A Giant Brotherhood of Toil – Knights of Labor

Storm the fort, ye Knights of Labor                      Toiling millions now are waking
Battle for your cause;                                    see them marching on.
Equal rights for every neighbor                           All the tyrants now are shaking,
Down with tyrant laws.                                    Ere their power is gone.

A Philadelphia tailor named Uriah Stephens dreamed of a great brotherhood that would unite skilled and unskilled workers, so they could receive their fair share of the nation’s wealth. His hope was that The Noble and Holy Order of the Knights of Labor would be “A Giant Brotherhood of Toil” and raise workers out of wage slavery, without strikes or boycotts.

When Stephens resigned in 1879, Terrence V. Powderly (1849‐1924) replaced him as “Grand Master Workman.” Powderly was a social reformer, in favor of abolishing the wage system for cooperatively owned shops. He did not believe that strikes proved a successful means of achieving aims and thought workers and employers should set up Boards of Arbitration instead.

The motto of The Order of the Knights of Labor, as Powderly renamed this society, was “An injury to one is the concern of all.” Membership was open to all “men and women of every craft, creed, and color.” Under Powderly’s leadership and until 1893, the Knights of Labor was the largest, most significant labor organization in the country. The Knights’ greatest victory came in 1885 when shopmen at Jay Gould’s Southwestern Railroads went on strike and got management to negotiate their grievances.

In the 1890s many Knights resigned to join the newly organized American Federation of Labor (AF of L). The Knights of Labor represented the forerunner of the trade unionism of the 1930s, when such industrial unions would be established by the Congress of Industrial Organization (CIO).

PREAMBLE AND DECLARATION OF PRINCIPLES OF THE KNIGHTS OF LABOR OF AMERICA.

TO THE PUBLIC:

The alarming development and aggressiveness of great capitalists and corporations, unless checked, will inevitably lead to the pauperization and hopeless degradation of the toiling masses.

It is imperative, if we desire to enjoy the full blessings of life, that a check be placed upon unjust accumulation, and the power for evil of aggregated wealth.

This much-desired object can be accomplished only by the united efforts of those who obey the divine injunction, "In the sweat of they face shalt thou eat bread."

Therefore we have formed the Order of Knights of Labor, for the purpose of organizing and directing the power of the industrial masses, not as a political party, for it is more - in it are crystallized sentiments and measures for the benefit of the whole people, but it should be borne in mind, when exercising the right of suffrage, that most of the objects herein set forth can only be obtained through legislation, and that it is the duty of all to assist in nominating and supporting with their votes only such candidates as will pledge their support to those measures, regardless of party. But no one shall, however, be compelled to vote with the majority, and calling upon all who believe in securing "the greatest good to the greatest number," to join and assist us, we declare to the world that are our aims are:

I. To make individual and moral worth, not wealth, the true standard of individual and National greatness.

II. To secure to the workers the full enjoyment of the wealth they create, sufficient leisure in which to develop their intellectual, moral, and social faculties: all of the benefits, recreation and pleasures of association; in a word, to enable them to share in the gains and honors of advancing civilization.

In order to secure these results, we demand at the hands of the State:

III. The establishment of Bureaus of Labor Statistics, that we may arrive at a correct knowledge of the educational, moral and financial condition of the laboring masses.

IV. That the public lands, the heritage of the people, be reserved for actual settlers; not another acre for railroads or speculators, and that all lands now held for speculative purposes be taxed to their full value.

V. The abrogation of all laws that do not bear equally upon capital and labor, and the removal of unjust technicalities, delays and discriminations in the administration of justice.

VI. The adoption of measures providing for the health and safety of those engaged in mining and manufacturing, building industries, and for indemnification to those engaged therein for injuries received through lack of necessary safeguards.

VII. The recognition, by incorporation, of trades' unions, orders and such other associations as may be organized by the working masses to improve their condition and protect their rights.

VIII. The enactment of laws to compel corporations to pay their employees weekly, in lawful money, for the labor of the preceding week, and giving mechanics and laborers a first lien upon the product of their labor to the extent of their full wages.

IX. The abolition of the contract system on National, State and Municipal works.

X. The enactment of laws providing for arbitration between employers and employed, and to enforce the decision of the arbitrators.

XI. The prohibition by law of the employment of children under 15 years of age in workshops, mines and factories.

XII. To prohibit the hiring out of convict labor.

XIII. That a graduated income tax be levied.

And we demand at the hands of Congress:
XIV. The establishment of a National monetary system, in which a circulating medium in necessary quantity shall issue direct to the people, without the intervention of banks; that all the National issue shall be full legal tender in payment of all debts, public and private; and that the Government shall not guarantee or recognize any private banks, or create any banking corporations.

XV. That interest-bearing bonds, bills of credit or notes shall never be issued by the Government, but that, when need arises, the emergency shall be met by issue of legal tender, non-interest-bearing money.

XVI. That the importation of foreign labor under contract be prohibited.

XVII. That, in connection with the post-office, the Government shall organize financial exchanges, safe deposits and facilities for deposit of the savings of the people in small sums.

XVIII. That the Government shall obtain possession, by purchase, under the right of eminent domain, of all telegraphs, telephones and railroads, and that hereafter no charter or license be issued to any corporation for construction or operation of any means of transporting intelligence, passengers or freight.

And while making the foregoing demands upon the State and National Government, we will endeavor to associate our own labors.

XIX. To establish co-operative institutions such as will tend to supersede the wage system, by the introduction of a co-operative industrial system.

XX. To secure for both sexes equal pay for equal work.

XXI. To shorten the hours of labor by a general refusal to work for more than eight hours.

XXII. To persuade employers to agree to arbitrate all differences which may arise between them and their employees, in order that the bonds of sympathy between them may be strengthened and that strikes may be rendered unnecessary.
The American Federation of Labor

Fair day’s wage for fair day’s work

“What does labor want?” Samuel Gompers was often asked by the press. “More and more, here and now! Wages, benefits, better and safer working conditions!” replied the President of the American Federation of Labor.

Source: Samuel Gompers, AFL Convention, Chicago, 1893.

We want more schoolhouses and less jails;
more books and less arsenals;
more learning and less vice;
more constant work
and less crime;
more leisure and less greed;
more justice and less revenge;
in fact, more of the opportunities to cultivate our better natures.

We are educating the public to the eight-hour movement; teaching America the evils of sweatshops, tenement factories, and child labor. That kind of education brings results.

It is not our purpose to bring the workers Beethoven and Shakespeare; it is our purpose to bring good food into their kitchens and clean toilets into their factories. When we have won the economic fight, the men will be free to pursue whatever life they want. Every hour spent in a filthy tenement factory, and every unfed child at mealtime is a crime against humanity...

For thirty-seven years, Samuel Gompers represented the single most important force in the American labor movement. He had immigrated from London at 13, the family’s passage paid by his father’s Union of British Cigar Markers. Like so many other Jewish immigrants, the Gompers family rolled cigars in a New York City tenement. When Samuel was seventeen, he joined the union at the shop where he worked and led a strike which got him blacklisted. He soon became president of the New York local of Cigar Markers’ international and was active in the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions, whose main goal was the eight hour workday. The FOTLU, founded in 1881, was replaced by the American Federation of Labor, which Gompers and Peter McGuire of the Brotherhood of Carpenters co-founded in Columbus, Ohio, where some twenty-five unions met on December 8, 1886. Their goal was “to organize small trade unions into a powerful national organization and to protect the skilled labor of America ... and to sustain the standard of American workmanship and skill.”

President of the American Federation of Labor from 1886 (except for one year) until his death in 1924, Samuel Gompers believed that separate unions of skilled craftsmen should be organized by their occupations under a national umbrella. He thought these should be governed as independent trade unions with their own officers, constitutions and rules to deal with employers, in the same way federal government presided over states. This was different from Powderly’s plan of one single union for skilled and unskilled workers. Unskilled workers, blacks, and women were originally excluded from membership in the AF of L. The AF of L signed on half a million members its first year and, by 1902, had more than a million. Dues and membership fees enabled the AF of L to hire and train union organizers and to provide financial aid to members on strike during lockouts.

Gompers believed the main purpose of unions to be economic. He was a practical man, willing to compromise. In his opinion, progress for the labor movement would come gradually, by working within the system. He thought gains for labor should be won by collective bargaining. He worked with government and business to achieve AF of L aims and disassociated the organization from socialists and radicals.

The AF of L continually fought for higher wages, compulsory education laws, an end to child labor for all under fourteen, safety and health at the workplace, and legal protection against cheap foreign labor. Gompers believed all workers had earned the right to a decent standard of living.

Declaration of Principles

American Federation of Labor

“Whereas a struggle is going on in the nations of the civilized world, between the oppressors and oppressed of all countries, a struggle between capital and labor which must grow in intensity from year to year and work disastrous results to the toiling millions of all nations, if not combined for mutual protection and benefits. The history of the wage workers of all countries is but the history of constant struggle and misery, engendered by ignorance and disunion, whereas the history of the non-producers of all countries proves that a minority thoroughly organized may work wonders for good or evil. It behooves the representatives of the workers of North America in congress assembled, to adopt such measures and disseminate such principles among the people of our country as will unite them for all time to come, to secure the recognition of the rights to which they are justly entitled. The various trades have been affected by the introduction of machinery, the subdivision of labor, the use of women's and children's labor and the lack of an apprentice system, so that the skilled trades are rapidly sinking to the level of pauper labor. To protect the skilled labor of America from being reduced to beggary and to sustain the standard of American workmanship and skill, the trades unions of America have been established.”
Preamble to the Constitution of the Industrial Workers of the World

The working class and the employing class have nothing in common. There can be no peace so long as hunger and want are found among millions of the working people and the few, who make up the employing class, have all the good things of life.

Between these two classes a struggle must go on until the workers of the world organize as a class, take possession of the means of production, abolish the wage system, and live in harmony with the Earth.

We find that the centering of the management of industries into fewer and fewer hands makes the trade unions unable to cope with the ever growing power of the employing class. The trade unions foster a state of affairs which allows one set of workers to be pitted against another set of workers in the same industry, thereby helping defeat one another in wage wars. Moreover, the trade unions aid the employing class to mislead the workers into the belief that the working class have interests in common with their employers.

These conditions can be changed and the interest of the working class upheld only by an organization formed in such a way that all its members in any one industry, or in all industries if necessary, cease work whenever a strike or lockout is on in any department thereof, thus making an injury to one an injury to all.

Instead of the conservative motto, "A fair day's wage for a fair day's work," we must inscribe on our banner the revolutionary watchword, "Abolition of the wage system."

It is the historic mission of the working class to do away with capitalism. The army of production must be organized, not only for everyday struggle with capitalists, but also to carry on production when capitalism shall have been overthrown. By organizing industrially we are forming the structure of the new society within the shell of the old.
One Big Union – One Big Strike: The Story of the Wobblies

Early in the 20th century, the Industrial Workers of the World, called the “Wobblies,” organized thousands of immigrant and unskilled workers in the United States. The union eventually failed, but it helped shape the modern American labor movement.

In 1900, only about 5 percent of American industrial workers belonged to labor unions. Most unions were organized for skilled craft workers like carpenters and machinists. Membership in these craft unions was almost always restricted to American-born white men. The American Federation of Labor (AFL), led by Samuel Gompers, dominated the labor movement. Gompers wanted to assemble the independent craft unions into one organization, which would work to improve the pay and working conditions of the union members. Gompers and the AFL believed that unskilled factory and other industrial workers could not be organized into unions. Therefore, the vast majority of American workers, including immigrants, racial minorities, and women, remained outside the labor union movement.

In 1905, a new radical union, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), began to organize workers excluded from the AFL. Known as the “Wobblies,” these unionists wanted to form “One Big Union.” Their ultimate goal was to call “One Big Strike,” which would overthrow the capitalist system.

Big Bill Haywood and One Big Union

One of the main organizers for the IWW was “Big Bill” Haywood. William Dudley Haywood grew up on the rough and violent Western frontier. At age 9, he began working in copper mines. Haywood eventually married and took up homesteading in Nevada. He discovered that he liked working for himself rather than for an employer, but he lost his homestead when the land became part of an Indian reservation. Haywood reluctantly returned to the harsh life of a mine wage worker.

In the 1890s, Haywood helped form the Western Federation of Miners union. A powerful speaker, he gained the reputation as a militant union organizer and strike leader. His followers called him “Big Bill.”
In 1905, Big Bill joined like-minded union leaders and socialists, anarchists, and other radicals to organize a new national union. The founding convention took place in Chicago. Big Bill called the convention to order by pounding a piece of board on the podium. He announced that the purpose of the meeting was to create a working-class movement to free workers from the “slave bondage of capitalism” and to bring workers “up to a decent plane of living.”

The delegates at the convention condemned the American Federation of Labor for failing to organize the vast majority of industrial workers. They called for all workers to join their “One Big Union,” which they named the Industrial Workers of the World. Their goal was to organize the working class to declare one big general strike to “take possession of the earth and the machinery of production.” According to the IWW’s founding document, “It is the historic mission of the working class to do away with capitalism.” Once this was accomplished, a “Cooperative Commonwealth” would be established with the workers in control.

The delegates split over one important issue. The socialists at the convention, like Eugene V. Debs, wanted the IWW to engage in politics and elections. But the anarchists believed that the election system was merely a tool of capitalism. They rejected political participation and argued for “direct action” in the form of strikes, workers demonstrations, and even sabotage. The two sides finally compromised by agreeing that the IWW would operate in both areas, but would not become attached to any political party.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Strike:</th>
<th>Where it took place:</th>
<th>Led by (groups)</th>
<th>Reasons for striking</th>
<th>Description of strike</th>
<th>How it was resolved:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Great Railroad Strike of 1877</td>
<td><a href="http://www.ohiohistorycentral.org/entry.php?rec=503">http://www.ohiohistorycentral.org/entry.php?rec=503</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>Haymarket Riot of 1886</td>
<td><a href="http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h750.html">http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h750.html</a></td>
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<td>Pullman Strike of 1894</td>
<td><a href="http://www.kansasheritage.org/pullman/index.html">http://www.kansasheritage.org/pullman/index.html</a></td>
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**Labor Unions**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Union:</th>
<th>Goals*</th>
<th>Tactics*</th>
<th>Leaders**</th>
<th>Members**</th>
<th>Problems faced in the union &amp; What they faced as a group**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knights of Labor 1869</td>
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<td>American Federation of Labor (AFL) 1886</td>
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<tr>
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