higher standard of living.

5 Preamble of the British National Assembly, p. 2.
7 V. Gore, ‘Rank and File Dissent,’ in Wrigley, History of British Industrial Relations, p. 51.
8 Quoted in Sharpe, Industrial Conciliation, p. 4.
9 Kirk, Class, Continuity, and Change, p. 189.
10 V. Rabinovitch, British Marxist Socialism and Trade Unionism: The Attitudes, Experiences
When the Knights arrived in Britain and Ireland, arbitration was already a common and popular means of settling disputes.

The Knights preferred and practised arbitration from the very beginning until the very end of their history. When English glassworkers created LA3504 they immediately formed committees to meet and negotiate with their employers. Managers at Hartley’s in Sunderland and Chance Bros in Spon Lane, they claimed in 1885, ‘have at different times treated our committee with great kindness.’ Managers from Pilkington’s in St Helens were not inclined to meet with any committee of organised employees; but the *St Helen's Examiner* still stressed that ‘arbitration is advocated in preference to strikes as a mode of settling disputes’ among local Knights. Assemblies outside the glass trades adopted the same stance, particularly in the Black Country, where some form of arbitration took place in most of the small trades that dominated the region. Trade unionists in the chainmaking industry, as Sheila Blackburn writes, saw conciliation boards as ‘infinitely preferable’ to strike action. The Midland Counties Trade Federation sent 82 deputations to negotiate with employers in 1888 and 160 in 1889. The emphasis that Powderly placed on arbitration as opposed to conflict was particularly well-suited to the regions in Britain and Ireland where the Knights of Labor established their longest and largest presence.

The Black Country assemblies had strong grounds for preferring talking to strikes. ‘All our Assemblies are of mixed trades, no trade or branch even having a large representation,’ Richard Hill, the recording secretary of LA7952, told the General Assembly in 1887. ‘While being exposed at many points,’ he continued, ‘we are much more liable than an ordinary trades-union to the outbreak of industrial hostilities.’ The ‘hitherto undisciplined character of our army,’ composed mainly of unskilled workers with no prior experience of trade unions, represented another danger. With the assemblies in danger of becoming embroiled in a series of costly strikes, none of which they had the numbers or resources to wage effectively, the need for successful negotiation became doubly important. In 1887 and 1888, the *Birmingham Daily Gazette* reported in 1889, ‘nearly every employer of labour in West Bromwich has been politely asked for an “interview”

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12 Quoted in *JUL*, 25 April, 1886.


by “representatives of the employees.” Even the *Gazette*, which always opposed the Order’s presence in the Birmingham area, admitted that Knights approached employers ‘most courteously and sensibly,’ that ‘a dozen petty complaints have been quietly investigated and settled by this means’ and that ‘the employers are continually conferring on moot points to mutual advantage.’ In January 1890, Reynolds’s claimed that Black Country Knights had engaged in ‘only three strikes in four years, while hundreds of disputes have been settled.’

A dispute at the Brades Steel Works at Oldbury in the beginning of 1889 illustrates the methods that Knights used to settle grievances. Brades employed 250 people, of whom 180 belonged to the Order. Knights claimed that 80 of them had for some time worked ten and a half hours, instead of the customary nine and a half, and 24 of them sent a respectful letter to George Heston, the manager of the works, asking that their hours be reduced. They signed their names in a circle to prevent Heston from singling out any of them as a leader. When Heston failed to reply, they sent another letter, which also received no reply. The Knights met in their local assembly and satisfied themselves that they had done all they could to peacefully solve the dispute. They then waited on the leaders of the district assembly, which called a special meeting and resolved to send one final letter before considering more drastic action. These attempts to exhaust every possible alternative to a strike won the Knights praise from the *Smethwick Weekly News* which, like the *Birmingham Daily Gazette*, usually attacked the assemblies. The Knights, claimed the *News*, ‘have no desire to resort to extreme measures, but are willing to exhaust all the resources of civilization in bringing about a good understanding.’

Knights elsewhere in the Black Country followed the same pattern. In Walsall, Haydn Sanders, the socialist town councillor and the Master Workman of LA454, claimed that ‘he had no desire to set men and masters against each other’ and added that ‘strikes were always best avoided.’ Though known best for his polemical turn of phrase, as we will see in the following chapter, Sanders was also a capable negotiator. Thanks to his leadership, local bridle bit makers won a 5 percent increase in addition to a further 10 percent over the preceding year, all without needing to strike, while the cased hame, solid hame and awl blademakers, representing other local saddlery trades, also presented their claims and in the latter case managed to negotiate a more favourable list of prices from their employers.

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16 *Birmingham Daily Gazette*, 18 February 1889.
17 Reynolds’s, 5 January 1890.
18 *Smethwick Weekly News*, 9 March 1889.
19 *Walsall Observer*, 4 January 1890.
The Knights in Industry

without needing to take industrial action. Indeed, as trade improved in 1888 and 1889, Sanders’s ability to arbitrate effectively with employers brought workers in many small trades into the Order as a body and rapidly swelled the membership of LA454. At the same time, Knights in Smethwick and West Bromwich negotiated concessions for workers in the tinplate and vice making trades. In Wolverhampton, a Knight became one of three workers to sit on a Board of Conciliation convened by the town’s Trades Council.

Far from the harbingers of industrial strife, British Knights appeared moderate in their demands and devoted to industrial peace. ‘The Knights of Labour are not Socialists,’ their supporters told the Birmingham Gazette in 1889. ‘They do not look upon employers as enemies.’ The press, claimed one Knight in Dudley, had convinced him that the Knights were all ‘Socialists and dynamiters’ until he found out for himself that ‘they respected the rights of the masters as well as those of the men, fair play all round being their motto.’ But socialists, as we have seen, also had their reasons for preferring to avoid strikes wherever possible, and Sanders was not the only socialist Knight to counsel arbitration instead. Samuel Reeves, a major figure in Liverpool’s socialist movement and a leading figure in Bootle’s LA443, gave a lecture in October 1889 entitled ‘Arbitration v Strikes, or Why I Became a Knight of Labour.’ ‘The object of the Knights of Labour,’ he stated in another speech, ‘was to put an end to strikes.’ The commitment of British and Irish Knights to arbitration cut across ideological lines.

They also experimented with the boycott as an alternative to strike action. American Knights, many of whom were first- or second-generation Irish immigrants, had adapted this tactic from the Irish Land League’s struggles against uncooperative landlords and their agents, and used it against employers who refused to deal with organised labour. The long lists of boycotted companies that appeared in the Journal of United Labor during the 1880s testifies to the popularity of the boycott as a means for workers to force employers to grant concessions or recognise their union without sacrificing wages and risking their jobs to go on strike. Newspapers in areas where the British Knights were active certainly feared that they would introduce the boycott into British industrial life. When Knights registered their new British National Assembly under the Trade Union Acts in 1891,

21 Walsall Observer, 4 January 1890.
22 Stourbridge, Brierley Hill and County Express, 1 March 1890.
23 Wolverhampton Chronicle, 2 April 1890.
25 Stourbridge, Brierley Hill and County Express, 1 March 1890.
26 Bootle Times, 1 February 1890.
the Smethwick Weekly News announced that ‘the Registrar of Friendly Societies will shortly be asked to legalise boycotting.’

That was hyperbole, of course, but British Knights did boycott several firms in the Birmingham area. In 1888 they boycotted the Birmingham Mail after receiving criticism from that newspaper. In the same year they boycotted the Mayor of West Bromwich, who owned the only grocery stores in the area that did not give in to the local early closing movement and allow their employees half a day’s rest per week. According to the colourful account provided by the Birmingham Daily Gazette, the assemblies agreed to commence the boycott. Then:

The interdict was conveyed from inn to inn; each Master Workman read it out in the presence of the Venerable Sage and the Unknown Knights before the Silent Globe and the Knightly Lance, and members all were warned to have neither truck, nor faith, nor sale, nor barter with, of, or from the interdicted one.

Knights in Preston also threatened to boycott Commonweal, the organ of the Socialist League, unless it was sold locally through one of their members in the stationery business. ‘An injury to one is the concern of all in our order,’ they concluded, ‘and we are not anxious to purchase if our brother Mr. Hall is to be the injured party.’

In all these cases the Knights were unsuccessful. They claimed to have reduced the circulation of the Birmingham Mail by 30,000 during their action, yet it was claimed simultaneously that ‘the Mail was to be found in the very sanctuaries of the Order.’ According to the Birmingham Daily Gazette, the Mayor of West Bromwich never even realised that his stores were subject to a boycott until it appeared in the newspapers. The wives of local Knights also joined the boycott but only for a time. One, claimed the Gazette, told an assistant that ‘she had gone elsewhere till her John had forgotten about that Knights of Labour stuff,’ and then promptly returned to shop at the mayor’s stores. Their boycott ended after the mayor’s employees wrote to the Gazette in his defence, and after the hero of many local Knights, Henry George, described the boycott as ‘ridiculous’ during a visit in May 1889. The editors of Commonweal also gained a reprieve as the Preston Knights disappeared before they could put a boycott into effect.

27 Smethwick Weekly News, 11 July 1891.
28 Birmingham Daily Gazette, 23 February 1889.
29 Letter from James Riley, 18 June, 1887, 2572, Socialist League Archives, International Institute of Social History.
30 Birmingham Daily Gazette, 23 February 1889.
31 Birmingham Daily Gazette, 23 February 1889.
32 Birmingham Daily Gazette, 23 and 28 February and 15 May 1889.
In all these cases the Knights lacked the numbers and discipline to make their boycotts effective. Where American Knights mustered tens or hundreds of thousands of workers to sanction uncooperative employers, British Knights mustered only tens or hundreds. When they and their wives continued to patronise the offending firms it is not surprising that the Mayor of West Bromwich had to learn of his boycott from the press. The only kind of embargo that Knights practised with any success was at the workplace, when Knights refused to cooperate with non-union workers until employers removed them. In a workshop at Rotherham, for instance, where the Order organised 90 of the 100 workers, Knights opposed the continued employment of a man who agreed to replace another worker for less than the prevailing wage. After pressuring their employer, the boycotted man was dismissed.33 In any boycott wider than an individual workshop, however, the fears of the Smethwick Weekly News remained unfounded.

The Knights of Labor always maintained that workers would never receive a fair share of the fruits of their labour until they abolished the wage system and replaced it with a cooperative commonwealth. To bring that day closer, Knights were encouraged to form cooperative enterprises of their own that would, with time, remove private firms from the industrial landscape. The General Executive Board of the Knights of Labor bought a coal mine at Cannelburg, Indiana, as a symbol of the new order and spent more than $20,000 on it over the next two years. After the local railroad refused to extend a siding to the mine the whole scheme collapsed, and the Knights sold it at a loss in symbolic as well as financial terms. Most of the Order’s cooperative enterprises were more local affairs, however. When many assemblies built their own assembly hall they established grocery or general stores on the ground floor. Others began cooperative workshops. Where the Cannelburg experiment ended in dismal failure, some of these local ventures survived and prospered for as long as the assemblies that created them.34

British and Irish Knights certainly wanted to emulate the cooperative achievements of their American cousins. Richard Hill told the Journal of United Labor in 1887 that ‘co-operation, productive and distributive, is now under consideration,’ and added that members were now studying the subject with great interest.35 Soon afterwards, as Charles Chamberlain told the Smethwick Weekly News in 1889, Knights established a special voluntary fund for members who wanted to invest in a future cooperative

33 Smethwick Weekly News, 11 July 1891.
35 JUL, 10 December 1887.
venture.\textsuperscript{36} That venture, as we saw in the previous chapter, was to have been a dedicated assembly hall in Smethwick with a library, reading rooms and a ground floor leased to shopkeepers on the American model. They also hoped to create a cooperative workshop of some kind, and in 1889 these plans came together in the shape of the Smethwick and District Knights of Labour Co-Operative Society.\textsuperscript{37} In Walsall, Haydn Sanders promised saddle tree workers on strike that the Knights would provide £100 towards a cooperative saddle tree works designed to free them from wage slavery altogether.\textsuperscript{38}

These plans all failed for a very simple reason: not enough money. An order that struggled to mount an effective boycott against a local grocer could hardly be expected to raise the £10,000 that Knights estimated they needed for their hall, library and shop space. Even as Chamberlain told the \textit{Smethwick Weekly News} about the special cooperative fund, he admitted that ‘we have not gone in for this much up to the present.’\textsuperscript{39} The unskilled workers and struggling craftsmen that Knights organised in the Black Country could not provide the capital needed to make cooperation work, and the recent failure of another cooperative society in Smethwick made them even more cautious with their limited savings.\textsuperscript{40} The Walsall assembly rose and fell too quickly to give anything like £100 to the saddle tree workers. Knights in Derry came the closest to building a cooperative enterprise when they mortgaged a hall that they used as a library and for meetings and cultural events. Even there they were only able to keep the hall afloat by leasing it to other societies. Elsewhere, Knights lacked the numbers, the money or sufficient time to do anything more than talk about cooperation. Chamberlain argued that ‘so far as we fail to put that principle into operation we shall fail as an organisation.’\textsuperscript{41} Judged by this impossible standard, the Order in Britain and Ireland was a miserable failure.

Its record on cooperation, as with arbitration and the boycott, also leads to other conclusions. These tactics were, of course, already part of the British and Irish labour movements’ repertoire. Craftsmen in the Black Country, for instance, did not need Powderly’s advice to seek arbitration with their employers. The impulse to form cooperative enterprises did not begin with the arrival in Britain of the Knights of Labor. The boycott

\textsuperscript{36} \textit{Smethwick Weekly News}, 2 March 1889.
\textsuperscript{37} \textit{Birmingham Daily Gazette}, 23 February 1889. This society is mentioned once in the \textit{Report of the Chief Registrar of Friendly Societies, For the Year Ending 31st December 1890}, Part A, p. 133, in HCPP. The society only appears in this one report.
\textsuperscript{38} \textit{Walsall Observer}, 4 January 1890.
\textsuperscript{39} \textit{Birmingham Daily Gazette}, 23 February 1889; \textit{Smethwick Weekly News}, 2 March 1889.
\textsuperscript{40} \textit{Smethwick Weekly News}, 2 March 1889.
\textsuperscript{41} \textit{Smethwick Weekly News}, 2 March 1889.
was an Irish innovation that the Knights reimported into Britain. But the fact remains that in each case British and Irish Knights tried to follow the industrial tactics that their American leaders prescribed for them as closely as possible. When Michael Davitt commented on the growth of the British assemblies in 1890, he observed that ‘the workingmen enrolled in such branches can be more or less influenced in their strike policies by the orders of General-Master Workman Powderly.’ Indeed, British Knights were more likely to follow Powderly’s instructions regarding strikes than most American workers who joined the Order during the Great Upheaval. As in the previous chapter, we find that British Knights remained truer to the principles of their order, as defined by its leaders, than many in the land of its birth. As in the previous chapter, we might also conclude that British Knights adapted themselves to their order at least as much as the other way around. In so doing, however, they found themselves entangled in the same contradictions that plagued American Knights. The first of these concerned those employers who did not share their desire for arbitration and peaceful industrial relations.

**Employers and the Knights**

The Knights of Labor, as we saw in the previous chapter, were born in an atmosphere markedly hostile to organised labour. The upheavals of the mid-1880s, when the Knights of Labor rose to the peak of their strength, only convinced employers further of the need to identify and remove labour organisations from their own concerns, and as the Great Upheaval began to subside it was replaced by a fierce counter-attack from employers who sought to reverse the gains made by organised labour in the middle of the decade. Where earlier scholarship attributed the decline of the Knights of Labor mainly to internal conflict, inept leadership and internecine conflict between the Knights and the trade unions, recent historians have placed greater emphasis on this ‘employer counter-offensive’ as the most salient cause of the Order’s disintegration in the late 1880s and early 1890s. In these conditions, naturally enough, arbitration remained unworkable.

Employers in Britain and Ireland never became as hostile to organised labour as their American counterparts, and seldom employed the surveillance and repression that American employers regularly directed against the unions. Indeed, British Knights sometimes established cordial relations with employers. One manager, after conceding a wage increase at his firm, ‘told the representative of the Knights of Labour who arranged the matter, that if that was an example of how they did their business they would always have his

42 Davitt, ‘Labor Tendencies in Great Britain.’
sympathy and support.' At the Brades Steel Works and at the great pump and engine-making works of Messrs Tangye in West Bromwich, Knights and managers soon consulted with each other to prevent grievances from flaring up into strikes. We have already seen that even hostile newspapers like the *Birmingham Daily Gazette* and the *Smethwick Weekly News* were willing to praise the Knights for their determination to exhaust all other possibilities before going on strike. Most employers, however, remained unwilling to meet with the Knights or, alternatively, to grant the concessions the Knights requested. In Britain and Ireland, as in the United States, Knights found that arbitration often worked only after they convinced employers that a strike, or the credible threat of a strike, awaited them if negotiations failed.

Knights learned this lesson very early in the Black Country. In 1887 and 1888, even as the Order’s representatives met with local employers to establish a basis for future negotiations, the Knights conducted several strikes in the area to convince employers, as well as any potential members, that ‘the leaders meant “business.”’ The Knights fought these battles without admitting that they led them, but word spread that the assemblies stood prepared to use forceful means if reason failed. Even Messrs Tangye, which soon developed a friendly relationship with the assemblies, only agreed to negotiations with the Knights after they organised most of the workforce and declared their intention to strike if their demands were not met. Knights in Derry led a strike by workers at the distillery of Messrs Watts, and won wages increases for both skilled and unskilled employees, the reinstatement of overtime wages, sick pay and free coal for the workers. The leading partner in the firm also promised to ‘visit personally each department of the firm, inquire into the men’s grievances, and remedy them as far as possible.’ Arbitration in Derry emerged directly out of conflict.

This strategy carried substantial risk. The first assembly of dockers in Liverpool in 1884 and 1885, as James Sexton later explained in his autobiography, secretly planned a strike that would force the shipping companies and other employers on the waterfront to deal with the Knights. Their strike, as Sexton wrote, ‘was a lamentable, woeful, total failure.’ They lacked sufficient savings to continue it for more than several days and employers placed its leaders on a blacklist. Many of them never found employment on the docks again.

43 *Stourbridge, Brierley Hill and County Express*, 1 March 1890.
44 *Birmingham Daily Gazette*, 18 February 1889.
45 *Birmingham Daily Gazette*, 18 February 1889.
46 *Birmingham Daily Gazette*, 18 February 1889.
47 *JUL*, 20 November 1890.
Many other British employers remained opposed to organised labour as well. The Sons of Labour, as we saw in the previous chapter, faced Lanarkshire coal masters who worked together to blacklist union activists. Knights in Preston predicted that ‘when it becomes known to the employers that we have started it [the Order] here we shall be left to their mercy, which will cause a few thousands of us to be thrown out of work.’ Knights at the Hoyland Silkstone Colliery, near Barnsley, were ordered in 1890 to sever their connection with the Order or lose their jobs. Charles Chamberlain told an interviewer in March 1889, that ‘when a little dispute took place some time ago one of our lodge rooms was watched night after night for more than a month.’ British and Irish Knights never faced the Pinkertons, agent provocateurs and violent repression that plagued the American assemblies. But the blacklisting and surveillance that some British employers did employ against organised labour constrained the Order’s growth in Britain and Ireland on occasion. The most significant example of this concerned the glassworkers of LA3504, the oldest and largest assembly in the country, whose growth was restricted by opposition from employers which ultimately led to its demise in 1893.

The Knights established LA3504 at a crucial period in the English window glass industry. The three main firms, Chance Bros at Spon Lane, Pilkington’s at St Helens and Hartley’s at Sunderland, had established a cartel in the 1860s to regulate the prices and output of window glass and their own respective market share. In the next two decades, however, their cartel broke apart. First, they faced growing competition from Belgian glass manufacturers, who could not be induced to join the cartel; instead they flooded the English market with Belgian glass, reducing prices and profits for the English manufacturers. Second, Pilkington’s invested more heavily in new plants than its two major English competitors, and as the cartel collapsed it soon dominated the domestic production of window glass.

To continue this growth, the managers at Pilkington’s brooked no compromise with organised labour. In 1878 they broke up the Sheet Glassmakers’ Association after a failed strike and rehired the Association’s members at a lower rate of pay. When Knights arrived in St Helens to hold the first convention of the Universal Federation of Window-Glass Workers in 1884, Pilkington’s resolutely opposed them. One of their employees chaired a public meeting called by the Knights; the company dismissed him

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49 David Whittle to Powderly, 13 April 1887, Box 32, TVP.
50 *Sheffield and Rotherham Independent*, 10 October 1890.
51 Smethwick Weekly News, 2 March 1889.
the following day. Joseph French, the secretary of LA3504, told Powderly in 1887 that Pilkington’s was ‘continually discharging our members for no other reason than that they belong to our Society.’ When the Universal Federation held subsequent congresses at St Helens in 1886 and 1888 to encourage organisation at Pilkington’s, the company kept a note of the employees who attended meetings called by the Knights and asked the Chief Constable of the town to protect their property against sabotage by the Order’s representatives.

This simple and effective policy made arbitration impossible. When French tried to set up a meeting anyway, managers told him that ‘the Firm would not discuss the matter with any one only their own men.’ Powderly suggested an alternative strategy: the boycott. ‘Get the manufacturers who do treat their men properly to join with you in putting a stop to the sale of the St Helens glass,’ he advised French, ‘and by that means, bring Mr Pilkington to a recognition of the claims of humanity.’ French demurred. ‘You must consider Pilkingtons are the largest producers in the world,’ he explained to the General Master Workman, ‘and besides that they have large retail warehouses in very near all the large towns in the United Kingdom so you will understand at once that that line of action is out of the question.’ French wanted instead to organise a strike to bring Pilkington’s to the negotiating table. Powderly, however, was not keen on the idea and French eventually proved unable to muster anything like the number of workers needed to launch an effective strike. Pilkington’s also operated a staggered contract system, where workers finished their contracts and applied for new ones in small batches and not all at once, which made it more difficult for large numbers of employees to strike without breaking their contract. James Brown, who replaced French as the secretary of LA3504, told Beatrice Potter (soon Webb) that this system presented the main obstacle to organisation at Pilkington’s. In short, opposition from the company ensured that the St Helens preceptory failed to establish a permanent presence there, let alone negotiate with management.

This failure was a severe setback for LA3504, as Pilkington’s was by far the largest window glass manufacturer in England. Henry Pelling concludes that ‘the failure at St Helens was indeed decisive for the whole English [glass] Assembly.’ At Chance Bros and Hartley’s, where relations

53 Joseph French to Powderly, 30 March 1887, Box 32, TVP.
55 Joseph French to Powderly, 3 May 1887, Box 33, TVP.
57 Pelling, ‘Knights in Britain,’ p. 317.
between management and the Knights were initially cordial, Knights also found that economic difficulties put serious strains on their goodwill towards the end of the 1880s. Those firms suffered from a competitive disadvantage against Pilkington’s as they had failed to invest in new plant and production techniques. Competition from Belgian glass manufacturers, and the McKinley Tariff of 1890, which protected American industries against imported goods including glass, further reduced their market share at home and abroad. To maintain profitability these firms had to increase their investment in new machinery, squeeze more out of their workers or both.

The end of the decade saw two minor strikes at Hartley’s as the firm sped up production without a corresponding increase in wages. The major test of amicable relations between the Knights and the firm, however, came in 1890 when Hartley’s introduced the new continuous tank system, which had greatly improved productivity at Pilkington’s. At the beginning of the following year the company then imposed a 10 percent wage reduction on skilled glassworkers. They went on strike in response. In July 1891, Chance Bros followed suit with a new piecework wage system. Glassworkers there claimed the new system reduced their weekly pay by as much as 20 or 25 percent and introduced greater uncertainty about their earnings. Chance Brothers countered that ‘glass is being sold at St Helens and elsewhere cheaper than they can make it, and in order to compete with these places they have suffered a considerable loss.’ The company refused to prove that assertion to their employees. Representatives from the Spon Lane preceptory then travelled to the United States to consult with the glassworkers of LA300 and the Order’s General Executive Board. When they returned, and after they failed to broker a last-minute settlement with management, the company locked out its workers at the end of July.

The entire membership of LA3504 was now on strike. Knights in Sunderland only had to pay strike pay for skilled glassworkers, as unskilled workers at Hartley’s belonged to the National Labour Union. Knights at Spon Lane, however, had to subsidise the unskilled workers thrown out of employment during the strike themselves, as James Brown complained

59 *Sunderland Daily Echo*, 20 and 22 June 1888, 6 December 1888.
60 *Sunderland Daily Echo*, 2 February 1891. Catherine Ross instead claims that the firm cancelled a 10 percent wage increase agreed to the previous year – but in any case, the effect was the same. See C. Ross, *The Development of the Glass Industry on the Rivers Tyne and Wear, 1700–1900* (unpublished PhD thesis, Newcastle University, 1982), p. 515.
61 *Smethwick Weekly News*, 18 July 1891.
to General Secretary-Treasurer John Hayes in September. The financial problems caused by the strike also opened rifts between the Spon Lane and Sunderland preceptories. Workers at Chance Brothers, as Robert Robertson informed Hayes in September, ‘thought after so long a struggle of twenty nine weeks for Sunderland and we nine we should have got assistance before now, as we paid to Sunderland Bros while we were at work ten per cent of our wages to assist them.’ James Brown added that ‘the Spon Lane men are continually asking how it is we receive nothing from the General Assembly.’ Glassworkers at Chance Bros found that the Smethwick Local Board even refused to let them hold a boxing display to raise money for the strikers. The firm refused to resolve the dispute through arbitration, and rumours began to circulate at the end of 1891 that individual strikers were returning to work. Some Knights at Spon Lane remained on strike as late as February 1892, but the strike, and the Spon Lane preceptory, came to an end soon afterwards.

The dispute at Hartley’s ended on more favourable terms. In November 1891, the Knights and the firm agreed to arbitration and there were signs that they might re-establish friendly relations. But then both sides were faced with a very different kind of disaster. After only two weeks back on the job, a fire destroyed most of the works and Hartley’s went into receivership. The glassworkers were again thrown into unemployment. Brown told Hayes in August 1892 that ‘we are doing our best to keep the members of our Assembly together so as to be ready for anything that may turn up in our own trade so as we will be able to get the best terms we can.’ A new firm restarted part of the works at the end of 1892, raising Brown’s hopes, but it closed again for good in 1894. The history of LA3504 ended with it. ‘It is very easy to see how our Assembly has gone down,’ Brown wrote in August 1892. ‘It was through a few giving in at Spon Lane during the strike and the others fell away.’

Terence Powderly might have predicted that the glassworkers’ strikes would end badly. He boasted in his autobiography that he never ordered a strike in his 15 years as General Master Workman and helped to end
many of them. But unless Knights managed to find employers who were willing to allow labour organisations at their concerns, and who were as willing as the Knights to submit their disputes to reason rather than force, arbitration remained impossible. British and Irish Knights occasionally encountered such magnanimous employers. More often, they found that the friendliness of management was directly linked to their own ability to strike and win if necessary. Messrs Tangye in West Bromwich and Messrs Watts in Derry became enthusiastic negotiators after they faced a strike, or the credible threat of one. When employers remained implacably opposed to organised labour, or when economic circumstances forced them to abandon their earlier goodwill, Knights were only left with the option to strike. The glassworkers found this to their cost. But employers were not the only ones to view the Order’s methods with suspicion. As trade improved at the end of the 1880s, the Knights found that many workers could become as implacably opposed to arbitration as the managers of Pilkington’s.

**Arbitration and the Workers**

The Knights of Labor arrived in Britain and Ireland amidst a severe depression in trade that lasted, with only brief patches of growth, until 1888. Successive Trades Union Congresses reported a falling away in membership. The Amalgamated Society of Engineers, an established union in a trade crucial to British industry, found that as many as one-eighth of its members were out of work. With so many unemployed workers ready to replace those who walked out, strikes remained infrequent and it is no surprise that the TUC placed its hopes on arbitration as an alternative. From 1888 until the end of the decade, however, trade began to improve. As unemployment fell, the number of strikes rose from 517 in 1888 to 1,211 in 1889, and the number of strikers increased from 119,000 in 1888 to around 400,000 in 1890. These were the years of the New Unionism, when a rash of new organisations representing hitherto unorganised, and particularly unskilled, workers became a powerful presence within the British labour movement and engaged in a series of large, bitter and often successful strikes. Between 1886 and 1890 the outlook of many British workers changed from resignation to militancy, from an understanding that arbitration remained their best hope, where possible, to the belief that strikes were the fastest and most effective way to wring concessions from their employers.

The British and Irish assemblies began at the height of the depression, between 1884 and 1886. Their penchant for arbitration and their unwillingness

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72 Cronin, ‘Strikes,’ p. 89.
to countenance strikes were doubly popular in the Black Country. Workers there were not noted for engaging in strikes. Poor trade in the 1880s only accelerated the long-term industrial decline of the region. In these conditions, where low wages ensured that a strike inevitably led to great and immediate hardship for the workers and their families, trade unionists avoided industrial conflict wherever possible. The Knights conducted several strikes, as we have seen, to prove to workers and employers that ‘they meant business,’ but they and their rivals in the Midland Counties Trades Federation both went to extreme lengths to secure settlements through arbitration.

As trade improved, and as workers’ expectations grew, however, Knights found that their pacific approach to industrial relations was not always so popular. The hollowware turners at Kenrick’s in West Bromwich provided one example of workers refusing to submit to arbitration. Kenrick’s occupied a similar position in the iron hollowware industry to Pilkington’s in the glass trade. The firm organised other manufacturers into the Association of Cast Iron Hollow Ware Manufacturers, a cartel designed to maintain high prices and the existing market share of its members. Kenrick’s also epitomised the paternalistic attitudes of many employers in Black Country. The firm gave money to local schools, hospitals, cricket and football clubs. Part of West Bromwich became known as ‘Kenrick’s village’ even though the company contributed little to its construction. Kenrick’s extended the same paternalism into labour relations. Managers enrolled workers into a number of welfare schemes and went through most of the nineteenth century without a single strike. But the introduction of new machinery from 1884 onwards threatened to disturb that industrial peace, as it threatened the position of turners and other skilled workers on the factory floor and stimulated resentment among them. In 1888 the company made some of them redundant, including Charles Chamberlain, a leading local Knight, and all 100 turners and many of the 800 other workers at Kenrick’s turned to the Order for help.

The Knights became involved soon after the redundancies took effect. Hollowware turners from across England and Scotland had already met in West Bromwich at the beginning of 1888 to draw up a price list to present to their employers, which they did in July. Neither side initially acted on these demands, but in January 1889 the Knights, anxious to demonstrate the strength of their Black Country assemblies, presented a version of the

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73 Trainor, Black Country Elites, p. 146.
existing list to employers and insisted that they accept it without delay. The employers initially refused to do so, and even issued notices that the turners would be locked out. Yet the Knights seemed to have convinced them and the local press that in the event of a strike the turners could draw on enormous resources from the Order’s British and American assemblies. One report claimed that local assemblies boasted more than £100 in reserve funds, and that the General Assembly was prepared if necessary to raise as much as £20,000 for strikes that they approved. Charles Chamberlain reiterated this theme in an interview with a local journalist in March. ‘If a strike took place in the hollowware trade tomorrow,’ he claimed, ‘the Americans would send us £500 as a first instalment straight off.’

Faced with these numbers, the hollowware manufacturers decided on arbitration instead. Where the newspapers previously worried over a ‘Threatened Gigantic Strike,’ they now reported the meetings of the turners and their managers. By mid-March, both sides put forward a detailed list of their grievances and positions. They also agreed on an arbitrator, Nigel C.A. Neville, the stipendiary magistrate of Wolverhampton, who made his decision on 2 April. The turners did not receive Neville’s award with much enthusiasm. Half of them had their wages reduced rather than increased, and as the award was retroactive to 29 January they actually owed money to their employers. The turners went on strike against the award and only returned to work when the Knights demanded that they honour their pledge to abide by the results of arbitration.

The dispute flared up again in December 1889 when the Association of Cast Iron Hollow Ware Manufacturers unilaterally decided to grant a 10 percent increase on the prices listed in Neville’s award. Only a day before the arbitrator’s list was due to expire, on 29 January 1890, the turners and employers met one final time to attempt a last-minute settlement, and failed. When the employers suggested further arbitration the workers, as their secretary reported, ‘unanimously decided to cease work the next day, January 29th, and try to obtain by that means that which they thought they were justly entitled to.’ Yet the Knights remained opposed to a strike. Rumours circulated that they would refuse to give money to striking turners. ‘They have gone in the face of the constitution, and landed themselves in

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76 Smethwick Weekly News, 23 February 1889. This article also provides a detailed list of their grievances and demands.
77 Smethwick Weekly News, 2 March 1889.
78 Report on the Strikes and Lock-outs of 1890, By the Labour Correspondent to the Board of Trade, pp. 188–89. Found at HCPP.
79 Report on the Strikes and Lock-outs of 1890, By the Labour Correspondent to the Board of Trade, pp. 188–89. Found at HCPP.
the position of being on strike without being entitled to strike pay,’ one Knight claimed in the *Halfpenny Weekly*. Nevertheless, the Birmingham and Black Country assemblies voted to ‘forgive the turners for their stupid act of insubordination’ and to raise £50 for their strike.

That strike, however, collapsed after turners at firms in Wolverhampton, Coseley and Manchester returned to work. Turners at Kenrick’s admitted defeat soon afterwards, and by 22 March 1890, they were all back at work. The Knights, writes R.A. Church, ‘refused to countenance the turners’ militancy.’ The turners soon refused to countenance the Knights as well. Some of them remained in the assemblies until the end of the year, but most never forgave the Knights for their equivocation and left the assemblies for good. Managers at Kenrick’s further increased the mechanisation of their works and soon dispensed with the need for turners altogether. They also redoubled their welfare schemes in order to prevent any re-emergence of trade unions and strikes at the firm. Tranquillity soon reigned again at Kenrick’s; Knights found that their commitment to arbitration could provoke severe and ultimately disastrous opposition from their own members.

American Knights had already discovered, amidst the Great Upheaval two years earlier, that once workers began to see strikes as a quick way to settle disputes, and saw other workers fighting and winning strikes of their own, no amount of speeches, articles, resolutions or even orders could stop them. A similar wave of strikes began in Britain in 1888, intensified in 1889 and reached a crescendo in 1890. British and Irish Knights initially welcomed the new optimistic mood. In Walsall they led subscription drives to raise money for the London Dock Strike in 1889, supported striking fibre drawers in Sheffield, and helped local bit filers, saddle tree makers, awl blademakers and other saddlery workers to negotiate with employers and, if necessary, backed them if they were forced to strike. Knights in Derry, as we have seen, quickly expanded after winning victories over employers like Messrs

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80 *Halfpenny Weekly*, 22 February 1890.
81 *Halfpenny Weekly*, 22 February 1890. DA248 of Cradley Heath and DA236 of Rotherham raised £25 and £15 respectively towards the strike (*Halfpenny Weekly*, 8 March 1890).
82 The trustee of LA7952, for example, was a turner in October 1890 (*Smethwick Weekly News*, 4 October 1890).
83 Church, *Kenricks in Hardware*, p. 289.
84 The trustee of LA7952, for example, was a turner in October 1890. *Smethwick Weekly News*, 4 October 1890.
85 Church, *Kenricks in Hardware*, p. 293; Staples and Staples, *Power, Profits, and Patriarchy*, p. 11.
86 *Walsall Observer*, 31 August 1889, 4 and 25 January 1890; *Birmingham Daily Post*, 20 July and 2 September 1889; *Sheffield and Rotherham Independent*, 24 September 1889; *Halfpenny Weekly*, 1 March 1890.
Watts. In the opening years of the new unionism the ranks of the Knights of Labor swelled along with the rest of the British labour movement. But their industrial tactics soon caused them problems, as they had at Kenrick’s, among two large bodies of workers, dockers in Liverpool and stove grate workers in Rotherham, who had initially seemed destined to become major players in the Order’s British and Irish history.

The leaders of LA443 took their commitment to arbitration very seriously. From the earliest days of the assembly they cultivated ties with the master stevedores and shipping companies active on the Bootle docks. In December 1889, a meeting of the assembly discussed the demands they should place on employers, and ‘it was unanimously resolved that the employers be asked to appoint a time when the matter can be settled by arbitration.’ Most dock employers looked on their demands with some favour and in January 1890, the Knights followed up on these initial attempts at negotiation with a full set of rules to govern work on the docks. These rules governed everything from the working day, which was to be nine hours, to overtime pay, from 6 p.m. to 6 a.m. and with double time on Sundays and a number of public holidays. Two leading master stevedores and two shipping companies accepted these rules, in the words of the secretary of LA443, ‘without a murmur.’

But the negotiations carried out by Knights in Bootle did not take place in a vacuum. Their assembly began at the same time as a new union, the National Union of Dock Labourers (NUDL), formed in Glasgow at the beginning of 1889, expanded southward into Merseyside. Later chapters examine conflict between these two organisations in more detail, but we can say here that in Bootle they represented two very different approaches to the question of dealing with employers. In May, almost immediately upon arriving in Liverpool, the NUDL considered sending its members on strike. Thomas Dooling, one of the leaders of LA443, told local Knights in response that ‘on no consideration were the members to strike. They must seek arbitration, and should they fail in this attempt then their American brothers would help them.’ NUDL leaders, for their part, publicly attacked the working rules that Knights presented to employers as the product of agitators with no practical knowledge of work on the docks, and they refused to recognise the agreements that Knights had made with the stevedores and shipping companies. Against this, LA443 promised

87 *Halfpenny Weekly*, 14 December 1889.
88 *Halfpenny Weekly*, 1 February 1890.
89 A full copy of these rules can be found in *Liverpool Weekly Courier*, 1 February 1890.
90 *Halfpenny Weekly*, 1 February 1890.
91 *Bootle Times*, 31 August 1889.
92 *Liverpool Echo*, 27 January 1890.
to uphold their agreements and to establish ‘mutual respect and confidence between employers and employees.’

These disagreements reached a head at the beginning of 1890 as both organisations expanded on the Liverpool docks. When NUDL leaders insisted that none of their members should unload cargoes alongside non-union workers, Knights in Bootle were faced with a stark choice: support that union or abide by their agreements with employers. They chose the latter course. Individual Knights, if not the assembly at large, agreed to offload ships that NUDL members refused to handle. They gained short-term advantages from this course. Stevedores began to give Knights preferential treatment over other workers. But as their currency rose among employers, their reputation within the rest of the local labour movement, and among many dockers, began to plunge. Dockers in Liverpool, meanwhile, clamoured for a strike like the one their comrades had recently won in London. The NUDL offered to lead one, and their leaders’ plans for a strike in March were only delayed until the next month thanks to obstruction from the Knights. This delay gave employers time to recruit large numbers of strike-breakers and when the dockers did strike, they went down to defeat.

Ironically, the strike was settled by a man strongly associated with the Knights: Michael Davitt. Davitt advised the dockers to negotiate with their employers and, if that failed, to seek assistance from American Knights, who could mount a transatlantic boycott of anti-union shipping and so bring employers back to the negotiating table. This advice was indistinguishable from that given by Thomas Dooling in August 1889. The Knights, however, would not be the ones to benefit from it. The NUDL survived for a time. The Bootle assembly, now tainted by its association with strike-breaking, did not survive the year. Knights disregarded the change in zeitgeist at their peril. Eric Taplin concludes that with their almost fanatical devotion to arbitration at any cost, they managed to alienate themselves even from those dockers who might otherwise have supported them.

The case of the stove grate workers of Rotherham illustrated other dangers. In 1889 they joined the Order in large numbers, and from their first assembly, LA1266, they soon created ten others. In March 1890, they decided to demand a 10 percent wage advance on the grounds that their earnings had not increased even after the introduction of new, more productive machinery in recent years. When employers refused to negotiate with them or with a

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93 Halfpenny Weekly, 1 February 1890.
94 Bean, ‘Knights in Liverpool,’ p. 74.
96 Reynolds’s, 11 May 1890.
deputation the Knights sent from Birmingham, they handed in their notice and struck work.97 Haydn Sanders travelled up to Rotherham from Walsall to direct the strike while claiming, in public at least, that he remained determined to settle the dispute through arbitration. The employers refused to negotiate with him too.98 As the strike went on, new assemblies continued to open in Rotherham, and in May the strike ended with employers conceding their demands.99

This battle was the largest and most prominent strike that the Knights ever carried out in Britain and Ireland. It was also their most notable industrial victory. Yet this victory ended not with the Order’s expansion throughout the stove grate industry, but with the formation of a new union, the Stove-Grate Workers Union, headed by none other than Haydn Sanders. We will explore the wider ramifications of that new union in later chapters. But we can say here that even as many stove grate workers expressed their thanks to the Knights for their assistance during the strike, many of them also wondered if the Knights would help in future disputes. Their suspicions were probably well founded. While it is unlikely that the Knights completely refused to support the strikers, as one writer claims, many of them received no or little strike pay.100 A new union, uniting stove grate workers across Britain, was better placed to provide financial support when strikes broke out than an order that seemed unable, or unwilling, to do so.

British Knights attempted to solve this problem when they finally created a National Assembly in 1891. They proposed to increase the contributions of their members in order to ‘build up a fund which would attract recruits, and enable any serious dispute to be properly fought.’101 After they registered the National Assembly they planned to test that new plan with a strike of vice makers at Lye. But these steps came too late to halt their decline. The judgement the Smethwick Weekly News passed on the Order’s Black Country assemblies in 1891 could equally have applied to assemblies in Liverpool, Rotherham and elsewhere. ‘The thousands who joined two years ago, expecting half-crowns for shillings,’ it claimed, ‘ceased to subscribe when they found that the Knights, apart from their mysteries and secret codes, were a hum-drum set who rather disliked strikes.’102

In the depressed conditions of the mid-1880s that dislike did not cause the Knights many problems. At the end of that decade it lost them recruits. Newly

97 Rotherham Advertiser, 22 February 1890.
98 Leeds Mercury, 12 April 1890.
99 Rotherham Advertiser, 29 March, 26 April and 17 May 1890.
100 Brake, Men of Good Character, p. 330; Reynolds’s, 11 May 1890.
101 Smethwick Weekly News, 11 July 1891.
102 Smethwick Weekly News, 11 July 1891.
militant workers lacked the patience to wait on the results of negotiation. Nor were they willing to accept the compromises that arbitration entailed. The Knights, those that stayed in the assemblies at least, held onto their faith in arbitration until the very end of their history. In Rotherham they gained at least one small victory through negotiations at an axle turning shop in 1892. But these minor victories counted for little next to the hundreds, if not thousands, of workers who left the Knights because they would not or could not support their strikes.

Conclusion

Thanks to their name, the Knights of Labor became the butt of many jokes in British newspapers. ‘Judging by the strikes they are always organizing,’ claimed the London magazine *Fun*, ‘days of idleness seem the natural outcome of Knights of Labour.’ The *Taunton Courier* jibed that ‘an assembly of the Knights of Labour in New York has disbanded in order that its members may go to work.’ These jokes, however, were completely unrepresentative of the Order’s history in Britain and Ireland. The Knights preached arbitration and strained every nerve to practise it. Some employers refused to submit to arbitration, notably Pilkington’s, and then, as their position in the window glass industry deteriorated, Hartley’s and Chance Bros too. Knights were forced into strikes they did not want and when they ended, with some help from a fire in Sunderland, LA3504 was destroyed. The hostility of employers never became as damaging to British and Irish Knights as it did to American Knights but it ended the glassworkers’ assembly – the strongest assembly, composed of the most skilled and highly paid workers, that ever existed in Britain and Ireland.

In other cases, Knights called strikes in order to bring employers to, or back to, the negotiating table. But their preference for arbitration proved so strong, and their unwillingness to walk out so great, that they appeared to some, particularly dockers in Liverpool and hollowware turners in West Bromwich, to be friendlier to employers than to workers on strike. That preference survived through all the fluctuations of the economic cycle and the swings in militancy, strikes and trade union membership that accompanied it. Indeed, Knights preached and tried to practise arbitration even when doing so put them at odds with the desires of the workers they wanted to represent. With the rise of the new unionism, their lukewarm attitude to strikes cost them an excellent chance to establish a permanent

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103 *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 14 May 1892.
104 *Fun*, 7 March 1888.
105 *Taunton Courier*, 31 August 1887.
presence on the Liverpool docks, and meant that even when they won an impressive victory in Rotherham, stove grate workers preferred to form their own union rather than rely on an order that seemed unwilling or incapable of financing a serious dispute. Efforts to change those perceptions came too late to save the assemblies.

The sheer fact that Knights persevered with this course for so long, even when it was not always in their interests to do so, tells us something about the British and Irish workers who joined the Knights of Labor. In the previous chapter we saw how they made as few changes as possible to the cultural practices and organisational style of their adopted order. Their attitude towards industrial relations was no different. As well as following Powderly’s dictates regarding arbitration and strikes, British and Irish Knights attempted a number of boycotts and even tried to amass enough capital to start a cooperative enterprise of their own. They lacked the numbers and the savings to make either effective, but in both cases they remained true to the industrial prescriptions of their order. Arbitration and cooperation, if not the boycott, were already popular in the British labour movement – but the consistency with which British and Irish Knights followed them suggests that their main inspiration came from Powderly and the General Executive Board. If we compare their record with that of most American Knights, whose propensity to strike with or without the sanction of their leaders infuriated Powderly and his associates, we find that the orders of the General Master Workman were more closely followed in Britain and Ireland than in the Order’s American home.

British and Irish Knights never explained why they remained so ‘pure’ in this sense, and we can only speculate as to why. The most likely explanation is that they established and joined the assemblies because they saw the Order as superior to any local alternative. They doubtless hoped to emulate the achievements of American Knights who had briefly become, in 1886, the largest and most successful labour organisation in the world. Having already adopted that order it seemed natural to keep, as far as possible, to all of the practices, methods and principles that their American leaders laid down for them. Better to keep them all rather than change something that, for all they knew, was a crucial ingredient in the Order’s American victories. And why, indeed, join a transnational organisation if you wish to change it completely, unless you wish only to trade on its name? The Sons of Labour and the British United Order, as we saw in the previous chapter, went down that road and the assemblies, had they wished, could have done the same.

But the British and Irish Knights did not. Their adherence to the principles of their order won them recruits in the 1880s; that same adherence lost them members in the following decade. Powderly repeatedly encouraged the British and Irish Knights to adapt their order to suit local conditions;
they became amongst his most faithful followers instead. It is often said that the most virulent nationalists come from border regions or from outside the nations they claim to represent, from Napoleon, a Corsican, to Hitler, an Austrian. The history of the Knights of Labor in Britain and Ireland suggests that in a transnational movement, the most enthusiastic followers of the official line might also be found on the periphery of the movement rather than at its centre.