The Noble and Holy Order of the Knights of Labor

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In the year of 1869, a revolution began, one which changed thousands of lives. This was a labor revolution. Thousands of laborers were subjected to horrible working conditions, and although a few small organizations tried to change this, none were as successful in their day as the Noble and Holy Order of the Knights of Labor (KOL). This organization introduced the concept of a union to the common worker, and attempted to make life better for the people it served. Its motto was: “When bad men combine, the good must associate else they will fall one by one, an unpitied sacrifice in a contemptible struggle.” (Thirty Years of Labor) The Knights weren’t the first, or the last labor organization. They weren’t the most important, and, today, they aren’t well known. However, the Knights made by far the biggest impact, and ultimately took a stand against the horrific working conditions.

The Worker’s Problem

During the Industrial Revolution, factories were being built rapidly. Employers needed more and cheaper workers. There was no minimum wage, so the employers could set the wage scale well below a living wage. Even the highest wage paid was still well below the living wage, which, at the time, was around $1000 per year. (Meltzer) This left no disposable income to spend. Sometimes families even had to sacrifice clothes, food, and even medical care. However, it was obviously in the employers’ best interest to set the wage scale as low as possible. Labor laws didn’t prevent it, so wages plummeted. This resulted in laborers working long hours or multiple jobs, which in turn resulted in more laborers needing extra jobs. This meant that, with a surplus of laborers, employers could set the wage even lower, and the downward spiral continued.
These problems were nationwide. Over 11 million common laborers were subjected to horrible working conditions, in addition to the approximately three million slaves. (1860 Census)

In the factories, there was rampant danger. Air conditions were horrible, and the air was hardly breathable. Very few machines had safety precautions, and the risk of an accident was high. This, partnered with the long hours, sparse breaks, and horrible air quality, meant that accidents were frequent, crippling, and even lethal. (The Path I Trod)

Unsurprisingly, labor laws favored the employer. This allowed them to implement the aforementioned long hours, nearly nonexistent safety restrictions, and even use child labor. In fact, child labor was on the rise! Child labor didn’t peak until the early 20th century. (IHSCSL News) Due to the low wages, often the entire family had to work the same long hours.

The Beginnings

In order to solve the common worker’s problems, the KOL was founded in Pennsylvania, on December 9th, 1869. It had not one founder, but nine, Uriah Stephens serving as the primary one. (Phelan, 21) Those nine disgruntled workers left the tattered remains of a local craft union to form something that would eventually be much larger. The word “local” is key. The KOL was founded in the very small neighborhood of Hyde Park, Pennsylvania. The population was measured at approximately 500 in the 1860 Census.

Stephens and the other founders intended for the Knights of Labor to be a secretive organization, serving as a support group for workers being oppressed. The Knights adopted a culture of secrecy. They began their meetings with rituals, and ended with them, too. Initiation rituals were performed, and every member had to take a “vow of silence,” which very rarely held
up. (Thirty Years of Labor) They functioned much like a modern “brotherhood” in that they supported each other.

The Rise

Although the Knights were originally intended to be a small scale group, they quickly expanded. Simply speaking, working conditions were so bad that the Knights did next to no promotion. (Thirty Years of Labor) Word of the organization traveled simply by word of mouth. This way, they eventually grew to the size of 700,000 members. (Thirty Years of Labor) Although that may not seem like a lot by today’s standards, there were only 11 million total workers back then. (1860 Census) Approximately one in every fifteen workers was a member of the KOL. This provided a critical mass for the Knights, and they were able to command more influence.

The KOL gained members fast, and needed a way to distribute power. The few people leading the group couldn’t manage all of the people under them at once. Hence the chain of command made it’s way into the KOL. The KOL divided itself into Local Assemblies. There were also District Assemblies, a General Assembly, and a Senate. Each group had a leader. The leader of the General Assembly was called the Grand Master Workman. The leader of District and Local assemblies would get the title of Master Workman. The most important role, however, was that of Grand Master Workman. (Thirty Years of Labor)

The Knights were merely a support group through 1878. They didn’t take up any large scale issues for the common worker. However, in 1879, elections were held to choose officers to lead the General Assembly. That year, the Knights elected Terence V. Powderly for Grand Master Workman, the highest position available. He was the second Grand Master Workman,
after Uriah Stephens, and arguably the most important. Powderly would help the Knights take a stand for key worker’s rights issues, and cement the Knights’ legacy.

Powderly was a great leader, and helped the Knights achieve many things. Under his command, the Knights were able to gain rights for the workers they served. Their first and primary issue was the length of the work day. Before the Knights came to power, there was no reasonable limit on the length of the work day. Through ceaseless lobbying, the Knights eventually achieved their first victory: They successfully lowered the hours in the standard work day. They achieved this by convincing more and more private companies to sign on until, finally, Congress made it law in 1916. (Thirty Years of Labor)

Under Powderly, the Knights also began campaigning for equality. They allowed women to join their organization and campaign for their rights the same way men did. They also campaigned for African-American rights. The KOL was of the opinion that African-American citizens should receive the same education and the same working rights as white men. These principles were revolutionary at the time, especially since slavery was abolished shortly before the Knights were formed.

But the Knights under Powderly had one defining trait; They refused to strike. Powderly rejected strikes as a “relic of barbarism.” (The Path I Trod) Instead, the Knights campaigned, much as politicians do today. This way, they got Congress to limit the work day at the national level.

Of course, sometimes strikes were the only option. On a smaller scale, the Local Assemblies would strike against a particularly troublesome employer. This would later lead to an unforeseen consequence.
Powderly also disapproved of the rituals put into place by his predecessor, Uriah Stephens. One such example was the reading of initiation rites by a hooded “Unknown Knight.” (Thirty Years of Labor) It was a remnant from a time when the Knights were a secret organization acting as a support group. Under Powderly, the rituals were abolished at the general level. The name was also changed from “The Noble and Holy Order of the Knights of Labor” to “The Order of the Knights of Labor.” A minor change, but one that made all the difference.

When the Knights started, they were serving a total workforce of around 11 million. At their end, there were around 56 million laborers. And for those workers, they earned an unprecedented amount of rights.

The KOL initiated the end of child labor. Child labor would begin to decline shortly after the KOL lost influence. They secured better wages for the entire workforce. They achieved the miraculous feat of limiting the standard work day to eight hours. They overcame the opposition, rallied the population, and jump started a movement that would continue long after the Knights fell.

There were several labor organizations before the Knights, and there were even more afterwards. The Knights hit their peak at such a key time in the Industrial Revolution that they, by far, made the largest impact. Those small unions that came before the Knights might have made a small difference in their community. But the Knights had such a huge influence that they made a difference beyond any other labor union. The Knights were big enough to have their hand in government at a key time. Thanks to Terence V. Powderly, they used their power to it’s fullest extent.
The Opposition

With all the benefits and profits that they were making at the time, it is natural that the business moguls would host some opposition. One example includes Henry Clews, a top investor and financial advisor to then-President Ulysses S. Grant. He argued that there was no cause for complaint among American workers. He blamed the Knights of Labor for causing nothing but disturbances, and attempting to fix a nonexistent problem. (Dudley, 136) He argued that just as common people have rights, so employers should have rights. He said that the Knights were doomed to fall. He said “They [the KOL] stand discredited and distrusted before the community at large as impracticable, unjust, and reckless; and, occupying this attitude before the public, their cause is gone and their organization doomed to failure.” (Henry Clews, from “The Industrial Revolution, Opposing Viewpoints”)

Although business giants and titans of Wall Street may have opposed the movement, the working public, and indeed the general public, were supportive. As the KOL gained members, they also gained influence, which made it easier to secure rights for the people they served.

The Fall

Due to the Knight’s new policy of not organizing large-scale strikes, they experienced some failed strikes. By far, the worst was the Haymarket Riot in May 1886. Originally a peaceful rally against the Chicago police for killing rioters the day before, it quickly turned into a massacre. As the crowd started to get more restless, although still peaceful, the police advanced to break up the crowd. Then, someone threw a bomb. It is estimated that eight or more people died that day. Despite the complete lack of incriminating evidence, top labor activists within the KOL were blamed. (History.com)
This led to a huge setback to the KOL and the labor movement as a whole. Unfortunately, this along with a series of other failed strikes resulted in the KOL’s death. Whether or not the KOL was to blame for the riot, they quickly lost favor among the middle class. They plummeted from the 700,000 members of their glory days to only 100,000. Local Assemblies started closing, membership kept dropping, and slowly, the Knights faded into oblivion.

The Successor

After the Knights fell, other labor unions arose, such as the American Federation of Labor and the Congress of Industrial Organizations. Those two unions would later merge to form the AFL-CIO, which is still active today. The AFL-CIO and other groups like it took up rights such as the right of the common laborer to bargain. Built on the core ideals of the KOL, they were able to secure even more rights for the people.

The Results

In their prime, the Knights achieved the most out of any labor organization. They limited the standard work day to eight hours, they almost defeated child labor, and they improved safety conditions. But most importantly, the Knights helped each worker to realize that they had rights. They were not another pawn on their manager’s chessboard. The Knights revitalized the labor revolution by revitalizing the laborers.
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