Knights Across the Atlantic

Steven Parfitt

Published by Liverpool University Press


For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/72674

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2492365
The Knights and the Unions

No account of the Great Upheaval is complete without the story of the Knights of Labor and the trade unionists of the American Federation of Labor. Amidst the titanic industrial and political struggles between capital and labour, the American labour movement, divided mainly into these two camps, fought its own internecine war until the Knights were driven off the field and the Federation, weakened but intact, was left to lead organised labour into the twentieth century. The outcome of this struggle still shapes the way we understand American labour history. John Commons, Selig Perlman and Gerald Grob, among others, argued that the AFL’s victory represented the triumph of rational trade unionism, concerned solely with narrow economic interests, over the utopian dreams of the Knights of Labor.¹ Norman Ware and most subsequent historians see that victory as a retreat, however necessary it might have been, from the powerful and wide-ranging organisation of American workers that the Knights briefly maintained in the mid-1880s. Black and women workers suffered most from that retreat.² The American labour movement would not achieve the proportion of workers organised by the Knights until the 1930s. Indeed, the Knights organised proportionally more workers than the American labour movement does today.³

The labour civil war of the mid-1880s should not obscure other trends in the history of the Knights and the unions, however. They were not always

¹ The most vehement explanation of this thesis can be found in Grob, *Workers and Utopia*.
or necessarily enemies. In the first decade and a half of the Order’s history, the Knights established cordial ties with many trade unionists. The Knights became an attractive option for many of the latter during the 1870s as poor trade and failed strikes decimated the unions. Some trade unionists became Knights. Whole unions even joined the Order as a body. Cooperation was as much a part of the story as conflict, even if conflict ultimately proved more decisive. Equally decisive was the absence of any meaningful rival to the Knights until the revival of the trade unions in the mid-1880s.

The same considerations governed the Order’s growth outside North America. Belgian Knights exploited the absence of trade unions in the glass and coal industries of the Charleroi basin. Knights in New Zealand grew rapidly in the aftermath of a large failed strike in 1890, and ‘the early 1890s was the era of KOL activists,’ as Robert Weir writes, ‘for the simple reason that they didn’t have a lot of competition.’ Australian Knights, by contrast, faced a relatively powerful trade union movement. Though some trade unionists flirted with the Order during the Great Upheaval, Australian unions consistently fought against the assemblies that opened there from 1888 onwards. The strength of the local labour movement remained a powerful determinant of the Order’s success or failure in any given country or region.

In this respect British and Irish Knights faced an uphill task at best. In August 1886, the *Omaha Daily Bee* claimed that extending the Order into Great Britain ‘will be very difficult, if not impossible. The trade-union spirit in Great Britain is very strong, and British workingmen are very stubborn.’ Certainly, as we saw in Chapter 1, the British trade union movement, for all its problems, remained the most powerful in the world. Its affiliated unions would make formidable adversaries. But Knights had solid grounds for optimism. The TUC only organised around 4 or 5 percent of the British labour force for most of the 1880s. The Knights, committed to organising all workers regardless of skill, gender, race or national origin, could potentially

---

4 Ware, *Labor Movement*, p. xviii.
7 Trade unionists in Brisbane wrote to Powderly in 1886 and then held meetings with a view to forming assemblies there (W. Lane to Powderly, 12 May 1886, Box 21, TVP; *Brisbane Courier*, 5 September 1887). The Melbourne Trades Council twice kept the Knights from affiliating while the wider movement in the various Australian colonies prevented the Knights from attending what became the first congress of the Australian Labor Party (Melbourne Argus, 11 July 1891; Melbourne Argus, 15 April 1893; Weir, *Knights Down Under*, p. 228; Churchward, ‘American Influence on the Australian Labour Movement,’ pp. 265–66).
8 *Omaha Daily Bee*, 8 August 1886.
find support from some sections of this unorganised mass – even, perhaps, without upsetting unions affiliated with the TUC.

The changes that took place at the end of the decade further complicated this picture. The end of the 1880s and the beginning of the 1890s, as we saw in Chapter 4, saw the rise of the new unionism. Strikes and trade union membership skyrocketed. New unions like the National Union of Gas Workers and General Labourers and the Dock, Wharf, Riverside and General Labourers’ Union spearheaded the extension of trade unionism into unskilled occupations. New unionists like Tom Mann, John Burns, Ben Tillett and Will Thorne gave the new movement a younger and more radical image. Historians agree that the upswing in trade and the fall in unemployment at the end of the 1880s encouraged workers to strike and organise in large numbers.

Agreement ends there. The classic view of the new unionism saw it emerge out of a small but growing socialist movement that, despite its small numbers, provided most of the new unions’ leadership and gave these institutions a distinctly radical edge. In this view the new unionism represented a new departure in the British labour movement. Cheap organisations, catering to unskilled workers and more ready to strike, grew in importance at the expense of traditional unions with their high dues, benefit plans and reluctance to engage in industrial action. Revisionists argue that the socialists played a negligible role in the new unions. They point out that the established unions benefited most from the upswing in trade. Still more assert that the new unions, and many of the new unionists, came to resemble the old unions and old unionists more than the other way around. Revisionists even argue that the new unionism represented a quantitative advance in the membership of the trade union movement but not a qualitative change at all. Others point to previous movements among unskilled labourers in the 1870s as proof that the new unionism was not all that new.10

These are useful cautions to keep in mind. They continue to inspire historical debate. They should not stop us, however, from seeing the new unionism as at least the beginnings of a qualitative change in the British

labour movement. The TUC that entered the twentieth century was a very
different animal from that of 1880 or even 1888.11 And the Knights of Labor
became a part of that change. The influence of their American struggles
and victories in the mid-1880s helped generate debate among trade unionists
keen to revitalise their movement, and provided them with ideas to speed
this revitalisation along. The British and Irish assemblies became part of the
new unionism themselves. Their attempts to organise unskilled workers and
create local federations in several towns and regions provided models for
other new unions, and other new unionists, to follow.

The story of the Knights and the new unionism also returns us to
a central question from Chapter 1: American exceptionalism. Chapter 1
rejected exceptionalist arguments that see the American labour movement
as always and inevitably smaller and backward compared with the labour
movements of Europe. This chapter builds on the arguments of Kim Voss,
who claims that the relative weakness of the American labour movement in
the twentieth century resulted from the defeat of the Knights of Labor in
the nineteenth.12 American exceptionalism was not something inherent, she
argues: it was made. The story of the Knights in Britain and Ireland provides
a new twist on top of this one. The decline of the American Knights caused
the labour movement there to retreat; in Britain and Ireland the Knights
encouraged the labour movement to advance. American exceptionalism was
made by Knights on both sides of the Atlantic.

British and Irish Knights left that powerful legacy to the British labour
movement. Their encounters with actual trade unions, however, mirrored
the failures of American Knights in the 1880s and 1890s. Knights in some
places made alliances with other trade unionists, and in some cases small
unions willingly absorbed themselves into the assemblies. More often the
Knights and the unions came into conflict. On the one hand, they faced
craft unions that resisted any attempts to let their members join the Knights.
On the other, they faced new unions of unskilled workers that, despite all
the affinity that they might otherwise have shared with the assemblies, also
competed with them for members. The Knights were driven out from some
industries and displaced by rival unions in others. This chapter, in other
words, addresses the deep historical significance of the Order in Britain
and Ireland; it also points us towards the reasons behind its decline. As in
Belgium, New Zealand, Australia and the United States, the history of the
Knights of Labor in Britain and Ireland was powerfully shaped by the trade
unions.

11 See, for instance, B.C. Roberts, The Trades Union Congress, 1868–1921 (London: George
12 See Voss, Making of American Exceptionalism.
The Knights and the Crafts

The Knights of Labor arrived in England in 1884 as the saviour of local trade unionists. The glassworkers had seen their union crumble in the previous decade, and LA300 and its Universal Federation offered them the chance to revive trade unionism in the industry and build alliances with fellow craftsmen in Europe and North America. A.G. Denny, LA300’s European organiser, met with Thomas Burt, the Lib-Lab MP and leader of the Durham Miners’ Association, and reported to Powderly that Burt ‘was very favourably impressed with the K of L as far as he understood it.’ Burt and Henry Broadhurst, the secretary of the TUC’s Parliamentary Committee, both praised the Knights in public for their work among the glassworkers.

At the Labour Electoral Congress in 1890, however, a Knight from Cradley Heath gave a very different view of their relationship with the trade unions. ‘The Knights of Labour, of whom he was one,’ he told the Congress, ‘held out the hand of fellowship to other bodies, but it did not seem to be accepted.’ In just six years the Knights went from saviours to enemies.

During that time more than 10,000 British and Irish workers became part of upwards of 50 assemblies. The Knights naturally focused most of their attention on the great majority of workers that no trade union organised. They became most successful in regions like the Black Country where, as we saw in Chapter 2, unions remained weaker than in other major industrial centres. But their growth, gradual as it was, soon brought them into contact with trade unions that claimed the Order’s members for themselves. One Knight from Smethwick told the Labour Tribune in December 1886 that, ‘in stating that we are opposed to trade unions,’ one of the Order’s critics ‘has made a mistake. One half of its members are trade society men.’

These comments aroused suspicion from the trade societies involved. Eric Hobsbawm wrote in his study of British general unions that ‘they avoided the competition with the “crafts” which wrecked the Knights of Labor in the more mechanized USA of the late 1880s.’ More precisely, the British general unions organised ‘labourers’ and left ‘artisans’ to the craft unions while the Knights tried to organise them all, and faced opposition from the ‘crafts’ as a result. The British Knights, like their American cousins, also faced damaging and, for some assemblies, fatal opposition from the ‘crafts.’

---

13 A.G. Denny to Powderly, 29 December 1884, Box 12, TVP.
14 Pelling, ‘Knights in Britain,’ p. 315.
16 Labour Tribune, 4 December 1886.
The Knights and the Unions

The Knights began to establish assemblies outside the glass trade in 1886, at a propitious time in the history of trade unionism in the Black Country. The many small trades in the area, from chain making to ironworking, were represented by a loose patchwork of small organisations. In that year, as the *Birmingham Daily Gazette* later recollected, ‘several orders of skilled workmen were casting about for a newer style of Trade Unionism.’\(^{18}\) Well-known local trade union sympathisers, like the Rev. T.T. Sherlock and the Rev. Harold Rylett, chaired meetings that brought together workers who wanted to unite these small organisations into a meaningful alliance. As we saw in Chapter 2, Robert Robertson and Charles Bird attended these meetings and urged listeners to make the Knights the basis of their proposed federation.\(^{19}\)

These meetings offered Black Country Knights the chance to become the standard-bearers for craftsmen all across the region. They enjoyed some local support. T.T. Sherlock claimed that their presence ‘was a splendid augury for the future.’\(^{20}\) Richard Juggins, the foremost trade unionist in the Black Country, expressed his sympathy for the Knights and announced his intention ‘to unite all trades together so as to form one strong Union, on a similar basis to the Knights of Labour in America.’\(^{21}\) His preference for arbitration over strikes also fit well with the industrial philosophy of the Knights. One American newspaper even reported in May that the Order had brought about federation in the Black Country.\(^{22}\) Yet these reports proved premature. Juggins and others flirted with the Knights but ultimately built their own organisation, the Midland Counties Trades Federation (MCTF), instead.\(^{23}\) The MCTF, writes Eric Taylor, represented a ‘late flowering of craft unionism’ in the Black Country, and aimed to give the various small craft unions in the area parity with employers.\(^{24}\)

Knights viewed the new Federation as an ally at first. They told one meeting of Black Country workers in April 1886 that while they hoped that all English societies would join them, they ‘would not in any way interfere with the objects

---

\(^{18}\) *Birmingham Daily Gazette*, 18 February 1889.

\(^{19}\) *Smethwick Telephone*, 29 May 1886.

\(^{20}\) *Smethwick Telephone*, 8 May 1886.

\(^{21}\) *Labour Tribune*, 17 April 1886. One contemporary pamphlet listed Juggins as the most respected trade unionist in the area. See Sunday Chronicle, *Chains of Slavery: A Visit to the Strikers at Cradley Heath* (Manchester, 1886), p. 15.

\(^{22}\) John Swinton’s Paper, 30 May 1886.


of federation for the Unions of this country; for, with that, co-operation would be the more easy.\textsuperscript{25} Assemblies in Wolverhampton, Lye, Stamber Mill and Wollescote, as well as others from outside the Black Country, all affiliated with the MCTF.\textsuperscript{26} The Dudley vice makers, for instance, belonged to both bodies in 1889.\textsuperscript{27} Leaders from both organisations sometimes worked together to settle disputes which involved members of each.\textsuperscript{28}

But this \textit{entente cordiale} soon broke down. In May 1889, chain makers accused the Knights of using aggressive tactics against them. Juggins ‘disclaimed any understanding’ between the Knights and the Federation.\textsuperscript{29} In June, reports surfaced that the Knights were trying to force out workers affiliated with the Federation unless they switched to their side.\textsuperscript{30} These reports reflected the Knights’ desperation as they found that even when they worked with the MCTF that body drew hundreds of potential members away from the assemblies. George Barnsby argues that the Order’s ‘ultimate failure in the Black Country was due to there being a British organisation able to do everything that the Knights could do – the Midland Counties Trades Federation.’\textsuperscript{31} That was not true in the short term, of course. As early as 1888 the Knights operated two district assemblies and more than 30 local assemblies in the Black Country alone.\textsuperscript{32} There were enough disorganised workers available for both organisations to grow. In the long run, however, both the Knights and the MCTF strove to unite the workers of the Black Country under a single banner. The Knights missed their chance to hold that banner in 1886 before the MCTF became an established fact.

The Federation slowed the growth of the assemblies without the need for much open conflict. The Amalgamated Society of Engineers, on the other hand, wrenched their members from the assemblies in the space of a year. The ASE remained one of the most powerful trade unions in Britain, indeed the world, with its overseas branches scattered across North America, Australasia, France and other parts of the world where British engineers plied their trade. The ASE also had a history of cooperation with trade unionists from the United States. A young Terence Powderly, then a junior

\textsuperscript{25} \textit{Labour Tribune}, 17 April 1886.

\textsuperscript{26} Barnsby, \textit{Socialism in Birmingham}, p. 80.

\textsuperscript{27} \textit{Birmingham Daily Post}, 4 December 1889.

\textsuperscript{28} See for instance, the example of the fireclay trade, where different crafts in the industry were affiliated with each body (\textit{Birmingham Daily Post}, 24 December 1889), or the block-chain trade (\textit{Smethwick Weekly News}, 21 September 1889, \textit{Dudley Herald}, 7 September 1889).

\textsuperscript{29} \textit{Midland Counties Express}, 4 May 1889.

\textsuperscript{30} \textit{Midland Counties Express}, 8 June 1889.

\textsuperscript{31} Barnsby, \textit{Socialism in Birmingham}, p. 85.

\textsuperscript{32} A list of assemblies from the end of 1888 can be found in \textit{Birmingham Daily Gazette}, 18 February 1889.
official of the Machinists’ and Blacksmiths’ Union, had worked with the Engineers in the 1870s to promote transatlantic cooperation between the two unions through the pages of their journals. In the 1880s the ASE’s General Council began to cede some autonomy to the Australasian and North American branches. The North American branches let their members become Knights and retain their membership in the Engineers, with all the unemployment and sickness benefits that membership entailed. Their leniency in regard to the Order probably stemmed from the enthusiasm that accompanied its growth in the mid-1880s. That enthusiasm infected skilled as much as unskilled workers, and the ASE’s American officials probably worried that if they refused to allow dual membership it would be theirs that engineers would discard.

The General Council in Britain was not inclined to leniency, and stuck rigidly instead to the ASE rules that forbade any member from joining another trade society. The secretary of the new National Labour Federation on Tyneside, himself an Engineer, was informed in 1887 that the General Council would expel anyone who remained a member of both organisations. They extended the same threat to members of the Birmingham No. 4 branch, which asked the Council in September 1887 if it might join the Knights. Hundreds of engineers defied these instructions, according to Jesse Chapman, the Master Workman of LA10227. Their minor rebellion, however, was soon dealt with. The ASE’s Monthly Report for April 1888 instructed branch secretaries to tell ‘every member who has violated one of the fundamental principles of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, by joining another trade society, that he cannot retain his membership in our Society whilst he belongs to the “Knights of Labour,” and that he must immediately give up one (ours) or the other.’

33 Yearley, Britons, pp. 56–57.
34 In 1885 the General Council ruled against members in Montreal joining the Knights (Meeting 22 May 1885, Minutes of the Executive Council of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, November 1884–July 1885, Warwick Modern Records Centre [MRC], MSS.259/ASE/1/1/53). In 1887, John Hewitt, a delegate to the General Council, noted that ‘the Local Executive Council’s decision, directing our members to sever their connection with the “Knights of Labour,” does not apply to our members belonging to the American and Canadian Branches’ (ASE, Abstract Report of the General and Local Councils’ Proceedings, From January 1st to June 30th, 1888, pp. 17–19, MRC, MSS.259/ASE/11/1).
35 ASE, Abstract of the Council’s Proceedings, From June 30th, 1887, to December 31st, 1887, pp. 61–62, MRC, MSS.259/ASE/4/1/19. Note: the ASE’s Executive Council generally met in London and handled day-to-day issues, while the General Council met several times each year and generally handled larger issues.
36 Jesse Chapman to Powderly, 3 March 1888, Box 41, TVP.
trades attempted to defend themselves. They visited all the Birmingham branches and, according to Chapman, met with ‘very marked success among the men – many, when matters are fairly explained to them, taking up our side with enthusiasm.’

But the General Council overcame all opposition from the local rank and file. Knights sent a deputation headed by Richard Hill, the recording secretary of LA7952 and DA208, to plead their case at the triennial meeting of the General Council in May 1888; the Council, with some dissenting votes, refused to spare any time for their petition. The General Council then reaffirmed the decision of the Executive Council and gave ASE members six months to sever their ties with the Knights or face expulsion. Knights protested to no avail.

The Monthly Report for December 1888 reminded members that the six months had now elapsed, and judging by the silence on expulsions for joining another society in subsequent reports, the engineers followed the orders of their General Council and abandoned the assemblies. The Knights lost hundreds of members in the engineering trades as a consequence.

Knights achieved greater success for a longer time among the ironworkers of the Black Country. Edward Trow, an ironworkers leader originally from the Black Country but based in Darlington, viewed the Black Country ironworkers in 1888 as ‘a dead letter so far as unionism was concerned.’ This was an exaggeration. Ironworkers in the Black Country held onto a semblance of local unions, and some became early recruits to the Order’s assemblies.

In March 1887, as we saw in the previous chapter, their representatives held several meetings to discuss the prospects of forming a new association with ironworkers in the north of England. At the first meeting, the delegate from an ironworks at Corngreaves, near Cradley Heath, called for all of them to form assemblies of the Knights of Labor and claimed that workers from Corngreaves would not accept any alternative.

His advice and threats did not go unchallenged. Other delegates claimed that affiliation with the Order

---

38 Jesse Chapman to Powderly, 12 May 1888, Box 44, TVP.
39 ASE, Abstract Report of the General and Local Councils’ Proceedings, From January 1st to June 30th, 1888, pp. 17–19, MRC, MSS.259/ASE/11/1; Jesse Chapman to Powderly, 12 May 1888, Box 44, TVP.
42 At the Royal Commission on Labour in 1892, the Associated’s president, William Aucott, referred to the Knights as the main predecessor to his own union (‘Minutes of Evidence from 1892 Royal Commission on Labour, Group A, Volume II,’ p. 311. Found at: HCPP).
43 Stourbridge, Brierley Hill, and County Express, 3 March 1887.
would prove expensive and that the Knights were obsessed with politics. One remarked, to general laughter, that ‘he had greater faith in getting some of his money back from the North than from America.’

The sceptics won out. The delegate that Corngreaves sent to the next meeting made it clear that his predecessor spoke only for himself. Delegates from the Black Country soon helped to lay the groundwork later in 1887 for Edward Trow’s new union, the Associated Iron and Steel Workers of Great Britain, which represented part of a wider trend towards national unions in the iron and steel industries. Trow and other leaders of the Associated immediately set out to recruit those ironworkers who had already joined the Order. His Ironworkers Journal, and the West Bromwich Labour Tribune, which aligned itself with the Associated Iron and Steel Workers, raised questions about the future of the assemblies in Britain and the United States. Both carried stories on ‘the reported decadence of the Knights of Labor.’ The first letter to appear in Trow’s journal came in May 1888, and was obviously published with local rivalries in mind. The writer, an English ironworker living in the United States, reported his disillusionment with American Knights, claimed that ironworkers in the Order received less than those in rival unions and were led by workers with no direct knowledge of the ironworkers, and ended with praise for Trow’s new union. In November, the Labour Tribune reported on ‘a numerous migration from the ranks of the Knights of Labour to the [British] A.A.I.S.W.,’ and provided the story with an easily digestible moral. ‘It is the duty of every ironworker first and foremost to support his own society,’ the Tribune explained. ‘He can support whom he pleases afterwards.’

With these favourable winds from the press, the Associated Iron and Steel Workers slowly won ground from the Knights in the Black Country. The Labour Tribune was almost certainly premature to suggest a ‘numerous migration’ between the two. Even in 1892 the president of the Associated, William Aucott, commented that ‘a large number of those men [the Knights] are now joining us.’ Aucott also claimed in 1892 that ‘relations with them are friendly.’ But that can only have been the friendliness that comes after the defeated party has forgiven the victors. The Knights were that defeated

---

44 *Birmingham Daily Post*, 1 March 1887.
45 *Stourbridge, Brierley Hill, and County Express*, 12 March 1887.
48 Ironworkers Journal, May 1888.
49 Labour Tribune, 17 November 1888.
party, even if their defeat at the hands of Aucott’s organisation was not as abrupt or comprehensive as it had been in their conflict with the ASE. Trow and his fellow trade unionists lacked the power of the ASE General Council or the means to force ironworkers to leave the assemblies. Their main drawcard remained their ability to secure representation on the Joint Boards of Arbitration and Conciliation that traditionally governed the iron industry, something that the Knights, as Aucott told the 1892 Royal Commission on Labour, either never attempted or achieved.\(^50\) As with the Midland Counties Trades Federation, the Knights found themselves displaced and then replaced by a new body that first competed with them and then gradually took many of their members.

The case of the iron plate workers was perhaps the most discouraging example of all. During the 1880s, the Knights organised about 450 iron plate workers around Lye and helped them win a number of concessions from employers. We saw in earlier chapters that these concessions included barring female labour from the works; Knights also helped the iron plate workers to get ‘a unified list of prices.’ In 1890, however, the Knights faced new competition from the new National Amalgamated Iron Plate Workers Society, which brought together workers in the trade from London, Liverpool, Manchester, Bristol, Walsall and other parts of the Black Country. Iron plate workers from Lye, as Ted Brake writes, ‘were understandably loath to desert those who had helped them in their hour of need.’ But gratitude towards the Order did not stop them deserting their assemblies and joining the new Society after a few months.\(^51\)

In each of these confrontations the Knights soon emerged the clear losers. They nearly burst onto the Black Country scene as a federation organising craftsmen throughout the region, only for the Midland Counties Trades Federation to occupy that position instead. They won support from engineers until the ASE very effectively forced Knights in that trade to choose their side. For all their protests, the engineering Knights chose the ASE. Knights made inroads among the ironworkers of the Black Country until the Associated arrived and soon took their members. Even among iron plate workers at Lye, whose affiliation with the Knights brought them nothing but victories, the rise of the Iron Plate Workers Society soon cost the assemblies some 450 more men. George Barnsby’s claim that the Order could not compete with ‘a British organisation able to do everything that the Knights could do,’ rings true in each of these cases.\(^52\) These organisations need not even battle with the Knights to displace them. The crafts,

\(^50\) ‘Minutes of Evidence,’ p. 311.


\(^52\) Barnsby, *Socialism in Birmingham*, p. 85.
Hobsbawm suggested, eventually wrecked the American Knights; in Britain they hamstringed many assemblies in a short space of time.

‘There is no room for an organization of the Powderly type here,’ the Smethwick Weekly News concluded in December 1888. ‘The ground is occupied, the English trades unions are not going to dissolve themselves to make room for a new order.’53 The experiences of Black Country Knights certainly bore out the second half of that statement. But there were those who made radically different predictions about the future of the British Knights of Labor. In February 1889, a correspondent for Reynolds’s Newspaper claimed that the Knights of Labor would soon eclipse the TUC itself. That view seems pure fantasy when we consider the Order’s first five years in the Black Country; but method lay behind his apparent madness. The TUC, he explained, had ‘selfishly ignored the cause of unskilled labour,’ a mass of workers that far outnumbered all the trade unionists in Britain, for much too long. The Knights seemed much more likely to organise them than the Parliamentary Committee of the TUC.54 If the trade unions thwarted the Knights among skilled workers, in other words, the Knights might do better on the other side of the skill divide. And the Reynolds’s correspondent made his startling prediction just as the rise of a new movement, the ‘new unionism,’ placed the issue on unskilled labour squarely on the trade union agenda. The Knights and the new unionism were very closely related. The former, indeed, played an integral role in the origins and the development of the latter.

The Knights and the New Unionism

When Michael Davitt appeared at the General Assembly of the Knights of Labor in 1887, he told the delegates that ‘the spectacle which the Knights of Labor organization presents to European workingmen gives pride and pleasure and hope to your less powerful and less favoured brethren across the Atlantic.’55 Less than a year later, the strike of female workers at the matchworks of Bryant and May began a groundswell of trade union action that became known as the new unionism. The 1889 strikes of gasworkers and dockers in London became the great symbols of the new movement, and at all subsequent Trades Union Congresses the leaders of the older, established unions faced severe challenges to their leadership from ‘new unionists’ like John Burns, Tom Mann and Ben Tillett. These events were related. The pride and pleasure and hope that Davitt mentioned in 1887 formed part of the context from which the new unionism emerged in 1888 and 1889.

53 Smethwick Weekly News, 1 December 1888.
54 Reynolds’s, 24 February 1889.
55 JUL, 15 October 1887.
Contemporary observers certainly associated the Knights with the rise of the new unions. ‘The “New Unionism,”’ Sidney Webb wrote to a London newspaper in 1890, ‘is doing for England the work of the Knights of Labour in America.’\textsuperscript{56} The \textit{Birmingham Gazette} observed at the end of 1889 that ‘the labour movements which were initiated by the [1889 London] dock strike are clearly following on the same lines as those which the Knights of Labour marked out.’\textsuperscript{57} Historians have elaborated further. J.H.M. Laslett argues that ‘the K of L acted as part catalyst, and part actor in the movement towards trades amalgamation and general unionism.’\textsuperscript{58} Logie Barrow and Ian Bullock agree that the Knights briefly played an important role in the agitation for federation, a heading under which amalgamation and general union schemes usually fell.\textsuperscript{59} Henry Pelling writes that the Order ‘contributed in several ways to build up interest in unionism, especially among the unskilled.’\textsuperscript{60} Ronald Bean has shown how Knights in Liverpool played crucial roles in the development of new unionism in Liverpool, while James D. Young has underlined the important role that the Knights played, along with other American figures and institutions, among the workers of Scotland.\textsuperscript{61}

The Knights of Labor did not create the material conditions that led to the upswing in trade, or to the fall in unemployment that made hitherto unorganised workers more likely to act and organise. But strike waves are more than simply a function of economic conditions and especially of unemployment.\textsuperscript{62} James Cronin writes that in the 1870s and 1880s the extension and expansion of the British trade union movement remained hindered by the lack of ‘a new set of political ideas, by novel strategic thinking or what might be termed a new philosophy of labour.’ The growth of British socialism went some way towards providing this new philosophy. Many trade unionists learned lessons from the economic downturns of the period which became, as Cronin argues, a ‘great teacher of labour.’\textsuperscript{63} And from across the Atlantic, the Knights provided an alternative philosophy to the prevailing methods of the TUC. These and other strands combined to give the new unionism intellectual as well as material foundations.

\textsuperscript{56} \textit{Pall Mall Gazette}, 7 February 1890.

\textsuperscript{57} \textit{Birmingham Daily Gazette}, 20 December 1889.

\textsuperscript{58} Laslett, ‘Haymarket, Henry George,’ p. 72.


\textsuperscript{60} Pelling, ‘Knights in Britain,’ pp. 320–30.

\textsuperscript{61} R. Bean, ‘Knights of Labour in Liverpool,’ pp. 68–78; Young, ‘Changing Images,’ pp. 69–89.

\textsuperscript{62} Hobsbawm, ‘New Unionism in Perspective,’ p. 155.

\textsuperscript{63} Cronin, ‘ Strikes,’ p. 87–88.
The Great Upheaval gave a powerful jolt to radicals and trade unionists in Europe. Socialists were accustomed to seeing the Americans as laggards in the revolutionary movement. Now their struggles appeared, in the words of Jules Guesde, as ‘the tocsin for the social revolution … in all the civilized world.’\textsuperscript{64} Engels even predicted that the Americans would soon take their place in the vanguard of the international revolutionary movement.\textsuperscript{65} British trade unionists were also accustomed to seeing the American labour movement as a smaller and derivative version of their own. Yet in 1885 they saw the Knights defeat the infamous robber baron Jay Gould in a strike against his Southwestern railroad system – possibly the greatest victory ever won by a working-class movement against any corporation in the world. Now it seemed that British trade unionists had something to learn from the Americans instead of, as in the past, the other way around.

American Knights offered them two interrelated lessons in particular, both of which became central to the new unionism: organising unskilled workers and forming them and skilled workers into a single, grand federation of all trades and industries. Both causes animated British socialists and some radicals and trade unionists in the 1880s.\textsuperscript{66} The TUC of the 1880s, however, almost exclusively represented the skilled crafts and largely refused to lead a movement to organise workers outside the crafts. The Congress also failed to act on a number of schemes for federation that delegates proposed over the course of the decade.\textsuperscript{67}

Both causes had a rich British pedigree. ‘Ideas of federation,’ write Logie Barrow and Ian Bullock, ‘were part of something older and looser: of those aspirations for united action by all working people – however labelled – unionised or not.’\textsuperscript{68} Robert Owen’s Grand National Consolidated Trades Union in the 1830s, the United Kingdom Alliance of Organised Trades and the plans of the British and Irish sections of the First International for an ‘international trades union’ in the 1860s, each provided precedents for organising skilled and unskilled workers together. Yet Barrow and Bullock note that the supporters of both causes in the 1880s and 1890s tended to look for more recent precedents than these.\textsuperscript{69} And while the President of the 1886 TUC, Frederick Maddison, may have doubted ‘whether a system such as that instituted in America by the Knights of Labour would be congenial to

\textsuperscript{64} Quoted in Laslett, ‘Haymarket, Henry George …,’ p. 69.

\textsuperscript{65} Engels, ‘Preface to the American Edition.’

\textsuperscript{66} Rabinovitch, \textit{British Marxist Socialism}, pp. 89–90.

\textsuperscript{67} See, for instance, \textit{Report of the 1886 Trades Union Congress}, p. 46; \textit{Report of the 1887 Trades Union Congress}, pp. 36–37, all from TUC Online Reports, found at: http://www.unionhistory.info/reports

\textsuperscript{68} Barrow and Bullock, \textit{Democratic Ideas}, p. 58.

\textsuperscript{69} Barrow and Bullock, \textit{Democratic Ideas}, pp. 57–61.
the majority of our societies,’70 the Order provided many radicals and trade unionists with proof that federation and the organisation of unskilled labour worked in practice as well as in theory.

The staff of Reynolds’s Newspaper consistently urged their readers to follow the Order’s example. In May 1886, ‘Dodo’ called the attention of unionists to ‘the programme of the Brotherhood of the Knights of Labour.’ It was, he claimed, ‘worth studying’:

In England we can hardly be said to have a pure labour movement. We have a skilled labour movement, the chief manifestations of which is the trades unions. The unskilled labourers are still more numerous. America is now showing them a glorious example.71

Dodo’s colleague ‘Demos’ agreed, in an open letter to Michael Davitt in July 1887, that ‘an organization on the pattern of the American Knights of Labour seems to offer itself at once as the framework best suited to a Labour Union in this country.’72 In August he added that the man who led a great movement of unskilled labourers would become ‘one of the most powerful men in England.’ He would, Demos claimed, ‘be the English Powderly.’73

Reynolds’s was not alone. Socialists wanted to build a single organisation of all British workers and found a powerful model in the Knights. Justice and Commonweal, the two main socialist publications and the organs of the Social Democratic Federation and the Socialist League, respectively, praised the Order even if they also attacked the moderation, even anti-radicalism, of Powderly and its other leaders.74 Some trade unionists also found the Order’s message appealing. An anonymous trade unionist wrote in the magazine Fortnightly that ‘eager spirits’ saw the labour movement as either too limited in its goals or too exclusive in its membership. ‘In the opinion of the first,’ he explained, ‘social revolution is to supersede the union and render it unnecessary.’ In the second case, he added, ‘a new form of organisation is required, which, like the Knights of Labour of America, shall be all embracing and gather to its protecting folds the skilled artisan, the unskilled labourer, and the female toiler.’75

We can see the influence of the Knights on individual trade unionists, whether radical or moderate, well known or unknown. Ben Turner, a future Labour MP, cotton trade union leader, and widely regarded as moderate, saw the Knights as ‘the first definite attempt to have a working

70 Report of the 1886 Trades Union Congress, p. 24, from TUC Online Reports.
71 Reynolds’s, 16 May 1886.
72 Reynolds’s, 10 July 1887.
73 Reynolds’s, 7 August 1887.
74 See Justice, 18 April 1885; Commonweal, December 1885.
75 Trade Unionist, ‘Trade Unions,’ Fortnightly, September 1887.
The Knights and the Unions

class Trades Union covering the white races of the world.’ This message, he claimed, inspired his attempts in the 1890s to broaden the membership of his union ‘and take in as members all grades of textile workers other than cotton operatives.’ Michael Davitt, after his appearance at the General Assembly in 1887 and his subsequent work for Knights around Birmingham, went on to publish a short-lived paper, the Labour World. He also settled a strike on the Liverpool docks in 1890 and then tried to kick-start the new unionism in Ireland with the creation of a general union, the Irish Democratic Labour Federation. Anonymous trade unionists in Wales hoped, in 1887, to build ‘one federated society of working-men ... after the fashion of the Knights of Labour.’ The socialist J.L. Mahon published The Labour Programme the same year. That document called for a ‘general workmen’s union’ that would ‘gather together all kinds of disorganised workers’ and form them into a ‘workable system of Labour Federation.’ Mahon’s text never mentioned the Knights but his proposed union mimicked the Order in all important respects.

We can find the Order’s imprint on trade unions too. The first of these was the National Labour Federation (NLF), founded on Tyneside in November 1886. The NLF organised unskilled workers across the northeast, and A.E.P. Duffy argues that it was the first of the new unions, several years before the Gasworkers and Dockers in London. Its creators, writes M. Searle, were inspired by the victory of New York tramwaymen, in a strike organised by the Knights, ‘into thinking that the “all-grades” approach could herald a breakthrough on Tyneside.’ The Order’s role in the eight-hour movement encouraged them further. The Federation’s executive committee acknowledged these debts in a letter to Powderly on 6 December 1886, only days after the Federation was formed. J. Ramsey, the founding president, asked Powderly for ‘an outline of the working of your society, your code of Rules, number of members and your rate of increasing your plan of

78 Labour Tribune, 26 March 1887.
action, when engaged in a strike or dispute, and any other information you may consider likely of service to us in our future operations,' adding that ‘it is your enterprise and achievements that makes your practical experience of such value to us in our attempts to benefit the class on whose behalf both societies are working.’ Ramsey then informed Powderly that as well as taking inspiration from the American Knights, the new Federation had appointed a local Knight to its executive board.83

The NLF soon became little more than a vehicle for socialist agitation on Tyneside.84 When the new unionism reached its height in 1889, however, the Order’s influence remained important. Henry Pelling argues that the Knights and their ‘conception of a general union which refused no applicant for membership … was an example to the Gasworkers,’ whose membership actually consisted of labourers of all kinds, and especially to its president, Will Thorne.’ Thorne’s thinking was powerfully shaped by Eleanor Marx, who had in turn been inspired in the direction of a general union like the Gasworkers by what she and her partner, Edward Aveling, saw of the Knights on a trip to the United States in 1886.85 The leaders of the National Union of Dock Labourers, on the other hand, which organised dockers in Liverpool, Glasgow and other northern cities, had in some cases been Knights themselves. Richard McGhee actually arrived in Glasgow in 1889 as an organiser for the Black Country assemblies before he decided to begin the NUDL instead.86

Many new unionists sought to build on the rise of the new unions and create federations that would link them with the rest of the labour movement. In 1889 and 1890, as Hobsbawm observes, ‘all manner of federations and centralized “general staffs” had been suggested.’87 The founders of these bodies also drew inspiration from the Knights. John Williams, a socialist long active among London’s unskilled labourers, told participants in the London Dock Strike in September 1889 that ‘his purpose was to form a federation to consist of labourers and mechanics.

83 J. Ramsey to Powderly, 6 December 1886, Box 27, TVP.
Let all classes of workmen drop distinctions, so that when the mechanics struck the labourers would stop work, and when the labourers struck they would not go out without the mechanics.’ Williams added that ‘they must be like the Knights of Labour, now so powerful in the United States as to be able to dictate terms to employers and boycott those firms that are against the strikers. It had been the object of his life to form a union of this kind.’ He soon helped to build the National Federation of Labour Union, which remained, according to Victor Rabinovitch, ‘one of the most ambitious attempts at general federation’ attempted during this period. Rabinovitch further claims that the model for the NFLU came from the Knights’ branches in Britain, which had a large proportion of socialists among their ranks. Williams’s own words, however, suggest that the Order’s American example loomed even larger.

The power of that example soon waned. Opponents of the new unionism seized on the Order’s American decline as proof that organising unskilled workers and building grand federations were both doomed to failure. When H.H. Champion debated the new unionism in 1890 with George Shipton, the most outspoken of the ‘old’ unionists, he claimed that ‘federations have met with a good deal of success in America’; Shipton responded that federations ‘have been tried over and over again, and have failed, the collapse of the greatest organisation of the kind, that of the Knights of Labour, proving the truth of this assertion.’ The same Order that once helped to inspire the new unionism now became a liability to that movement. By this point, of course, British trade unionists no longer needed inspiration from foreign movements like the Knights. Their own new unions and federated bodies proved that it was possible to organise unskilled workers in large numbers. Even then, however, the Order held some lingering appeal for many trade unionists who came of age in the 1880s. Logie Barrow and Ian Bullock argue that the Knights of Labor remained a precedent when debates over federation grew even more intense at the very end of the 1890s. The industrial unionists and syndicalists of the early twentieth century, as Larry Peterson writes, looked to Robert Owen’s Grand National and the Knights of Labor as their predecessors.

But the Knights were more than just a precedent: the British and Irish assemblies became part of the new unionism themselves. Like most

88 *The Times*, 6 September 1889.
89 Rabinovitch, *British Marxist Socialism*, p. 308.
90 *Newcastle Weekly Courant*, 7 June 1890.
91 Barrow and Bullock, *Democratic Ideas*, pp. 67–70.
other trade unions, they benefited from the upswing in trade at the end of the 1880s, especially in their main base in the Black Country. Knights in Walsall, in particular, briefly established a powerful federation of the town’s small crafts between 1889 and 1890, and claimed to organise 40 distinct trades.93 While other trade unionists dreamed of great national federations, the Knights pushed for comprehensive unity on a local level. Walsall’s Haydn Sanders explained the concept when he lectured among workers at Rotherham. The Order’s ‘power of application and strength did not depend upon support from any other town or country,’ he told one meeting in September 1889. He ‘assumed there were 30,000 working men in the Sheffield and Rotherham district and showed what a power they would have if united. By contributing twopence per week there would be a sum realised of nearly £700 per week.’94

As the Knights spread into new corners of Britain and Ireland at the end of the 1880s they particularly encouraged the development of the new unionism, and especially the organisation of unskilled workers, in three places. The first was Glasgow. The agitation surrounding the Sons of Labour, with its close plagiarism of the Knights in neighbouring Lanarkshire, led to the formation of assemblies in Glasgow and on the west coast of Scotland. Though few sources concerning the Scottish assemblies have survived, we do know that the Knights helped to revive trade unionism among dockers at Ardrossan in Ayrshire, as well as in Glasgow itself.95 The second was Derry. Historians have usually confined their study of the new unionism in Ireland to three bodies: the Gasworkers, the NUDL and the National Amalgamated Union of Labour. Yet the Knights arrived in Derry in 1889, more than two years before the Gasworkers and the NUDL. In that time LA1601 reached 800 members. Its first recording secretary claimed that the assembly was ‘comprised of all classes of industry in this city,’ including unskilled workers at a distillery and what the replacement secretary called ‘outside labourers.’96 Most of LA1601’s members were those in that last category who, as the secretary explained to Powderly in 1891, ‘found this organization for the purpose of getting an increase of their pay.’97 Knights in Derry briefly managed to build a powerful local federation that crossed lines of skill as well as the all-important sectarian lines that then, as now,

93 Halfpenny Weekly, 30 November 1889.
94 Rotherham Advertiser, 28 September 1889.
96 JUL, 13 February and 20 November 1890; William Stewart to Hayes, 14 August 1891, Box 9, JHP.
97 William Stewart to Powderly, 2 October 1891, Box 69, TVP.
permeated all facets of life in Northern Ireland. They became both the standard-bearers of the new unionism and the precursors of other new unions in the town.  

The Knights proved most instrumental in the development of the new unionism on Merseyside. Their short-lived assembly in 1885 had anticipated later attempts to organise on the Liverpool docks. In 1889 the Knights re-established themselves in the city and, as in Derry, they predated all the new unions with the exception of the Sailors’ and Firemen’s Union. Not long after establishing LA443 in May, they led the agitation for trade unionism among the city’s tramwaymen, an agitation that soon mushroomed into a wider movement to organise unskilled workers. James P. Archibald, the Order’s American organiser, spoke at one of their early meetings. John Higgins, one of LA443’s leaders, became the first chairman of their new union although he stepped down from that role after only several days. William Newcomb, the tramwaymen’s subsequent leader, was also closely associated with local Knights. And Samuel Reeves, Liverpool’s most prominent Knight and the Inside Esquire of LA443, remains known as ‘a pioneer of the New Unionism.’

As in Walsall, Rotherham, Derry and elsewhere, Knights in Liverpool saw LA443 as the first step towards a citywide federation that would number upwards of 50,000 members. They soon attracted interest from local railwaymen and plasterers. Most of all, they sparked a revival of trade unionism along the waterfront. In 1889, LA443 found many recruits among workers at the Bootle docks. They soon found that rival trade unions were more successful at corralling the city’s unskilled workers into more permanent bodies than theirs. The NUDL soon occupied the ground that Knights had cleared. But the latter remain important as pioneers and, as Brian Towers writes, ‘their espousal of the unorganised industrial worker fed into the emerging pressure from industrial workers for union representation.’

American and British Knights each contributed to the new unionism in distinct and important ways. The Americans had four main effects on the British labour movement during the 1880s. First, Knights showed,

---

99 Bean, ‘Knights in Liverpool,’ p. 70.
100 Taplin, ‘Liverpool Tramwaymen,’ p. 58.
101 Rees, Local and Parliamentary Politics, p. 66.
103 Bean, ‘Knights in Liverpool,’ pp. 72–73.
through their organising of unskilled as well as skilled workers in a single federation, that British and Irish trade unionists could build a broader and more united movement than that then represented by the TUC. Second, they showed that such a movement could indeed work and win great victories against powerful employers. Third, they directly influenced a number of individuals who became new unionists. Fourth, they directly influenced the creation of bodies like the National Labour Federation, the National Federation of Labour Union and other similar federations as well as, to a lesser extent, ones like the Gasworkers, the NUDL and the London Dockers’ Union.

The Knights of Labor did more than simply influence the development of the new unionism in Britain and Ireland. In some towns and cities they were the new unionism, or at least the first expression of it. They were, to quote Laslett, ‘part-catalyst and part-actor’ in the rise of general unionism; they also played this same role in the new unionism as a whole. They might not have provided the critical factor in that movement. Their presence does not require the complete rewriting of nineteenth-century British labour history. But they were definitely a part, and an important and discernible one, of the new unionism. Even if that had been their only contribution to the history of the British labour movement, it would have been enough to ensure that the British and Irish Knights of Labor did not rise and fall without trace. It also supplied one of the central ironies of their history. Just as the crafts had stymied the progress of the British and Irish assemblies in the 1880s, the new movement that the Knights inspired then helped to bring about their downfall in the 1890s.

The New Unionism and the Knights

Knights in the Black Country had found over the course of the 1880s that many skilled workers, even those initially attracted to the assemblies, soon deserted them in favour of rival unions. Their dream of becoming more than a transient collection of small and disparate trades diminished with each new defection. But the upswing in trade at the end of the decade, and the new unionism that the Knights of Labor part-inspired and part-led, seemed to offer new avenues for growth and new constituencies for their brand of all-embracing trade unionism. If the old unions checked their progress, then the new unionism appeared to be a salvation. Knights in Derry, Liverpool and Glasgow also epitomised the ways in which the revival of trade and trade unionism revived the fortunes of the British Knights of Labor. They were not alone. In the first months of the new decade the Order approached its peak membership and reached into more parts of Britain and Ireland than it had or ever would again. Yet trade worsened
again in the next several years. The tide of the new unionism receded with it, and the Knights became one of the many casualties of the ensuing retreat. But their fall was not simply an index of the swings of the business cycle. Knights in Britain and Ireland found that the new unionism gave rise to new movements and new organisations that, for all the intellectual debt they owed to the Knights, were as likely to compete with the assemblies as to cooperate with them.

The years of the new unionism, of course, were not just the story of newly organised unskilled workers fighting unprecedented numbers of strikes. Most of the increase in union membership during the period occurred in the skilled trades, and ‘old’ unions like the ASE benefited as much if not more from improved economic conditions as the Dockers or the Gasworkers. The Midland Counties Trades Federation, that ally-cum-enemy of Knights in the Black Country, organised as many as 14,000 workers in 1891.105 The Order’s growth in some places reflected these trends too. LA454 in Walsall, for instance, grew more as a local alternative to the MCTF than anything else. They were able to do so because of rifts between that Federation and local unions. The bit filers and forgers, in particular, accused the Federation of failing to support them during a strike even though, as Richard Juggins made clear, they had severed their connection with the Federation some months earlier. The Knights, as Richard Juggins and the MCTF’s other leaders suspected, used these rifts to attract craftsmen in Walsall to LA454 instead.106

They were not entirely successful. Some local trade unionists were none too happy to see their organisations absorbed into the Knights of Labor. In 1889 and 1890 the newspapers of Walsall often printed letters from trade unionists attacking LA454 and particularly its Master Workman, Haydn Sanders. Samuel Welsh, the president of the Coach Harness Furniture Trade Society, whose members were targeted by the Knights as potential recruits, became Sanders’s most vehement critic. The Knights, he claimed in one long screed, operated with ‘money obtained by means of delusive promises incapable of realisation [which] is wastefully expended in providing residences and exorbitant salaries for domineering officials.’ He implored his fellow trade unionists in other letters to resist the incursions of the Knights.107 Some did. The head of the local miners, Benjamin Dean, often criticised the Order.108 These men and their organisations, however, remained too weak to defeat the Knights as the Engineers

106 Midland Counties Express, 13 July 1889.
107 Walsall Observer, 11 January 1890.
108 Walsall Free Press, 2 November 1889.
and other craft unions had done. They could only slow and not stop the
growth of the Knights as a (briefly) powerful force in Walsall’s industrial
and political life.

The Walsall experience acts as a caution against any too-neat compart-
mentalisation of the old and new unions, or the old and new unionism. The
new unions and not the old, however, determined the fate of the British
assemblies in the 1890s. The Knights were generally inclined to treat them
as allies. They participated in the early growth of the National Labour
Federation on Tyneside in 1886, and in the same year they spoke on behalf
of seamen busy organising the Sailors’ and Firemen’s Union. In 1889,
as the new unionism began to peak, the assemblies also raised money for
the London dock strike, for bedstead workers on strike in Birmingham
and for seamen on strike in Glasgow. Haydn Sanders acted as secretary
of the local Gasworkers Union at the same time as he led LA454, and
Sam Reeves agitated for unskilled workers throughout Liverpool as well
as for the Knights and for his own trade, the iron core moulders. The
seamen, at least, reciprocated this support for a time. Knights worked
relatively closely with them in the early months of LA443 in Bootle.
Seamen in Glasgow appreciated the Order’s help so much that when
James Shaw Maxwell went to open a new assembly at Ardrossan, on the
Ayrshire coast, he was accompanied by a representative of the Sailors’ and
Firemen’s Union.

The Knights also found a vehicle to secure further cooperation with other
unions through the trades councils. These bodies, which brought together
trade unionists from all the different unions in a given town or city, had
emerged as early as the 1860s and were, in the words of their first historian,
‘pioneers of Trade Union solidarity.’ In the 1880s they remained the only
official bodies, apart from the TUC, where representatives of the various
trade unions formally met. As the new unionism began in earnest, many
trade unionists looked to the trades councils as forums where delegates from
both new and established unions could combine forces and even extend trade
unionism among new and disorganised bodies of local workers.

109 Sunderland Daily Echo, 1 December 1886.
110 Walsall Observer, 7 September 1889; Birmingham Daily Gazette, 9 December 1889;
111 Walsall Observer, 16 November 1889; Rees, Politics in Liverpool, p. 67.
113 The Scotsman, 20 January 1890.
Department, 1920), p. 20.
115 A. Clinton, The Trade Union Rank and File: Trades Councils in Britain, 1900–40
The Knights and the Unions

187

The Knights and the unions became involved publicly on the trade councils of Dudley, Wolverhampton, Sunderland, Walsall and Rotherham. In the first two places they formed an important part of the council.\(^{116}\) James Brown of LA3504 even served as the secretary and then the treasurer of the Sunderland Trades Council in the early 1890s.\(^{117}\) Knights in Walsall and Rotherham actually set up the trades councils in these towns with some help from other trade unionists. Where Knights elsewhere sought nothing more than the cooperation and friendship of the local labour movement, Knights in these towns used the trades councils to put their ideas of local federation into practice. The trades councils would go beyond simply bringing together existing unions in the area. ‘If the trade has no organisation,’ said Haydn Sanders, explaining the new Walsall Trades Council to a meeting in October 1889, ‘then it is hoped the trades’ council will be the means of forming one.’\(^{118}\) Knights in Rotherham even claimed that their new body, founded in 1891, represented an advance over all previous trades councils. ‘Under the old order of things,’ one claimed in 1892, ‘beyond their power to exchange opinions, advise each other in time of strike, and allow the members to collect at the shop gates of the various unions federated with the different councils, little could be done.’ Workers in Rotherham, however, went for a ‘new idea, viz., of having a Trades Council, whose members paid one penny per week, and got 5s in return for it while on strike.’\(^{119}\)

These trades councils allowed the Knights to bury past disagreements. Haydn Sanders and Samuel Welsh, among others, put aside their polemic to bring the Walsall Trades Council to life.\(^{120}\) But these trades councils also outgrew the Order that helped create them. The Walsall Trades Council assumed the political role that LA454 had developed in 1889 and, as we saw in the previous chapter, quickly replaced the assembly as the local champion of working-class representation.\(^{121}\) The trades councils also became substitutes for the local federations that Knights hoped to build. Haydn Sanders had advanced an identical plan to the one adopted by the Rotherham Trades Council three years earlier – but through the vehicle of the Knights of Labor. The Walsall and Rotherham Trades Councils represented the extension of the Order’s own aims, a local federation

\(^{116}\) For their importance see *Birmingham Daily Post*, 17 August 1894; Lawrence, *Speaking for the People*, p. 116.


\(^{118}\) *Walsall Observer*, 5 October 1889.

\(^{119}\) *Rotherham Advertiser*, 12 March 1892.

\(^{120}\) *Walsall Observer*, 22 February and 8 March 1890.

\(^{121}\) *Walsall Observer*, 8 November 1890.
comprised of and appealing to workers of all occupations and grades of skill – but by other means. The very success of the trades councils left the assemblies without a clear role in their local labour movement.

The situation was even worse in the larger centres, where more established trades councils excluded the Knights and left them isolated from the rest of organised labour. The Glasgow United Trades Council enforced this isolation very early on in the history of the city’s assemblies, despite their mutual commitment to organising unskilled workers in the city. At a meeting in March 1890 one delegate moved that, as the Knights represented no particular trade, they 'could not, according to the constitution of the Council, be admitted.' His resolution was held over until the Knights addressed the Council in person. Two weeks later, however, the United Trades Council approved the resolution by 34 to 16.

The Liverpool Trades Council proved even less sympathetic, despite the fact that Samuel Reeves sat on it as a delegate for the local core moulders’ union. Indeed, it was generally known as one of the more conservative trades councils and one that looked with suspicion upon the new unionism in all its iterations. And Knights in Liverpool became early standard-bearers for the new unionism. Members of the Liverpool Trades Council, one paper reported, regarded the Knights as ‘itinerant agitators who, not understanding local conditions, frequently do a great deal of harm by gratuitously meddling in labour disputes.’ The same article contrasted the ‘intelligent, respectable artisans’ of the Council with the Order’s ‘band of intermeddling strangers.’

Unlike their Glaswegian counterparts, delegates to the Liverpool Trades Council did not even put the question of admitting the Knights to a vote. They also failed to respond to letters from LA443 over the course of 1890. The assembly’s fate was sealed in one brief line in the Council’s minutes in October. ‘Knights of Labour write and send rules,’ it read, and recommended no

---


123 Glasgow Weekly Mail, 15 March 1890; Glasgow Weekly Herald, 29 March 1890.

124 1890–1 Report of the Liverpool Trades Council (Liverpool, 1891), p. 20. Reeves actually became the president of the Trades Council later in the decade; his immediate predecessor was James Sexton, another former Knight. See ‘Souvenir: Trades Union Congress, Liverpool, 1906,’ Liverpool Trades Council Archives, Liverpool Record Office, 331 TRA 5/4.

125 Liverpool Weekly Courier, 8 February 1890.

126 Liverpool Weekly Courier, 8 February 1890.

127 Knights of Labour, LA 443, Bootle, to the Liverpool Trades Council, August 26, 1890, Liverpool Trades Council Archives, Liverpool Record Office, 331 TRA 2/84.
further action.\textsuperscript{128} By that point the Bootle assembly was on the verge of dissolution anyway.

Knights in Derry, as in Liverpool, spearheaded the local rise of the new unionism. And, as in Liverpool, the Derry Trades Council became an enemy of the Knights – but for the opposite reason. The Council, writes Shane McAteer, took an early interest in organising unskilled and female workers, and in bridging the sectarian divide that cut the town in two.\textsuperscript{129} But the Knights never figured in their plans. Instead, the Derry Trades Council chose to put its weight behind the Gasworkers Union, when they arrived in the town in 1891, and against LA\textsuperscript{1601}. The Council and the Gasworkers both accused the Order of working illegally, as it was not yet registered under the Trade Union Acts. They also accused the Knights of refusing to support strikes by their members, and further claimed that American Knights were unable to give them financial support. In this way they forced Derry Knights to support a strike they could not afford, and to make matters worse, bureaucratic mishaps in Philadelphia meant that LA\textsuperscript{1601}’s appeals for financial assistance to the General Executive Board went unanswered.\textsuperscript{130} The Knights seemed to prove the propaganda of their opponents. At the same time, according to one local Knight, the Derry Trades Council even ‘resorted to the device of getting a number of their tools enrolled in the Assembly.’\textsuperscript{131} These crippling financial burdens and the opposition of powerful forces in the local labour movement played no small part in the reduction of LA\textsuperscript{1601}’s numbers from 800 to 100 over the course of 1891.\textsuperscript{132}

The fights between the Knights and the Gasworkers Union in Derry suggested wider differences between the assemblies and the new unions, first and most importantly in their approaches to industrial relations. Most new unions emerged out of strikes. This was true even if, as revisionist historians have made perfectly clear, the leaders of most new unions, irrespective of whether they were socialists, soon favoured arbitration over strikes and became less militant than many of their members. British and Irish Knights, as we saw in Chapter 4, practised arbitration even when it jeopardised the very future of the assemblies. The second major difference lay in the public image of the respective organisations. The Knights, even when they

\textsuperscript{128} Minutes of the Liverpool Trades Council, October 1, 1890, \textit{Liverpool Trades Council Archives}, Liverpool Record Office, 331 TRA 1/2.

\textsuperscript{129} McAteer, ‘New Unionism in Derry,’ pp. 12–15.

\textsuperscript{130} William Stewart to Hayes, 14 August 1891, Box 9, JHP; William Stewart to Powderly, 25 October 1891, Box 69, TVP.

\textsuperscript{131} JUL, 30 July 1891.

\textsuperscript{132} McAteer, ‘New Unionism in Derry,’ p. 19.
publicised their meetings, maintained a higher level of secrecy than other trade unions. The new unionists generally took the opposite course. They, as Ken Coates and Tony Topham write, ‘readily abandoned the clandestinity of the Knights of Labour … in favour of the open, bands-and-banner-waving public demonstrations of the new unions.’

Secrecy and arbitration often aided the growth of Knights in Britain, as in the early years of the Order in America and other parts of the world. Secrecy became valuable when trade unionists suffered victimisation; arbitration prevented risky and costly strikes that destroyed whole assemblies in depressed, or even in favourable, economic conditions. When trade remained poor, as for most of the 1880s, these strategies ensured steady if often slow growth. But when trade improved, as at the end of that decade, they made it difficult for the Order to expand as quickly as the other new unions. Eric Hobsbawm observes that, before trade unions became ‘recognized and institutionalized,’ their growth occurred in discontinuous leaps ‘because if unions are to be effective they must mobilize, and therefore seek to recruit, not numbers of individuals but groups of workers sufficiently large for collective bargaining.’ Thanks to their ritual, the Knights could steadily initiate small numbers of workers at a time but not large numbers all at once. To make matters worse, the main opportunity to recruit in large numbers came through the momentum that accompanied a strike, which Knights refused to countenance in most cases. The new unions, then, could ‘recruit in lumps,’ as Hobsbawm puts it. Knights in Britain and Ireland could not, or at least did not; or they did not do so enough. This was an unfortunate turn of events for an order whose American assemblies grew so quickly after they relaxed their secrecy and struck in large numbers, even against the wishes of Powderly and most of its other leaders.

These drawbacks caused the most damage in Liverpool. Knights there harboured hopes of a network of assemblies 50,000 members strong and received early support from the local Sailors’ and Firemen’s Union. Their negotiations with stevedores and shipping companies had won them a number of concessions, as we saw in Chapter 4, and their numbers grew steadily over the course of 1889. Yet their willingness to secure these concessions through the unloading of cargoes boycotted by the NUDL soon caused them problems. Dockers in Liverpool hoped to emulate the victory of their counterparts in London. The NUDL seemed willing to lead them; the Knights seemed more interested in winning the trust of employers on the waterfront.

---

134 Hobsbawm, ‘New Unionism in Perspective,’ p. 155.
135 Taplin, *Dockers and Seamen*, p. 79.
The attacks of some Knights against rival trade unionists seemed to confirm these suspicions. John Higgins had, before the establishment of LA443, described the Sailor’s Union as a fraud; in January 1890, an anonymous Knight described the NUDL as nothing more than a front for the Sailor’s Union. Conflict between the Knights and the NUDL came to a head at an ‘uproarious’ meeting of LA443 at the end of that month. The local secretary of the Sailor’s Union accused Higgins, the chairman, of defaming his union and accused the Knights of scabbing on the NUDL. Sam Reeves attempted to maintain order and distance the assembly from these charges, but ‘disorderly scenes’ and ‘several violent altercations’ between Knights and NUDL members ensued. Higgins then read a telegram from Knights in Glasgow, claiming that 15,000 workers joined assemblies there in a single day. ‘A Glasgow telegram sent from the Bootle Exchange,’ one man said to general laughter; others shouted ‘they are all swindles.’ The meeting soon ended with members of the rival organisations engaging each other, as one report of the meeting described it, in ‘verbal warfare’ that continued late into the night.

The Knights lost this war. John Havelock Wilson, the president of the Sailor’s Union, and Edward McHugh, the general secretary of the NUDL, very pointedly praised the American Knights but deplored the behaviour of their followers in Liverpool. The NUDL led Liverpool dockers on strike in April. The strike failed, but by the middle of the year its branches in the city numbered upwards of 15,000 workers. Dockers were hardly likely to return to an order now stained by strike-breaking and by the suggestion that it had collaborated with employers. The Knights, writes Eric Taplin, ‘had proved to be “a transient organisation,” no more than an irritant to the more militant unions of the waterfront.’ When representatives of the Sailors’ and Firemen’s Union again appeared at meetings of LA443 in the final months of 1890, they were not there to offer forgiveness but to entice Knights to their own union. The assembly’s fate was soon sealed. And it was sealed by a union whose co-founder, Richard McGhee, had once worked as an organiser for the Black Country assemblies, and whose future leader, James Sexton, had served his trade union apprenticeship in that early, ephemeral assembly of Liverpool dockers in 1885. Former Knights ended the Knights of Labor in Liverpool.

136 Bean, ‘Knights in Liverpool,’ p. 75; Liverpool Echo, 28 January 1890.
137 Liverpool Mercury, 31 January 1890.
138 Liverpool Weekly Post, 1 February 1890.
139 Liverpool Weekly Post, 8 February 1890.
140 Bean, ‘Knights in Liverpool,’ p. 77.
141 Taplin, Dockers and Seamen, pp. 79–80.
142 Bean, ‘Knights in Liverpool,’ p. 77.
Stove grate workers in Rotherham, as we saw in Chapter 4, went one better. Unlike Knights in Bootle, Knights in Rotherham supported the stove grate workers’ strike in April 1890. Yet when the strike was won they responded to the Knights with the creation of their own union and took Sanders with them to serve as its president. ‘As time went on,’ Henry Pelling observes, ‘mention of the Knights of Labor became less and less common in his utterances.’ In one stroke the Knights lost the services of their most vociferous and capable agitator. Though Sanders initially claimed that steps would be taken to affiliate the new union with the Knights, this never happened. Some officials in the Stove-Grate Workers Union remained Knights for some time, and its secretary, Arthur Nadin, and one of its presidents, Thomas Guest, remained Knights until the very end. But the new union blunted the growth of the Rotherham assemblies and then slowly reversed it. Former Knights may have ended the Liverpool assembly, but members in good standing were responsible for the decline of the assemblies in Rotherham.

Few events have a single cause, and conflict with the trade unions was only one of a number of causes behind the decline of the British and Irish assemblies. We have already explored some of them and in the next and final chapter we explore others. But conflict between the Knights and the trade unions became a crucial part of the Order’s history, and the new unions became opponents of the Knights as implacable as the old. One trend also tied the Order’s battles with the old and new unions together. In each case, the Knights were supplanted by organisations with a national or wide regional remit. The Midland Counties Trades Federation, the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, the Associated Iron and Steel Workers of Great Britain, the National Amalgamated Iron Plate Workers Society, the National Union of Dock Labourers, the National Union of Gas Workers and General Labourers, and the National Union of Stove-Grate Workers all fell under these headings. The Knights represented an alternative current that concentrated instead on building powerful local federations of all workers. The rise and growth of the trades councils during the years of the new unionism proved that this current was not dead. The trend towards centralised, national unions, however, was much stronger. The TUC emphasised that trend in 1895 when its representatives voted to exclude trade council delegates from the Congress.

144 Sheffield Daily Telegraph, 20 May 1890.
145 For a meeting of Knights at Hoyland that included both men, see Rotherham Advertiser, 30 January 1892. In 1892 Guest was the Master Workman of LA1266, the largest assembly in Rotherham. See Rotherham Advertiser, 23 January 1892.
146 Clinton, Rank and File, pp. 95–96.
Powerful national unions of skilled workers defeated the Knights in the 1880s. Their assemblies contributed to the rise of the new unionism and were then beaten by powerful new national unions of unskilled workers in the 1890s. At a local level their plans for town- or citywide federations increasingly resembled those of local trades councils, including those they supported or helped to create. Those plans became surplus to requirements even when the trade councils welcomed the Knights rather than excluding them. Where the national unions supplanted the Knights, the trades councils made them redundant. The economic downturn towards the middle of the new decade did not make the assemblies’ identity crisis any easier. The new unions that survived that downturn generally managed to establish themselves in a particular industry or set of industries. The Knights of Labor could not become the Knights of Glass after LA3504 was crippled in strikes at Hartley’s and Chance Bros; and the unions had forced them out of every other major industry in which assemblies had once operated. They never, Henry Pelling writes, ‘found a raison d’etre in Britain comparable to that of the “new unions” which managed to survive the depression of the early 1890s.’ When the depression ended, the assemblies were not there to see it.

Conclusion:
The Knights of Labor and the British Labour Movement

In 1886 the Knights of Labor burst onto the world stage and became the largest labour organisation in the world. With their 1 million members they outnumbered the trade unions of Britain, the traditional home of trade unionism. Few had predicted it. Many commented on it. For a brief moment the centre of gravity in the international trade union movement shifted from Western Europe, and Britain above all, to the United States. The American labour movement failed to hold this unusual position for long. Four years later the Knights were reduced to a fraction of their former numbers and the American Federation of Labor, now the larger organisation, remained well below the Order’s peak figure of 1 million members. Things had also changed on the other side of the Atlantic. The rise of the new unions in Britain and Ireland, and the increase in membership of the old, had restored Britain to its accustomed place at the top of the trade union world. Grave structural changes in both movements accompanied these see-sawing membership figures. The American labour movement retreated from the expansive goals and membership of the Knights to the craft unionism that would guide the leaders of the Federation for some time to come. The British labour movement advanced into hitherto unorganised industries and occupations.

without falling into a full-scale war between the new and old unions like the one that had overtaken the Order and the Federation in the 1880s.

The Knights of Labor naturally played a decisive role in the American side of that story. Their defeat, Kim Voss points out, heralded the beginning of American exceptionalism in all matters relating to the working-class movement. Craft unionists like Samuel Gompers, writes Norman Ware, may have saved the labour movement from complete destruction, but their determination to avoid the kind of repression that employers and the state dealt to the Order also led to undue caution, and the Federation failed to retake the mechanised industries that the Knights had once held. The Knights not only failed to maintain their assemblies and their hopes of a nationwide federation of all American workers. They also encouraged the next generation of trade union leaders to adopt an unduly defensive posture, even as their colleagues on the other side of the Atlantic and Pacific oceans began to assert themselves and build comprehensive trade union movements. Under Gompers’s and his successors’ leadership, the American labour movement began to fall further behind its counterparts in Europe and Australasia, regardless of whether we measure this gap in terms of proportional union representation or in terms of political influence.

But the Knights of Labor also played an important role in the British side of the story. Their growth and victories during the Great Upheaval illuminated many of the shortcomings of the TUC in the mid-1880s and encouraged many trade unionists to remedy them. Their calls for a federation of all wage earners, skilled or not, resonated with many British and Irish trade unionists, who became impatient with the slow pace of change within the TUC. The American Knights heavily influenced a number of trade unions and trade unionists, and their British and Irish assemblies played their own powerful roles in the development of the new unionism in several important centres, Liverpool and Glasgow most of all. The new unionism required the right material conditions, in this case the upswing in trade at the end of the 1880s, to emerge in the way that it did. But its leaders also required a set of ideas and theories, backed up if possible with some kind of practical evidence, to guide their thinking and plans. The Knights provided a successful and powerful alternative to the entrenched practices of the TUC at a time when such alternatives were very thin on the ground.

These are, of course, broad generalisations that need some qualifications. The AFL was never simply a bastion of craft privilege. The Federation also soon faced rivals like the Industrial Workers of the World who were anything but ‘moderate.’ The ‘old’ British unions, far from disappearing with the arrival of the ‘new,’ actually grew in the 1890s and beyond. The new

148 Ware, Labor Movement, p. xii.
unions increasingly resembled them. Eric Hobsbawm even speculates that had there not been a renewed upsurge of trade unionism just before the First World War, the general and new unions that survived into the twentieth century may have become de facto ‘craft’ unions of unskilled workers along the lines of the Teamsters and the Hod-Carriers in the United States.149

But with these qualifications in mind we can take Voss’s arguments even further. American exceptionalism is, after all, a relative term that depends as much upon the state of labour movements outside the United States as on the American labour movement itself. It would be stretching things to say that the British and American labour movements swapped places between 1886 and 1890, with the British labour movement in 1890 assuming the position held by Knights in 1886 and the American labour movement retreating to the British position of four years earlier. But each movement travelled along these lines, one advancing, the other retreating. In the previous chapter we saw this pattern take shape when it came to working-class politics. In this chapter the same pattern arose in terms of organisation at the workplace. Both cases point to one simple conclusion. The making of American exceptionalism began with the decline of the Order in America; it also began thanks to the influence and work of Knights in Britain and Ireland.

The British and Irish assemblies never benefited from the wider historical changes of which they were part. The Knights were caught between the ‘crafts,’ who so successfully resisted and reversed the Order’s incursions and advances in the 1880s, and the rise of the new unions in the 1890s. In the first case the British and Irish assemblies met the same problems as Knights in the United States, even if their relations with the ASE or the ironworkers never became as hostile as those between American Knights and the AFL. In the second case they were undone by a new movement whose commitment to organising unskilled workers resembled their own order more than anything else. In both cases the local federations of workers from all crafts and none, which they began to build in the Black Country, South Yorkshire, Merseyside, Clydeside and Northern Ireland, were supplanted from two different directions. The national unions, representing skilled or unskilled workers, took their members in specific trades and industries. The trades councils fulfilled the role that Knights hoped their assemblies would play at a community level. Knights in Britain and Ireland were caught between these pairs of scissors, and it is not surprising that in this predicament many assemblies began to decline or disappeared altogether. In the next and final chapter, we look at this decline in greater depth. Having examined the rise of a transnational movement, we now turn to its fall.