

KNIGHTS OF LABOR



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Many early efforts to organize workers in the United States saw their inception in Pennsylvania. As early as the 1790s, shoemakers in Philadelphia joined to maintain a price structure and resist cheaper competition. In the 1820s, a Mechanics Union was formed that attempted to unite the efforts of more than a single craft.

The rise of industrial capitalism, with its widening of the gap between rich and poor, generated the union movement's transformation. One form of worker reaction occurred with the Molly Maguires of the western Pennsylvania anthracite coalfields; their *modus operandi* was intimidation and violence.

In 1869, the Noble and Holy Order of the Knights of Labor, which initially offered a more reasoned approach to solving labor problems, was established in Philadelphia. At its inception, the KOL comprised nine tailors whose leader was

Uriah S. Stephens. The organization believed that its predecessors had failed by limiting membership; the Knights proposed to organize both skilled and unskilled workers in the same union and opened their doors to blacks and women. In its early years, the organization was highly secret since in many areas union members were summarily fired. The Knights developed ornate rituals, drawn from Freemasonry,* to govern their meetings. By the early 1880s, the group had emerged as a national force and had dropped its initial secrecy. They sought to include within their ranks everyone but doctors, bankers, lawyers, liquor producers and gamblers.

The aims of the Knights of Labor included the following:

- An eight-hour work day
- Termination of child labor
- Termination of the convict contract labor system (the concern was not for the prisoners; the Knights opposed competition from this cheap source of labor)
- Establishment of cooperatives to replace the traditional wage system and help tame capitalism's excesses
- Equal pay for equal work
- Government ownership of telegraph facilities and the railroads
- A public land policy designed to aid settlers and not speculators
- A graduated income tax.

In its early years, the Knights opposed the use of strikes; however, new members and local leaders gradually radicalized the organization. By the mid-1880s, labor stoppages had become an effective tool. The KOL won important strikes on the Union Pacific in 1884 and the Wabash Railroad in 1885. However, failure in the Missouri Pacific strike in 1886 and the Haymarket Square Riot of the same year quickly eroded the Knights' influence—although no member was implicated in the latter event. In the public mind, the eight-hour work day and other demands by the KOL had become radical ideas; to many, the terms "unionism" and "anarchism" were synonymous. Labor leader Terence V. Powderly's organizing skills had brought the group's membership to more than 700,000 in the early 1880s, but by 1900 that number had dropped to approximately 100,000.

Why did the Knights decline so precipitously? The Haymarket incident was certainly pivotal in that it transformed a skeptical public into vocal opponents of the group. Beyond that, however, the Knights suffered from mismanagement and internal divisions, especially the longstanding strife between the skilled and unskilled worker members. Finally, the rise of the American Federation of Labor offered an alternative that rejected radicalism and organized its members along craft lines.

URIAH SMITH STEPHENS en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uriah_Smith_Stephens



Uriah Smith Stephens (August 3, 1821 - February 13, 1882) was a U.S. labor leader. He led nine Philadelphia garment workers to found the Knights of Labor in 1869, a more successful early national union.

Stephens longed to be a Baptist minister but never entered the field. In 1846, he moved to Philadelphia, where he worked as a tailor and became very active in politics. He ran for the United States Congress in 1878 on the Greenback–Labor ticket, but lost. He was responsible for the incorporation of the word "labor" in this party's name.

Stephens was initiated an Entered Apprentice Mason in Kensington Lodge No. 211 in Philadelphia on December 9, 1864; passed to the Degree of Fellowcraft on February 25, 1865; and raised to the Sublime Degree of Master Mason on March 24, 1865. He was also a member of Keystone Lodge No. 2, Knights of Pythias, and Fidelity Lodge No. 138, Independent Order of Odd Fellows.

Stephens' involvement with Masonry began during the same period of his initial involvement with organized labor. In 1862, he helped to organize the Garment Cutters' Union, which survived for only seven years. At his invitation, a few members of the recently demised union met at his home on Thanksgiving Day, November 25, 1869. At this meeting, he unfolded his plan for the "Noble and Holy Order of Knights of Labor" as a "brotherhood of toil" open to every laborer, mechanic, and artisan who wanted to improve his mind and condition, regardless of

country, creed, or color. At the new order's second meeting on December 28, 1869, Stephens' ritual, Adelphon Kruptos (Secret Brotherhood), was officially adopted. In this opus, Stephens expressed his conviction that the "Everlasting Truth sealed by the Grand Architect of the Universe" is that "everything of value, or merit, is the result of creative Industry." Ritualistic work included lectures on the nobility of labor and the evils of wage slavery, monopoly, and accumulation. Stephens selected an equilateral triangle within a circle as the new order's emblem, embellishing it with symbolism from the various lodges to which he belonged.

The Knights of Labor elected Stephens as the first local Master Workman, the first District Master Workman, and the first Grand Master Workman. By 1879, there were 23 district assemblies and 1,300 local assemblies. At that time, Stephens resigned the highest office in the order and was replaced by Terence V. Powderly. The decision resulted from a policy shift experienced the previous year—which he opposed—when the General Assembly, mainly due to pressures exerted by Roman Catholic members, had voted to make public the name of the order, omit scriptural quotations from the ritual, and edit the initiation ceremonies to make them less offensive to the Catholic Church. On January 1, 1882, after five years of debate regarding the wisdom of secrecy, the Knights of Labor became a public organization.

Stephens died on February 13, 1882. He was buried in the Odd Fellows Cemetery in Philadelphia. At the time of his death, he was estranged from the order he had founded and guided for nearly a decade. Nevertheless, he was still revered by many Knights. As a result, when the General Assembly convened in Richmond, Virginia, in 1886, they voted to appropriate \$10,000 to erect a home for the family of their founder.

Samuel Gompers

"Samuel Gompers." *The Columbia Encyclopedia, Sixth Edition. 2008. Encyclopedia.com. 1 Nov. 2010* <<http://www.encyclopedia.com>>.



Samuel Gompers, 1850-1924, American labor leader, b. London. He immigrated to the United States with his parents in 1863. He worked as a cigar maker and

in 1864 joined the local union, serving as its president from 1874 to 1881, when he helped to found the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions. It was reorganized in 1886 and became the American Federation of Labor, of which Gompers was first president and of which he remained president, except for the year 1895, until his death. He directed the successful battle with the Knights of Labor for supremacy, kept the union free from political entanglements in the early days, and refused to entertain various cooperative business plans, socialistic ideas, and radical programs, maintaining that more wages, shorter hours, and greater freedom were the just aims of labor. He came to be recognized as the leading spokesman for the labor