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# T.V. Powderly and the Knights of Labor

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Published as "T.V. Powderly, Grand Master Workman, His Executive Associates,  
and His Official Declarations" in *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine*,  
vol. 10, no. 5 (May 1886), pp. 257-261.

The exigencies of labor in the United States have brought to the front a number of men who are now exerting an influence of such power for weal or for woe, that their words are watched with extreme solicitude by the entire country — of these men, it is probable that T.V. Powderly, Grand Master Workman of the Knights of Labor, is at this time, by a combination of circumstances, the most conspicuous and powerful.

The history of the Knights of Labor, until recently, has not been sufficiently eventful to attract special attention.

It was organized in the year 1869, and its founder was Uriah S. Stevens. The growth of the Order has been phenomenal and its membership is now variously estimated at from 300,000 to 650,000 and reports have it that the membership is increasing at the rate of 175,000 a year. How true, or how approximately true, these statements are we have no means of knowing, and give them, as we find them, for what they are worth. It is stated that "any person who stands well in his trade, above the age of 18, whether male or female, without distinction of creed or color, whether tradesman or manufacturer, employer or employee, may become a member; the Order excludes lawyers, bankers, brokers, professional gamblers or any person who derives a profit from the sale of intoxicating liquors."

The Executive Committee is composed as follows: T.V. Powderly, Grand Master Workman; Frederick Turner, Secretary and Treasurer, and John W. Hayes, W.H. Bailey and T.B. Barry. This Executive Committee is clothed with extraordinary powers. Its Orders are of tremendous import. It can "Order strikes, continue or terminate them. It can investigate grievances, and its decisions are final. It can

Order, continue, and 'lift' boycotts. It is empowered to confer with corporations, capitalists, and employers, and may investigate charges against the character and acts of local and district officials and assemblies." T.V. Powderly is at the head of this Committee and at the head of this great organization. Mr. Powderly is a native of Carbondale, Pennsylvania, and is now 37 years of age. In starting in life, he learned the trade of a machinist. Subsequently he educated himself for the profession of civil engineer. He joined the Knights of Labor at the age of 28 years, and became an active worker, and to his efforts was mainly due the meeting of the first grand assembly which occurred eight years ago. It is stated that "the Order of the Knights of Labor was founded to prevent the encroachment of capital on labor. The local assemblies govern themselves. They have the power to boycott whenever they please in their own district. Boycotting is the most effective weapon of the Order. Striking is less frequently resorted to, but strikes can also be ordered by the local assemblies; if they hope however, to obtain aid from the General Assembly, the strike must be *legalized*. To do this, the local assembly must notify the District Assembly, whose officers must investigate the reasons for discontent. Two weeks notice is given and if in that time the district officers cannot bring about harmony between the employer and the employed, the strike is legalized, after which the financial support of the entire district may be secured. If the strike extends to other branches of trade or other assemblies, and the district is unable to sustain it, then an assessment may be laid on the entire organization throughout the country and throughout the world."

Such is a brief outline of the powers of the grand officials and of the local authorities of the Knights of Labor as they have been made public.

It will be observed, that as the Order was founded in 1869, it is now 17 years old — a period sufficiently extended to develop the value of the methods adopted to accomplish the purposes of its founders, and those who have had, and now have, control of its operations. What are the results? We shall not pretend to enumerate the instances where either failure or success has attended the strikes and boycotts ordered by the Knights of Labor; we are without the necessary data for such statements. We simply know there have been strikes and boycotts and that they have been, according to public rumor, ordered by the Knights of Labor. Fortunately we have before us the official declarations of T.V. Powderly, Grand Master Workman. The

authenticity of the important document is unquestioned — in fact, is *in toto* admitted by all Knights of of Labor. This official paper was issued to all the assemblies of the Knights of Labor at Philadelphia March 13, 1886. The document is in many regards most extraordinary, and that the Grand Master Workman regards it of supreme importance we infer from the fact that the “recording secretary” of every assembly of the Knights was required “to issue a *red letter* call for a *full* meeting” for the purpose of hearing it read.

It will be observed by those who read Mr. Powderly’s communication or “circular,” that he refers to an Order “recently issued to suspend the organization of new assemblies for 40 days.” Such an Order from the Grand Master Workman of the Knights of Labor demands more than a mere mention. It is a signal of danger. It is an intimation from the captain, that the ship is becoming unmanageable and is on a lee-shore, drifting amidst rocks and reefs. We have quoted current talk in the press showing that the Order of Knights of Labor was organized “to prevent the encroachment of capital on labor.” It was organized to initiate “any person who stands well in his trade, above the age of 18, whether male or female, without distinction of creed or color” and for 17 years the Order has progressed, grown in numerical strength. Those in charge have had seventeen years to eliminate errors, readjust machinery, note consequences, and prepare for emergencies — and now, an Order is issued to arrest for 40 days the organization of assemblies of Knights of Labor. Why? Let Mr. Powderly speak. In his “circular” of March 13th he says:

If the Order is to perform its mission as intended by its founders and those who have *worked with it from the beginning, a radical change must be effected*. A stop must be called, and the ship brought back to her moorings. It has always been, and is at the present time, my policy to advocate conciliation and arbitration in the settlement of disputes between employer and employee. The law of knighthood demands at the hands of our members an adherence to that policy. *Thousands of men who had become disgusted* with the ruinous policy of the strike as the only remedy for the ills we complain of were drawn to us because we had proclaimed to mankind that we had discarded the strike until all else had failed. The men and women who flocked to our standard have a knowledge of their wrongs. They have endured these wrongs for years; and in reason are in duty bound to learn how to right these wrongs by the *least expensive* and satisfactory, as well as lasting remedy.

Six months will not teach men our principles and proper methods, yet men are impressed with the idea that they can learn them in *six weeks* or *six days*, and before the ground work for a proper education is laid we find our assemblies on a strike or lock out; and in too many cases the provocation comes from *their own hasty and inconsiderate action*. No matter what advantage we gain by the strike, it is only medicating the symptom; it does not penetrate the system, and therefore fails in effecting a cure. The only natural sequence is a relapse, and a relapse always means more medicine and a weaker patient than before. You must bear with me and read this letter to the end, for it may be the last one I will ever write to you.

In reading the foregoing there can be but one rational conclusion and that is, that the Order of the Knights of Labor have totally misconceived the objects of the organization, or that the methods devised by the Order, to correct evils, were originally and fundamentally wrong. Mr. Powderly's view of the situation is that the Order has gone wrong and is pursuing a career of error and injustice which demands a "*stop*," and these wrongs have grown to such proportions that Mr. Powderly demands their prompt correction or he must be permitted to resign.

Just here our readers should be reminded that the public has been told that "local assemblies govern themselves, and that they have the power to boycott and strike whenever they please." If this is true, and current events demonstrate that it is absolutely true, the fact will occur to a great many people that the mistake, if it be a mistake of the Order, a misapprehension of power and prerogative, ought to have been corrected long ago. Seventeen years is a long time for an error to exist in an organization, for in that time it will become so embedded, so interwoven into the fibre and muscle and thought of men, that it will be accounted a vital virtue rather than a wrong, fruitful of untold ills and crushing disasters. In this connection Mr. Powderly says:

While I, as the chosen mouthpiece of the Order, am proclaiming to the world that the Knights of Labor do not *advocate or countenance strikes* until every other remedy has failed, the wires from a thousand cities and towns are bearing the news of as many strikes by Knights of Labor, in which *arbitration* and *conciliation* were never *hinted at*. Not that alone, but they were in many cases *scorned* and *rejected* by our own members. In some cases these strikes were entered upon against the advice of the General Executive Board.

The declarations of Mr. Powderly rivet the conviction that the great mass of the Knights of Labor have totally misunderstood the mission of the Order — strikes and boycotts have multiplied in all directions. The authority of the Executive Board has been ignored and local assemblies and district assemblies, believing they had the power, have ordered strikes and boycotts *ad libitum*. Mr. Powderly sees in the growth of the Knights of Labor as an Order, multiplied dangers, elements and forces which alarm him — a blind Samson, preparing to shake down the superstructure, and he does not disguise his fears. He says “five hundred assemblies of Knights were organized in February last — as many as were organized in the first eight years of the Order’s existence,” and just here appears another source of danger. The men and women, “men and women without distinction of creed or color,” “new recruits,” undisciplined and uneducated, join the Order because they believe it can protect them against the “encroachments of capital on labor,” and hence strikes and boycotts which local assemblies have the right to order, but says Mr. Powderly, “to attempt to win concessions or gains with our present raw, undisciplined membership would be like hurling an unorganized mob against a well drilled regular army.” Nor is this all. Mr. Powderly intimates that strikes have increased because of the fact, which we have stated, of pecuniary assistance from other Knights who continue at work. He says, “It is not fair to the older assemblies to bring in new members, pick up their quarrels as soon as organized, and have them expect pecuniary aid from those who helped build the Order up for a noble purpose. It is not wise to give men and women a premium for joining us. It is wrong to encourage them in the idea that they have nothing to do themselves, that they are to lean upon others; they must depend upon themselves, and in any case cannot receive assistance inside of six months, and I will hold out no inducements that will encourage them in the belief that they will receive assistance even then.” Manifestly it operates as an inducement to strike when the strikers know all other Knights within a certain territory are to be assessed to support them, but unfortunately, many Knights of Labor regard this as a fundamental principle of the Order, and if they have entertained erroneous opinions upon the subject, Mr. Powderly ought long since to have corrected the grave mistake.

In reading the circular of Mr. Powderly, we confess to sensations such as hitherto we have not experienced. Mr. Powderly, we believe,

has been elected four times to the position he now holds in the Order of Knights of Labor, and how it happens that he has not long since discovered the tendencies in the Order, which he now deprecates, is a mystery, which we find quite impossible to explain — organized to arrest the “encroachments of capital on labor” the Order has become unwieldy, and by its growth, defeats the purpose of its existence. Local and district assemblies, empowered to order strikes and boycotts, are doing the cause of labor immense damage by doing the very things they were organized to do. Starting out with the proposition that manufacturers and the employers of labor might join the Knights, we are now told that it was “not intended that the Order should harbor unjust employers” and now, the advice is to “take in as few employers as possible.” Mr. Powderly says, that “the name of this Order and its principles are published everywhere and men who stood openly arrayed against us two years ago are now our *friends*. *Beware of them*. Take them in if you will, but watch them.” Mr. Powderly warns the assemblies against men who studying the purposes of the Order for two years have been converted from enemies to “friends,” and advises that such friends should be “watched.” Mr. Powderly further observes that “the politician is planning, night and day how to catch the Knights of Labor for the advantages of himself and party and rest assured he has his emissaries in our ranks.”

If this be a danger, then by Mr. Powderly’s admission, the blood of the Order is already poisoned with it.

The circular abounds with statements well calculated to discourage the friends of the Knights, and we are not surprised that Mr. Powderly is willing to retire to private life, if the outlook does not at once become more assuring. He says that “nearly every State assembly that has “been formed since the General Assembly met has been organized amid discord and contention. I fear that the struggle is not to serve the Order so much as to serve personal ends. Nearly every assembly in the states of Kansas and Michigan has complained to me about the attempts being made to organize State assemblies. Such official declarations are an indication of anarchy and dissolution.” The Grand Master Workman tells the Knights of Labor in an official circular that men who organize assemblies are prompted by selfish motives, and not to serve the Order — and now surveying the entire field the Grand Master Workman tells the Knights of Labor, that “These words of mine must be heeded or this Order goes down as surely as night follows day.”

What are his words? Stop striking, stop boycotting, stop doing the very things you have been doing, else the Order goes down “as surely as night follows day.” The Order of Knights of Labor started out with the motto, “An injury to one is the concern of all.” These were ordained the shibboleth words of the Order, and the Knights have for seventeen years proclaimed it as their battle cry. Mr. Powderly now sets down with great vigor on this motto. He shows the converse of the motto which most effectually upsets it. In his circular Mr. Powderly says: “While I write, a dispatch is handed me in which I read these words: ‘They discharged our brother, and we struck, for you know our motto is, “An injury to one is the concern of all.”’ Yes, ‘an injury to one is the concern of all,’ but it is not wise to injure all for the concern of one.” This is *striking strikes and strikers*, and the Grand Master Workman adds: “It would have been better to continue at work and properly investigate the matter.” Manifestly that is true, but for 17 long years, the Knights of Labor have been educated in the other direction, they have struck and boycotted, and now their Grand Master Workman tells them there must be a change or their Order “goes down as surely as night follows day” — and he tells them his words must be heeded or he will resign — and in conclusion Mr. Powderly announces his ultimatums. He says:

Strikes must be avoided; boycotts must be avoided.

Those who boast must be checked by their assemblies. No move must be made until the court of last resort has been appealed to.

Threats of violence must not be made.

Politicians must be hushed up or driven out.

Obedience to the laws of knighthood must have preference over those of any other Order.

In reading Mr. Powderly’s “Circular” we fail to find in it one solitary word, commendatory of the operations of the Order during the past year. According to Mr. Powderly’s view, everything has gone wrong, and wrong to such a degree as to threaten the existence of the Order, wrong to such an extent that he can no longer bear up against the swelling tide of error, and therefore, plainly tells the Knights of Labor they must change their course or he will retire. Such is the Order of Knights of Labor as told officially by their chief, and it must be confessed that the account is anything but assuring. If Mr. Powderly can speak in such terms of the severest censure of the Knights of La-

bor what must necessarily be the estimate of the public of the Order. If Mr. Powderly is alarmed is it strange that the entire community entertains doubts and fears. It is to be hoped that Mr. Powderly's authority and personal influence will be equal to the requirements, but he is likely to find that errors in methods of long standing are seldom if ever suddenly corrected.

*Edited by Tim Davenport*

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First Edition.