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IMPACT OF THE KNIGHTS OF LABOR ON THE AMERICAN LABOR MOVEMENT

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IMPACT OF THE KNIGHTS OF LABOR ON
THE AMERICAN LABOR MOVEMENT

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A Research Problem Submitted to the Graduate Division
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Master of Science

APPROVED:

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By

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The researcher of this study wishes to thank all those who helped with suggestions and advice, especially Dr. Richard Hay who was the adviser and whose guidance was valued greatly.

The writer is especially grateful to her American mentors, Mr. and Mrs. Jack Campbell who served as substitute parents and without whose patient encouragement and help this work could not have been completed.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A labor union may be defined as a continuous association of wage earners for the purpose of maintaining and improving the conditions of their employment. The character and causes of the development of unionism in the United States lay in economic and political causes, as the country was growing; the economic causes at work were the differentiation between the employing and working factions, the small business units, and the local markets. The causes of the first appearance of trade or labor unions were the development of a master working retailer and especially of the jobber and merchant middleman, a development made possible by the introduction of machinery, accumulation of capital, increase of population, and improvement of transportation with the consequent widening of the market-- dividing the ranks of the craftsmen into two classes, masters and journeymen, i.e., establishing the wage system. Moreover, the government was controlled by the master class and faithfully defended the interests of the employers. In some colonies the government even regulated the occupations of the workers, and in almost all colonies the government controlled the earnings of the workers. Then came labor unions. They were organized because of the coming of

capitalistic conditions, an employing class, general market, labor competition, the strategic advantage masters had with a tendency to lower wages, to bring in inferior workmen, and to lengthen hours, and also because the association of large numbers of journeymen in each craft made organization natural and possible. Unionism has not a single genesis, but it has made its appearance time after time, independently, wherever in the modern industrial era a group of workers, large or small, has developed a strong internal consciousness of common interests.¹ The scope and character of union ideals and methods have been as broad and diverse as the conscious common needs and conditions of the groups of workers entering into organization. Some unions have confined themselves to attempts to deal directly with their immediate employers and their immediate conditions of work and pay; others have emphasized mutual aid and education; still others have enlarged this field of thought and action to include all employers and all conditions, economic, legal, and social. General aims of these unions are higher wages, shorter hours, and better working conditions regardless, for the most part, of the welfare of the workers outside the particular organized group, and regardless, in general, of political and social considerations, except in so far as

¹Robert Franklin Hoxie, Trade Unionism in the United States (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1920), p. 34.

these bear directly upon its own economic ends.²

The union serves as a channel and administrative agency for worker protest. Through collective bargaining, grievance procedures and a practical monopoly of the strike, they have come to exercise a proprietary interest in labor protest. As workers' needs and desires assume a greater political and social content, unions have tended to broaden their service activities accordingly. In our modern time, a labor union establishes its position and bargaining rights not so much by its economic power as by its political appeal. It is a sole bargaining agent at a plant by winning an election rather than by winning a strike.³ Now a labor union is a political organization representing the members' job interests and their viewpoints on political and social issues. They come into competition with other institutions such as political parties, churches, chambers of commerce, and the like.⁴

In short, the union serves as a channel and instrument for workers' protests. Internally, it is essentially a political organization, whose operations often extend beyond the job into political and community activities. Naturally, unions compete with other institutions and elements in a

²Ibid., p. 35.

³Richard A. Lester, As Unions Mature (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1958), p. 14.

⁴Ibid., p. 15.

community for a share in the representation of workers' interests. Unions themselves are not monolithic but contain groups with differing viewpoints and, as the environment changes, union goals are frequently redefined. Successful collective bargaining is an educational process that aids in such redefinition of union objectives and purposes. In so far as unions perform educational functions and help to reconcile conflicts of interest, they serve a beneficial role in a democratic society.⁵

commodities. The reason is that man comes to this world without reference to supply and demand, and the poverty of the laborer compels him to offer the use of his labor-power unreservedly. The purchase of labor gives control over the laborer and a far-reaching influence over his physical, intellectual, social, and ethical existence. The conditions of the labor contract determine the amount of rulership. Again, while illness, inability to work, accident, or old age and death do not destroy other commodities or their power to support life, when this misfortune overtakes the person of the laborer, he loses his power to sell his only property, the commodity of labor, and he can no longer support himself and those dependent on him. These consequences of the peculiarity of labor may be summed up as follows:

(1) The absence of actual equality between the two parties to a labor contract, and the one-sided determination of the conditions of labor.

⁵Ibid., p. 19.

CHAPTER II

SOME THEORIES OF THE LABOR MOVEMENT

(2) The almost unlimited control of the employers over the social and political life of the physical and spiritual existence, and the expenditures of his employees.

(3) The uncertainty of existence which, more than any actual labor is a commodity, for it is bought and sold, but there are peculiarities about it which distinguish it from other commodities and that most radically. It is a commodity which is inseparably bound up with the laborer, and in this respect, it differs from other commodities. The reason is that man comes to this world without reference to supply and demand, and the poverty of the laborer compels him to offer the use of his labor-power unreservedly. The purchase of labor gives control over the laborer and a far-reaching influence over his physical, intellectual, social, and ethical existence. The conditions of the labor contract determine the amount of rulership. Again, while illness, inability to work, accident, or old age and death do not destroy other commodities or their power to support life, when this misfortune overtakes the person of the laborer, he loses his power to sell his only property, the commodity of labor, and he can no longer support himself and those dependent on him. These consequences of the peculiarity of labor may be summed up as follows:

(1) The absence of actual equality between the two parties to a labor contract, and the one-sided determination of the price and other conditions of labor.

and also (2) The almost unlimited control of the employers over the social and political life, the physical and spiritual existence, and the expenditures of his employees. labor (3) The uncertainty of existence which, more than for actual differences in possessions, distinguishes the well-to-do from the poor.

As the machinery became more general and more costly, the length of the working day was lengthened. Then, as production on a larger scale took the place of the small shops, crises became more and more common and more disastrous. Men were no longer hired for a long period, but from day to day and that uncertainty and irregularity of income, which is so disastrous to society, became general. High wages were followed by a total absence of work. When the laborers tried to raise their wages, they were imprisoned or forced back to work at the same wages or lower.

Under these disadvantages, the trade unions and labor organizations operated to counteract these economic evils.

The labor organizations enable the laborers to withhold their commodity temporarily from the market, and to wait for more satisfactory conditions of service than it is possible for them to secure when they are obliged to offer it unconditionally. They further enable laborers to gain the advantages of an increased demand for their commodity, to bring about a more satisfactory relation than would otherwise be possible between the supply and the demand for labor,

and also to exercise an influence upon the supply in the future market. These organizations are calculated to do away with the injurious consequences of the peculiarities of labor as a commodity to be sold, and, through them labor for the first time becomes really a commodity and the laborer a man.

The trade unions, and other agencies of the labor movement, such as the labor press, assist the laborer to find the best market for his commodity. Laborers are informed of the job situation and wages in different locales. Employers also engage employees through various labor organizations. When the demand for labor fails, it is the practice of the older, stronger unions not to allow their members to work below the usual rate wages and this is one of the chief means of maintaining the standard of life among the laborers.

If there is a permanent decrease in demand for labor, the tactics of the trade union must be changed. Laborers are assisted to move to new regions: in Europe they are helped to emigrate.

Finally, the trade unions educate the laborers to prudence in marriage. They accustom their members to overlook the field of labor, to pass judgment on the prospect of satisfactory remuneration for their commodity in future contracts. They help them to secure higher wages than would otherwise be possible.

John Stuart Mill recognized the economic value of labor organizations at an early date and assigned them an important place in our industrial organism.

There are several varieties of unionism, each with its own ideology and objectives. Thus, Robert F. Hoxie believed that unions grew out of the social-psychological environment of the workers; then the differences in group psychology caused different types of unions to appear. Hoxie classified these types according to their structure and according to the functional operation of each. He classified them by functional types, thusly:

Business unionism, accepting the wage system as it is, seeks the best obtainable terms of employment for its own membership. Its method is collective bargaining, supplemented by mutual insurance and occasional resort to strikes; its outlook is that of the craft or trade; its aims are somewhat narrowly economic. The railway brotherhoods furnish stock illustration of this type, although the type is dominant in the American Federation of Labor as well.⁶

Uplift unionism accepts, along with the wage system, the whole existing social order. Its mission is the diffusion of leisure-class culture and bourgeois virtues among the workers. Although using collective bargaining,

(New York: The Macmillan Company, 1961), p. 134.

⁶Hoxie, Trade Unionism, p. xvii.

these unions prefer to rely on the weapons of political action, mutual insurance programs, and cooperative enterprises. Hoxie cited the Knights of Labor as the closest approach to this type of unionism.⁷

Revolutionary unionism avowedly aims at the overthrow of the extant socio-economic order by and for the working class. Its two variants--socialistic and quasianarchistic--are sufficiently represented by Detroit and Chicago organizations of the I.W.W.

Predatory unionism practices secret rather than open violence. It is lawless and in so far anarchistic. The membership for the most part is content to follow blindly the instructions of leaders so long as they receive occasional wage increases. It often joins with employers to squeeze out competition for the mutual benefit of both parties. The International Longshoremen's Association on the East Coast and the Brotherhood of Teamsters under Beck and Hoffa are modern examples of predatory unionism.⁸

Dependent unionism appears in two forms, one company unionism and the other union label unionism. The former depends entirely on the employer for its support. The second type depends on the union label being imprinted on the products made by union members. It is supposed to encourage

⁷Arthur D. Butler, Labor Economics and Institutions (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1961), p. 134.

⁸Hoxie, Trade Unionism, p. 9. 1961, p. 63.

greater sales and thus make it necessary for employers to hire union workers.⁹

Besides, Hoxie, Selig Perlman and Karl Marx developed theories of unions to explain the basic motivating factors behind union organization, growth, and bargaining policies.

Perlman's Labor Movement Theory

Selig Perlman, after analyzing the labor movement in Russia and Germany, as well as in the United States, came to the conclusion that in any modern labor situation, there may be said to be three factors operative: First, the resistance of capitalism, determined by its own historical development as in Germany, Austria, and Hungary, or else its incapacity, as in Russia, to survive as a ruling group and to withstand revolutionary attack where the protective hand of government has been withdrawn.¹⁰ Second, the degree of dominance over the labor movement by intellectualist mentality, which regularly underestimates capitalism's resistance power and overestimates union labor's will for radical change.¹¹ It was from the intellectuals that the anti-capitalist influences in modern society emanated.

⁹Butler, Labor Economics, p. 135.

¹⁰Selig Perlman, A Theory of the Labor Movement (New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1949), p. 4.

¹¹Gordon F. Bloom, et al., Readings in Labor Economics (Homewood: Richard D. Irving, Inc., 1961), p. 63.

Intellectuals are non-manualists--outsiders--who attempt to impose their ideology on the labor movement. They consider the workers' economic position to be most unfortunate and claim that it can be remedied only by the acceptance of their ideology. They differ from each other in how they diagnose the ills of society and in the cure they recommend. Third, the degree of maturity of trade union mentality varies. Trade union mentality developed out of the scarcity consciousness of the worker. The workers' scarcity consciousness stems from the belief that his economic position cannot improve beyond that which is barely sufficient to cover the minimum essentials of an ordinary standard of living. There are two causes for this belief in the scarcity of economic opportunity: "The typical manualist is aware of his lack of native capacity" for coping with the complex business world. He also has the conviction that the world has been rendered one of scarcity by an institutional order of things, which purposely reserved the best opportunities for landlords, capitalists, and other privileged groups. Out of scarcity consciousness grew a job-conscious unionism, a unionism which controls the job opportunity. The union establishes certain job "rights" which it then rations among members through regulations applying to overtime, seniority, etc. The union does not displace the employer as the risk-taker and owner of the business, but

it does become the administrator of the scarcity of job opportunity.¹²

According to Perlman, Labor organizations develop from a concern with the scarcity of job opportunities. The pattern of development of organization in particular countries depends upon the particular combination of the three factors operative in any "modern labor situation." The relation of the labor movement to the future of capitalism is peculiarly influenced by the role of the intellectual.¹³ Perlman regards business unionism as the central type which most unions tend to approach over the long run. In his view, a union dominated by mutual benefit activities or revolutionary politics is simply an immature union which, if it survives, will move in the direction of business unionism.¹⁴

Karl Marx's Labor Movement Theory

According to Marx, unions are the natural result of the development of capitalism. In the Communist Manifesto, he and his colleague, Frederick Engels, state that

¹²Butler, Labor Economics, p. 138.

¹³Bloom, et al., Readings in Labor Economics, p. 66.

¹⁴G. Lloyd Reynolds, Labor Economics and Labor Relations (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1960), p. 66.

¹⁵Butler, Labor Economics, pp. 143-144.

with the development of industry the proletariat not only increases in number, it becomes concentrated in greater masses, its strength grows, and it feels that strength more. The various interests and conditions of life within the rank of the proletariat are more and more equalized, in proportion as machinery obliterates all distinctions of labor, and nearly everywhere reduces wages to the same low level. The growing competition among the bourgeois, and the resulting commercial crises, make the wages of the workers even more fluctuating. The increasing improvement of machinery, ever more rapidly developing, makes their livelihood more and more precarious; the collisions between individual workmen and individual bourgeois take more and more in character of collisions between two classes. Thereupon the workers begin to form combinations (trades' unions) against the bourgeois; they club together in order to keep up the rate of wages; they found permanent associations in order to make provisions beforehand for these occasional revolts.

Marx believed that the trade unions did not properly represent the workers. The labor movement as it developed spontaneously from the workers was pure and simple trade unionism, with the worker remaining subordinate to the owners of industry. Unions had a necessary and useful task to perform in protecting wages and working conditions, but should not limit themselves to these narrow economic goals. Instead they should use their organized power to emancipate the working class by destroying the capitalistic system.¹⁵ The intellectuals must lead the struggle of the working class, not only for better terms for the sale of labor power, but also for the abolition of the social system which compels the propertyless class to sell itself to the rich.

¹⁵Butler, Labor Economics, pp. 143-144.

(New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1951), p. 96.

Social Democracy represents the working class, not in its relation to a given group of employers, but in its relation to all classes in modern society; the unions should abolish the wage system.

To Marx, the revolution was the one great end to which all must be subordinated. To him, the interests of the workers in the immediate--shorter hours, better wages, greater freedom within the industry--were deluding. These "economic exposures" were only a phase of "bourgeois politics". The business of the intellectual leaders, the "idealists", was "to march ahead of the spontaneous movement," because to the intellectual the end is more important than the means, whereas to the trade union, the daily compromise with the details of a complex industrial world is the substance of its existence and survival. The Socialist and the Communist denies the trade union's importance except as a possible tool for their own revolutionary purposes.¹⁶

From these three Labor Movement Theories, the Knights of Labor, according to Hoxie, was an uplift unionism. Its aims were to improve the intellectual, moral, social, and economic welfare of all workers in the long run. It was a social-conscious rather than a craft-conscious union. Favorable legislation, worker education, social insurance, the producers' and consumers' cooperation were some of the

¹⁶Frank Tannenbaum, Philosophy of Labor, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1951), p. 96.

programs. Its constitution said that its purpose was to active secure to the workers the full enjoyment of the wealth they created, to enable them to share in the gain and honor of advancing civilization; and that strikes at best afforded only temporary relief and members should be educated to depend upon their organization and political action and through these the abolition of the present system. Its program was progressive with some revolutionary items. However, it was not a revolutionary organization as needed in Marx" theory because it did not reject or seek to overthrow the current social and industrial order. It was opposite to the Marxian theory because in it there were no conflicts of interest between the employers and employees; no class struggle was included in its ideals. It was not the business unionism which Perlman regarded as the central type which most unions tended to approach over the long run, and it was not a class organization. In it were crystallized sentiments and measures for the benefit of the whole people. But it trade developed out of the scarcity of job opportunities and was influenced by the intellectuals from the Utopian socialism. The Utopian socialists based themselves on the Ricadian Theory of Value which they claimed to be "socialist" and required only cleansing of its capitalistic "conclusions." If the labor is the source of all value, it must therefore be the source of all surplus value, and the "fruit of labor" rightfully belong to labor. The significance of the Utopian

socialists was that they corresponded to the first instinctive desires of the mania to reorganize society. As Marx said, the Utopian socialist stayed away from the living movement of the working class. There were many Utopian socialists, and each had different ideas from the other, but they did agree on the main points that the organization of cooperative communities would eliminate the social evils of capitalism. The Utopian aim was to convince workingmen that anything short of the abolition of capitalism was useless. The struggle for immediate demands was useless since it could not elevate the workmen to the true dignity of independence. Strikes could not accomplish anything for labor since they could not get at the root of the evil--surplus labor--which frequently compels the employers to reduce wages.

The important figures of these Utopian sects were Pierre Proudhon, Robert Owen, and Charles Fourier. From the Knights of Labor's philosophy, we can see that it was influenced by Proudhon's ideas. Proudhon opposed the trade unions and strikes. In his mind, the evil seemed to stem from the fact that upon gold was conferred an "economic privilege by the sovereignty of the state." All the evils of capitalism seemed to be a malicious perversion on the part of the government rather than a result of the method of commodity production. Although the class struggle was a mere abstract in his mind, like his "System of Contradictions," this intellectual anarchist conceived the conflict

to be solvable by the "right idea." Proudhon's "right idea" was the synthesis of the good sides of the opposing forces brought about by "reunited labor and property," within the current system of production, which was to remain intact.

His goal was to remove the middle man from between the capitalist and the worker; parcel out the land and industry; and establish "a society of equal producers." His conception was that exchange could be organized equitably if only the merchant and the banker did not have monopolistic power granted them by the government.¹⁷

Second, the organization ignores vocation but seeks to harmonize all individuals of separate interests into a whole.¹⁸ The Noble Knights of Labor which was born in 1869 was formed under this latter idea. It was the first revolutionary labor organization of national proportions and influence in the United States. There had been revolutionary thinkers and agitators in the labor movement before this time--communists, cooperators, agrarians, and anarchists--but not until this date did a great organized movement appear.¹⁹ The Knights were at first a local secret order. Secrecy was adopted as a protection from employers but it gave up the secret character of the organization in 1881.

¹⁸Carroll D. Wright, "An Historical Sketch of the Knights of Labor," *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 1 (New York: *Bookman Associates*, 1958), pp. 50-51.

¹⁷Raya Dunayevskaya, *Marxism and Freedom--from 1776 until Today* (New York: *Bookman Associates*, 1958), pp. 50-51.

¹⁹Walter D. Pataki, *American Labor Movement* (New York: *Arno*, The New York Times), 1954, p. 110.

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CHAPTER III

THE KNIGHTS OF LABOR

All employee organizations have been founded on one of two fundamental ideas. First, among the ancient guilds, trade unions, organizations of professional men, and whenever the members of a single vocation have associated themselves together, the underlying idea was of the association of people of like employment. Second, the organization ignores vocation but seeks to harmonize all individuals of separate interests into a whole.¹⁸ The Noble Knights of Labor which was born in 1869 was formed under this latter idea. It was the first revolutionary labor organization of national proportions and influence in the United States. There had been revolutionary thinkers and agitators in the labor movement before this time--communists, cooperators, agrarians, and anarchists--but not until this date did a great organized movement appear.¹⁹ The Knights were at first a local secret order. Secrecy was adopted as a protection from employers but it gave up the secret character of the organization in 1881.

¹⁸Butler, *Labor Economics*, p. 43.

¹⁸Carroll D. Wright, "An Historical Sketch of the Knights of Labor," *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, I (New York: Kraus Reprint Corporation, 1961), p. 116.

¹⁹Mary Ritter Beard, *American Labor Movement* (New York: Arno, The New York Times), 1964), p. 110.

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The Knights of Labor had two unusual organizational features. First, it adopted a policy of inclusive unionism designed to bring into one big union any "producer" who was eligible for membership. Producers included anyone who worked with his hands and thereby contributed to the total output of goods, but excluded doctors, lawyers, bankers, and other economic "parasites." Workers were to be in the same organizations with farmers, shopkeepers, and small employers; highly skilled journeymen joined with unskilled workers.

The second peculiar aspect of the organization was its strong centralization.²⁰ Supreme authority rested in the General Executive Board and the Grand Master Workman, which in turn possessed considerable control over the lower level of the governmental machinery--local, district, state, and national assemblies.²¹ The basic units were the local assemblies. These might be mixed, that is, open to all workers, or trade assemblies, open only to members of specific trades. Local assemblies were affiliated with district assemblies although the local did have some discretion as to the district with which they might affiliate.²² The General Assembly was the highest institution in the order,

²⁰Philip S. Foner, *History of the Labor Movement in the United States*, Vol. 2 (New York: International Publishers, 1955), p. 48.

²¹Charles A. Scontras, *Organized Labor and Labor Politics in Maine, 1880-1890* (Orono, Maine: University of Maine Press, 1966), p. 3.

²²Sanford Cohen, *Labor in the United States* (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Books, Inc., 1966), pp. 88-89.

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and had complete power over all lower units. The local and district assemblies had no independent powers.²³ The central body could call or terminate strikes and suspend or revoke the charters of local unions.²⁴

In a few years after the foundation, the union remained numerically a small sect and did not show any important activity. Even in the great struggles of 1877, the Knights of Labor were not prominent. With the return of prosperity in 1880, the Knights of Labor became involved in a large number of local and district strikes through financial help which was collected from its members. In 1885, the Knights of Labor had become the most successful boycotting agency in the history of the American labor movement.²⁵

The first national-scale strike openly led by the Knights of Labor was in 1883, but it ended in a great defeat for the workers. However, it succeeded in the second and third strikes in 1884 and 1885, which increased the prestige of the Knights of Labor. The membership of the Knights increased rapidly but was very unstable and reached

²³Philip S. Foner, History of the Labor Movement in the United States, II (New York: International Publishers, 1955), p. 48.

²⁴Richard A. Lester, Economics of Labor (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1941), p. 546.

²⁵Anthony Bimba, The History of the American Working Class (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968), p. 173.

²⁷Edward Aveling and Eleanor Marx, The Working Class Movement in America (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1891).

its highest development in 1886. From that time, the organization disintegrated and declined continually in importance. After 1887, the Knights of Labor lost its hold upon the large cities with their wage consciousness, probably because of the indictment, trial, and execution on November 11, 1887, of several anarchists from the Chicago Haymarket bomb affair of May, 1886. Any American community's hostility to social movements that threatened property interest was so keen that a belief in anarchy could be punished by death.

In 1889, the national leaders of the Knights of Labor took the first step toward political cooperation with the Farmers Alliance. By 1900, the Knights of Labor entirely disappeared.

Membership of the Knights of Labor

<u>Year</u>	<u>Membership</u>	
1879	20,151	26
1880	28,136	
1881	19,422	
1882	42,517	
1883	52,000	
1884	71,326	
1885	111,395	
1886	702,124	
1887	548,239	
1888	259,518	
1889	220,607	
1890	100,000	
1891	---	
1892	---	
1893	74,635	27
1894		

²⁶Norman J. Ware, The Labor Movement in the United States, 1860-1895 (New York: A Division of Random House, 1956), p. 66.

²⁷Edward Aveling and Eleanor Marx, The Working Class Movement in America (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1891).

or Utopian goals. Philosophy and Policy of the Knights of Labor
the trades; (2) educating workers on the evil of capitalism;

and (3) The Knights of Labor followed Utopian ideas which were dreamed up by radical intellectuals who sought the support of unions to put their programs into effect. These Utopians believed there was an abundance of economic opportunity, but that it was not available on a fair basis to all of the citizens. Institutional barriers blocked the way to the good life. If the capitalistic wage system could be eliminated, all workers would enjoy a higher standard of living.

The philosophy of the Utopians undermined the unions which had grown during the prosperous periods. As long as the workers believed their salvation lay in substituting another system for the wage system, they were not inclined to develop strong economic organizations to win wage increases and improvements in working conditions.²⁸ Such Utopian programs attracted the attention of American workers until well after the Civil War. The last one to win widespread support was sponsored by the Noble Knights of Labor.

Since the Knights engaged in normal union activity, besides pursuing the long-run Utopian goal, they did not constitute a pure Utopia in the same sense as the earlier Skidmore program. Their so-called first principles,

²⁸Butler, Labor Economics, pp. 41-42.

or Utopian goals included (1) seeking one big union of all the trades; (2) educating workers on the evil of capitalism; and (3) promoting producers' cooperation.²⁹

The Knights advocated public ownership of all public utilities such as railways, waterworks, and gas plants. They also believed that ownership of utilities and cooperative institutions for the production and distribution of working people should be coupled with government ownership in the new society which they hoped to create.

The ultimate goal was to have an economic system composed of worker-owned cooperatives.³⁰ The Knights of Labor militated against organization along craft lines, and the establishment of autonomous trade units within the framework of the Order aroused strong opposition. The leaders of the Knights believed that isolated trade unions could accomplish nothing; they would be too weak and powerless. The remedies that the Knights advocated must come largely through legislation and a process of education on the part of workers first, in order to fit them properly for the work of the organization.

The leaders of the Knights of Labor believed (1) surplus labor always keeps wages down; (2) nothing can remedy this evil but a purely and deeply secret organization, based

²⁹Gerald Grob, "The Knights of Labor and the Trade Union Movement," *Economic History*, XVIII (March-December), 176-192.

²⁹Beard, American Labor Movement, p. 117.

³⁰Cohen, Labor in the United States, p. 89.

³³Butler, Labor Economics, p. 43.

upon a plan that should be to teach, or rather inculcate in its membership, one set of ideas, ultimately subversive of the present wage system.³¹

The Knights proposed no collective bargaining as a means to industrial peace. In their opinion, it was time and energy wasted on inconsequential, short-run goals.³²

In October, 1885, the Knights adopted legislation looking to the prevention of strikes and boycotts. From Article XV of the constitution of the Local Assembly, "No strike shall be declared or entered into by any member or members of any Local Assembly without the sanction of the District or Local Assembly, as the case may be."³³

Nevertheless, the bona fide working class element in the Knights, forced by necessity to earn a livelihood in the prevailing system of production, constantly insisted on the importance of getting down to earth, carrying on strikes for better wages, and making wage bargains with employers. This "practical" element of the organization got the upper hand in the decade of the eighties, but the theoreticians and Utopians were always numerous and strong. Between the two factions, the Noble Order was torn to shreds. The officers caught between the two great factions, tried to appease both

³¹Gerald Grob, "The Knights of Labor and the Trade Union, 1878-1886," Economic History, XVIII (March-December), 176-192.

³²Beard, American Labor Movement, pp. 114-118.

³³Butler, Labor Economics, p. 43.

by political and humanitarian activities on one hand and economic welfare along wage and trade union lines on the other hand.³⁴

The Knights declared themselves not a political party but it was inevitable that the Knights of Labor would enter politics, for the reforms proposed by the Order presupposed political and legislative action for their realization. The Knights of Labor believed that the greatest victories could be secured only through political action.³⁵ The Knights of Labor favored independent political action. They sent their own candidates to the political contests or supported the candidates from the Labor political party such as the Union Labor Party. Many of the officers and members of the Knights belonged to the political parties. On the state level, the Knights sent a number of labor reformers into the legislature.

A district assembly or a local assembly under the General Assembly could take political action as well as tend to advance the interests of the Order or the cause of labor. But when political action was contemplated, the regular business of the district assembly or local assembly was closed. Local assemblies properly used their political

³⁴Beard, American Labor Movement, p. 119.

³⁵Sewall Thomas Adams and Helen L. Summer, Labor Problems (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1905), p. 225.

power in all legislature elections, and it was left to the discretion of each local assembly to act with that party through which it could gain the most. An assembly should not take political action unless three-fourths of the attending members were united in supporting such action.³⁶ As the Knights declined, their political entanglements became more marked. In 1889, the national leaders of the Knights of Labor took the first step toward political cooperation with the Farmers Alliance.

The Conflict Between the Knights of Labor and the Trade Unions

The real significance of the history of the Knights of Labor lies in the aims, the policies, and the structure of that organization. In government, it was more highly centralized, perhaps, than any general labor organization that had ever existed for any considerable length of time.³⁷ Then their particular organization brought them into an inevitable conflict with the strict trade unions whose cause was taken up and vigorously championed by the Federation of Labor.

The struggle between the Knights of Labor and the other unions represented a clash of two fundamentally opposing ideologies. The Knights of Labor on one hand grew

³⁶Scontras, Organized Labor, pp. 16-17.

³⁷Adams and Summer, Labor Problems, p. 220.

out of the reform and humanitarian movement of ante-bellum America, and was the direct descendant of the Jacksonian era. The trade unions, on the other hand, were commercial organizations, not an ethical society. They endeavored to organize, for collective responsibility, persons with common trade problems. They sought economic betterment in order to place in the hands of the wage earners the means to wider opportunities.³⁸ They rejected the broad reform goals of the Knights of Labor and emphasized, instead, higher wages, shorter hours, and job control.³⁹ They accepted their environment, and sought to take advantage of the relative scarcity of labor and the rising scale of production. Hence, they emphasized the collective bargaining function of labor organizations and thus tacitly accepted the workers' wage status.⁴⁰

In general, the national unions were fearful of the Knights of Labor for two closely related reasons. First, the mixed assembly was incompatible with trade union goals. In theory, both structural forms could exist side by side with each pursuing its own ends. Thus the mixed assembly could concentrate on reform and politics, while the unions could develop their collective bargaining function. Second,

³⁹Bloom, et al., Readings in Labor Economics, pp. 104-105.

⁴⁰Philip Taft, The American Federation of Labor in the Time of Gompers (New York: Harper Brothers, 1957), p. 38.

trade union officials opposed the chartering of trade assemblies within the Knights for the reason that these units had proved incapable of developing collective bargaining and other union functions of the Knights. This meant that there was little hope for the mature evolution of the national trade assembly. Local assemblies were often ineffective when operating in an environment marked by the nationalized economy and the geographical mobility of labor.⁴¹

Therefore, given the difference in ideology and structure, the conflict between the Knights of Labor and the trade unions was not simply a struggle for power between the two rivals, but was a clash between two fundamentally different ideologies. As the membership of the Knights of Labor expanded and opportunities for conflict between its assemblies and trade and labor unions increased, the leader of the Knights of Labor and the other leaders were unsympathetic to the claims of the unions to control their trade.

The skilled workers, however, who organized into trade unions began to look on their unions as trade monopolies. Especially in the eighties, it appeared to them that they had better protect their craft interests through their narrow craft organizations. They looked upon the attempt of the Knights to attract the skilled workers into its ranks as a means of using them for the benefit of the unskilled workers. Moreover, they all believed that they could raise

⁴¹Bloom, Economics of Labor Relations, p. 114.

their wages more easily and quickly through their own craft organizations than if they amalgamated with the millions of the unskilled.⁴²

This conflict of interest between skilled craftsmen who worked with tools and the mass of semi-skilled and unskilled wage-earners led in 1881 to the formation of the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions. In 1886, this became the American Federation of Labor.⁴³

From 1881 to 1886, the Federation declined rather than progressed, but in the latter year it reorganized under the present title and undertook a vigorous defense of trade unionism as opposed to the centralizing tendencies of the Knights of Labor. After 1886, the Federation grew steadily, with some loss in membership during the industrial depression that began in 1893. After prosperity returned its size increased by giant strides.⁴⁴

In organization and policy the Federation has been the very antithesis of the Knights of Labor. In its structure, it is a confederation. It was a decentralized federation; that is, it allowed each of its affiliated national organizations to develop more or less as it pleased. Hence each union, taking advantage of its autonomy, made its own

⁴²Bimba, History of Working Class, pp. 102-103.

⁴³Adams, Labor Problems, pp. 221-222.

⁴⁴Florence Peterson, American Labor Unions (New York: Harper Brothers, Publishers, 1945), p. 6.

adjustment to the economic and political conditions in its trade and had its own procedures for dealing with employers. The complete organization was along the trade lines of the entire body of wage-earners.

The Federation early adopted the principle of concentrating its efforts on the economic front and relegating political action to a minor role. The only government assistance they sought was legal protection against actions of employers and public officials (such as court injunctions) which interfered with their freedom to exert the maximum economic pressure in gaining better terms in their trade agreements. The Federation tried to organize particular groups of factory workers. It had no idea of helping the whole mass of the American working people; it was merely an effort by members of the skilled crafts to help themselves.⁴⁵

The duty of the Federation was to support the national and international unions in winning recognition from the employers, entering into collective bargaining and maintaining a position which would enable them to strike effectively when other measures failed.⁴⁶

The structure consisted of locals, international, and federal groups. The primary unit in the system of organization upheld by the Federation was the local trade union,

⁴⁵Foster Rhea Dulles, Labor in America (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell and Company, 1949), p. 116.

⁴⁶Peterson, American Labor Unions, p. 162.

composed of artisans following a single vocation, and attached to a national trade union.⁴⁷

The executive council was set up to handle affairs on a national level but was given no power to interfere in those affairs that fell within the jurisdiction of member unions. The unity of labor was to be accomplished through education and moral considerations rather than through the centralized controls inherent in the structure of the Knights of Labor.⁴⁸

The traditional concept of organization held by the American Federation of Labor required that federal labor unions (local units including workers of all trades having no separate unions of their own) be splintered into separate homogeneous craft units as soon as there were enough workers in that locality to form such bodies. The aim of such a policy was to develop the collective bargaining potentialities of the various trades. The Knights, on the other hand, sought to reverse this strategy and proceeded in the opposite direction.⁴⁹

The Knights of Labor hoped to achieve the organization and education of labor units. It emphasized the advantages of cooperation and advocated legislation to improve the status of the workers.⁵⁰ So it is seen that

⁴⁷Jacob H. Hollander and George E. Barnett, Studies in American Trade Unionism (New York: Arno and the New York Times, 1969), p. 856.

⁴⁸Dulles, Labor in America, p. 161.

CHAPTER IV

THE AMERICAN FEDERATION OF LABOR AND THE KNIGHTS OF LABOR

The Conflict Between the Knights of Labor and the AFL

From the previous outline, the conflict between the two types of labor organizations can be seen as derived mainly from their differences in philosophies, policies, government, and structure.

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⁴⁹Marc Karson, American Labor Unions and Politics, 1900-1918 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 1958), p. 19.

⁵⁰Richard L. Rowan and Herbert R. Northrup, Readings in Economics and Labor Relations (Homewood: Richard D. Irwin, Inc., 1968), p. 186.

because of their different structures and philosophies, the Knights of Labor and the American Federation of Labor had the different policies of carrying on their duties. This wing of The Union Label. The methods employed by the two organizations in entering the use of the trade label were largely influenced by their structural differences. The Knights of Labor, highly centralized, were able to require the issue of labels from headquarters, and to vest the general executive board with complete control over their distribution. Thus, the constitution (1961) of the General Assembly (Art. 4, Sec. 19) provides:

The general executive board shall take charge of and regulate all seals or prospective designs to be distributed to members of the Order, in such form as will be of service in protecting the products of their labor, and shall prescribe such rules and regulations as it may deem necessary for use of the same; and no assembly or other branch of the Order under penalty of forfeiture of charter shall indorse or sanction the use of any seal or design not issued or indorsed by this board.⁵¹

The main business of the Union Label Trades Department of the American Federation is propaganda. It urges the members of the labor unions and the general public to purchase goods manufactured by union labor and so designated by a union label attached to it.⁵² It assists in the formation of active label leagues to aid in educating the consumers in the appearance of trade labels.⁵³

⁵¹Hollander and Barnett, Studies, p. 365.

⁵²Harolad V. Faulkner and Mark Starr, Labor in America (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1944), p. 113.

⁵³Hollander and Barnett, p. 365.

Cooperation. Many Knights, especially among the men whose skills were menaced by the introduction of machinery, bent all their efforts toward productive cooperation. This wing of the Knights had not been "class conscious" for it was composed of men who aspired to be small employers or were already employers. They had gone into the organization in the hope that the whole weight of the Knights would be turned to organizing cooperative societies. Whenever strikes failed or industrial depression set in, there would come a wave of enthusiasm for forming small productive shops owned and operated by groups of workmen themselves. Sometimes, as the Illinois Commissioner of Labor said, "Wage earners are forced into cooperation by reason of discrimination against them by employers."⁵⁴ In 1882, a general cooperative board was elected to work out a plan of action, but it never reported. A new board was chosen in its place at the Assembly of 1883. In that year, the first practical step was taken in the purchase by the Order of a coal mine at Cannelburg, Indiana, with the idea of selling the coal at reduced prices to the members.⁵⁵

Experiments in cooperative stores, factories, and institutions were reported in 1882 from seventeen localities of the one hundred represented; in 1887, the general

⁵³Beard, American Labor Movement, p. 126.

⁵⁴Beard, American Labor Movement, p. 125.

⁵⁵Perlman, History of Trade Unionism, p. 126.

cooperative board announced that eight halls and buildings were owned, and that eleven newspapers and fifty-four workshops, factories, etc., were engaged in productive cooperation.⁵⁶

Most of these cooperative enterprises failed because of lack of business experience in the management of them, the successful experiments apparently being joint stock companies rather than cooperative brotherhoods, organized along idealistic lines.⁵⁷ But the disastrous end of the Knights The American Federation of Labor, on the other hand, made no attempt to become an employer through cooperative enterprises and even refused to organize farmers into unions on the ground that they were employing farmers and not workmen.⁵⁸ immediately concerned voted in favor of it.⁶⁰

Strikes and Boycotts. The preamble to the constitution adopted by the General Assembly in 1878 favored "the substitution of arbitration for strikes, whenever and wherever employers and employees are willing to meet on equitable grounds." In the event of arbitration failing, the boycott was regarded as the most effective weapon of labor, more effective, and less dangerous than strikes. It

⁵⁶Hollander and Barnett, Studies, pp. 366-367.

⁵⁷Beard, American Labor Movement, p. 126.

⁵⁸Hollander and Barnett, Studies, p. 368.

⁶⁰Hollander and Barnett, Studies, p. 371.

⁶¹Grob, "The Knights of Labor", p. 75.

has been pointed out that the national power of the General Assembly with its control over an inter-trade organization made boycott a rarely efficient tool for the Knights of Labor.⁵⁹

The Knights of Labor believed that strikes were as a rule productive of more injury than benefit to the working people. Consequently, all attempts to foment strikes were discouraged. As growth of the Order came, the strike regulations became necessary. But the disastrous end of the Knights came in 1886 with the General Assembly forbidding any local, trade district, or state assembly to declare a strike before a secret ballot had been taken of all members in good standing and in no case permitting a strike unless two-thirds of those immediately concerned voted in favor of it.⁶⁰

Reduction in the Length of Working Day. While the trade unions and the Knights of Labor both supported the eight hour day, there was a wide gulf between the two over appropriate means of winning the goal. Unions, if necessary, stood ready to strike for shorter hours. The leaders of the Knights, on the other hand, violently opposed such a policy. They claimed that the abolition of the wage system would automatically resolve the question and they emphasized that eight hours was more a political than an economic problem.⁶¹

⁵⁹Edna D. Bullock (compiler), Trade Unions (Minneapolis: H. W. Wilson Company, 1913), p. 9.

⁶⁰Hollander and Barnett, Studies, p. 371.

⁶¹Grob, "The Knights of Labor", p. 75.

In order to justify his anti-labor position toward the eight-hour movement, Powderly invented a peculiar philosophy.

To talk reducing the hours of labor without reducing the power of the machinery to oppress instead of to benefit, is a waste of energy. What men gain through a reduction of hours will be taken from them in another way while the rule of iron continues . . . The advocate of the eight-hour system must go beyond a reduction of the number of hours a man must work and must labor for the establishment of a just and humane system of land ownership, control of machinery, railroads, and telegraphs as well as equitable currency system before he will be able to retain the vantage ground gained when the hours of labor are reduced to eight per day.⁶²

May 1, 1890 was set as the date for a general strike for the eight-hour day, and certain days were designated in the interval on which simultaneous mass meetings in all cities were to be held. The Knights refused to participate in the movement and the Federation continued the process until they succeeded in many important cities.⁶³

Politics and Legislation. The ideas of the politics and the legislation of these two federations were different. The Knights of Labor and the American Federation of Labor have both recognized the advantages that a federation of trades has over separate trade unions in any reform movement involving political activity, and have shaped their respective policies accordingly. The two organizations have,

⁶²Bimba, History of American Working Class, p. 181.

⁶³Hollander and Barnett, Studies, p. 373.

however, employed different methods. Since the Knights believed that general interests could be promoted best by political action, the Knights laid greater stress on political activity and aimed ultimately to bring into existence a Labor party.⁶⁴ The leaders of the Knights had entered the political arena in the middle and late 1870's. But when they failed to be elected, they announced that the Knights were not a political organization, but the political economy ought to be taught in its true sense and thus give birth to political parties and issues. They recommended support of candidates who were members of the Order.⁶⁵

On the other hand, the Federation held that the best way to promote general aims is by each trade seeking zealously its own interests.⁶⁶ Trade unionists regard the increase in the bargaining power of their members as the chief remedy in improving conditions. To right trade matters by confronting the employer with united strength is of more immediate concern to the trade unionist than any direct gain from educational projects. But the chief aim of the Knights of Labor was to educate parties and govern them intelligently and honestly. In accordance with this view, education as a means to the larger end became an important

⁶⁴Ibid., p. 174.

⁶⁵Grob, "The Knights of Labor," p. 82.

⁶⁶Paul Douglas, Curtice N. Hitchcock, and Willard F. Atkins, The Worker in Modern Economic Society (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1892), p. 546.

branch of activity. The structure of the mixed local assembly of the Knights was well adapted to this function. On the other hand, in their opinion, an organization like the Knights, representing a highly centralized federation and disregarding the trade boundaries formerly observed, was well fitted to educate its members and promote a feeling of political solidarity among all classes of laborers. Besides, it was highly efficient for direct political action. Here again, the advantages of a centralized organization, co-extensive with the domain of labor, were marked.

Trade unionists in their independent organizations were too weak numerically to change the result of an election, while the members of the Knights of Labor pledged to mutual helpfulness were numerous enough to control the outcome. Politicians, recognizing the political possibilities, joined the Order for the express purpose of converting it into a voting machine.

In 1888, the Order was on the verge of taking active part in the national campaign, and escaped only through conservatism of the general officers. In many localities, the secret but powerful membership of the Knights had elected labor candidates. So successful were these that municipal elections resulted and the rank and file became ambitious for larger victories. A party in which all reformers could find a place appeared a fitting substitute for the two corrupt, boss-ridden political organizations. Active agitation in 1890 stimulated a wave of enthusiasm which aided

materially in the formation in 1892 of the National People's Party, Pledged in this manner to political action, the Knights dissipated much of their energy in vain efforts to make industrial forces politically supreme, and internal dissensions resulted.

The American Federation of Labor has resisted all allurements to political action. This freedom from affiliation with political parties, however, has not been maintained without a struggle on the part of the ruling element in the Federation. The Federation declared, "The American Federation has no political platform," but the efforts on the part of radical trade organizations to commit the Federation to political principles were so persistent that the New York convention of 1895 declared, "Party politics, whether they be Democratic, Republican, Socialistic, Populistic, Prohibition, or any other, shall have no place in the conventions of the American Federation of Labor."⁶⁷

The Knights of Labor, although regarding legislative activity as secondary to the more direct policy of party political action endeavored to forward labor legislation. Among the Knights, the rank and file worked through normal party channels and elected members to legislative bodies, especially on the local and state levels.⁶⁸

⁶⁷Hollander and Barnett, Studies, p. 176.

⁶⁸Grob, "The Knights of Labor," p. 83.

⁷⁰ibid.

trade One of the most important reforms advocated by the Knights was direct legislation. Others were the initiative and referendum, bureaus of labor statistics, abolition of the contract system on national, state, and municipal works, compulsory arbitration, prohibition of child labor under the age of fifteen, and the government ownership of telegraph, telephones, and railroads.⁶⁹ They were successful lobbyists and were mainly responsible for the first restrictive immigration law, the anti-contract labor law of February 2, 1885, and for a considerable body of state labor legislation.⁷⁰

trade The activity of the Knights of Labor and the AFL in carrying out their respective plans of organization resulted from time to time in serious conflict. During the early 1880's, however, it was by no means evident that the Knights and the national trade unions were predestined to clash. The Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions had many trade union leaders who belonged to the Order. Local unions and assemblies often cooperated in joint boycotts. The national unions regarded the Knights as valuable economically. In turn, the Knights vehemently denied having any hostile designs upon the trade unions and in a number of prominent cases before 1885, it acted accordingly. Nevertheless, with its structural inclusiveness and reform ideology, it was perhaps inevitable that the Order, in its efforts to bring all working men into a single organization, would undercut

⁶⁹Hollander and Barnett, Studies, p. 378.

⁷⁰Ibid.

trade union organizational efforts. Thus, the General Assembly authorized a committee in 1883 to confer with union representatives in the hope of incorporation of all the trade unions within the Knights. In the absence of any national or international union, the absorption of local unions by the Knights in the form of trade assemblies created no friction. Indeed, isolated local unions were eager to affiliate with such a powerful national organization. By 1886, the influence of the Order had become very great. There really did exist a danger of trade unions being absorbed into the Order. When the Knights began to organize workingmen in trades already having national organizations, friction was quick to arise. The trouble that followed the Order's attempt at expansion into the realm of the trade unions was not only simply a jurisdictional rivalry between similar organizations. As we have seen, the Order and the national unions had opposing conceptions of the legitimate functions of the labor movement, which in turn had led to different structural forms. The expansion of the Order's mixed units thus served to undermine the economic functions of the trade unions, since the heterogeneous character of the former prevented them from exercising any appreciable degree of economic power. Furthermore, the structural diversity of the Knights caused trouble when its trade assemblies sought to perform tasks that logically fell within the purview of the trade unions. In defense, union

officials generally refused to consent to a mutual recognition of the working classes and they demanded that the Knights cease interfering in the trade unions.⁷¹

But the Knights continued their sporadic interference in the national trade unions. The first open clash occurred in January, 1886, in New York. This conflict brought to a climax the struggle that had been going on between the Order and the trade unions. The trade union finally awakened to a sense of the danger from the rapidly growing Order. The common danger created a unity of feeling and the indifference previously felt for federated action now gave way to desire for closer union.⁷² By the end of 1886, the Knights and the national unions prepared for war because the conflicts were much greater than the negotiations could solve. The AFL Federation took an increasing inflexible position toward the Knights. However, during 1887 to 1891, the two federations tried many times to get together but failed. In 1894, the American Federation of Labor decided that no meeting or conference with the Knights' officials should be held until they declared against dual organization in any one trade.⁷³

⁷¹Gerald Grob, Workers and Utopia (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1961), p. 106.

⁷²John Rogers Commons, et al., History of Labor in the United States (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1918), p. 401.

⁷³Ware, History of Trade Unionism, p. 298.

⁷⁶Butler, Labor Economics, pp. 49-50.

⁷⁷Adams and Sumner, Labor Problems, p. 227.

By the middle of the decade of the 1890's, the Knights ceased to be a serious rival to the AFL.⁷⁴

The Decline of the Knights of Labor

From a membership of 708,924, and an annual income of half a million in 1886, the year of their greatest prosperity, the Knights steadily declined in membership and power.⁷⁵ But the new stability of the AFL, which was organized in 1881 as the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions of the United States of America and Canada, was proven in the financial panic of 1893 to 1899. Up to that time, depressions had always depleted the membership of the unions, but the AFL maintained 275,000 members throughout. During the years from 1898 to 1904, the AFL expanded from 275,000 to 1,676,000 members. From 1910 to 1914, it again made a spurt, reaching 2,000,000. From 1916 to 1919, it rose from 2,070,000 to 3,260,000 members and to more than 4,000,000 in 1920.⁷⁶ The failure of the Knights of Labor and similar organizations seems to prove, or establish, a strong assumption that the fundamental unit of labor organization must be a trade or industrial body, and that the necessary combination of these trade societies must take the form of federation, not amalgamation.⁷⁷

⁷⁴Taft, AFL in the Time of Gompers, p. 93.

⁷⁵Hollander and Barnett, Studies, p. 379.

⁷⁶Butler, Labor Economics, pp. 49-50.

⁷⁷Adams and Summer, Labor Problems, p. 227.

The trade unions need the loose federation with more realistic ideals, such as the AFL, not the strict idealism and too high aims of the Knights of Labor. Some unions connected with the Knights, hoping to gain support from it, at the same time kept their craft autonomy. Personal vested interests and ambitions exerted a strong influence. They were interested in strikes, but the leaders of the Knights were opposed to them so the organization never built up a financial reserve or a policy for centralizing strike activities. Since the Knights of Labor were interested in cooperation and politics as well as in more strict labor affairs, it was accused by the unions of neglecting trade matters for the purpose of forwarding the wider objectives.

The main causes of the decline of the Knights of Labor were these:

First, the Knights of Labor proceeded upon two false assumptions as a consequence of attempting to do two impossible things: (1) It assumed no fundamental disharmony of viewpoint and interest between wage workers and employers as such. It therefore tried to unite workers and the middle class against the "money power." (2) It assumed that the viewpoint and interest of all wage workers were identical. It therefore tried to unite the workers of all degree of skill and of all crafts and industries into one organization, and under one central authority which should direct the action of each group in the interests of all.

The first assumption was false because under the capitalistic wage system, the product of industry is divided into two parts, each part going to a distinct class,-- the one, exclusive owners of the material means of production, the other, the exclusive owners of the labor. Thus the interests of the two classes must conflict. The division of functions, under the system of machine industry, divides the workers and employers into such diverse material and social environments that inevitably diverse viewpoints develop and create a belief in diversity of interests even when this diversity does not exist. Then the union problem cannot be solved by any attempt to bring together into one organization the employing and working elements. Successful unionism must be an organization of wage workers, and unionism as a social problem must be accepted as an organization of wage workers seeking their own interests.⁷⁸

The second assumption was equally false because as long as there exists distinct crafts in industry and machine industry, the workers must be divided into many groups-- skilled workers, semi-skilled workers, and unskilled workers. The immediate economic interests of the different groups are not identical or harmonious. The interests of one craft may be definitely opposed to the interests of others. When one stands to gain, the others may stand to

⁷⁸Hoxie, Trade Unionism, pp. 43-44.

This is one of the reasons why the Knights of Labor lose. This is true between craft and craft, and between skilled and unskilled. And as the machinery breaks up industry into little tasks that can be performed by unskilled workers, thus destroying the apprenticeship system and so letting in the competition of the unskilled, the real interests of the two groups are diverse. The skilled workers in general have no love for the unskilled; they worry that the unskilled will take their jobs. And so long as the craft organization could keep up a successful fight of its own, it was not going to forego its advantages for outside labor. Equally, the crafts could not be made to combine together except as a loose federation, mainly for legislative activity and mutual aid. self-employed capitalists. The

trade From the two assumptions, the Knights of Labor American considered that the inequalities in the social system were mainly caused by the "money power," not from the conflict of interest between the employers and employees. It then proposed no collective bargaining as a means to industrial peace. It tried to avoid strikes which in its opinion were time and energy wasted for the short-run goal. The Knights tried to unite all the working classes into one big do not organization to help abolish the present wage system and to reach the ultimate goal of revolution or reform. They stood against the organization of a union along craft lines and against the establishment of autonomous trade units.

⁷⁹Dallas, *Labor in America*, p. 115.
⁸⁰Butler, *Labor Economics*, p. 45.
⁸¹Douglas, Hitchcock, and Atkins, *Worker in Modern Economic Society*, p. 346.

This is one of the reasons why the Knights of Labor declined and thus the AFL was given a chance to take over. The AFL grew out of experience and seemed to meet the needs of skilled labor. It has no broader idea or ideals than the Knights of Labor had. It has no ultimate ends; it fights only for immediate objectives--objectives that can be realized in a few years. These objectives are higher wages, shorter hours, better working conditions, more education, more comforts of life for workers and their families, and more of everything that might raise the standard of living and the workers' position in the community.⁷⁹ The AFL recognized that the great majority of workers would be employees all of their lives, while the Knights wanted to convert all workers into self-employed capitalists. The trade unions represented much better adjustment to the American environment than did the Knights of Labor.⁸⁰

Second, the technical structure, with the General Assembly supposedly having complete authority over the districts and locals of the Order, often placed decision upon essential trade policies in the hands of officers outside the trade concerned.⁸¹ This was a serious mistake, because in different trades, employers and employees do not have the same interests and where their interests conflict,

⁷⁹Dulles, Labor in America, p. 115.

⁸⁰Butler, Labor Economics, p. 46.

⁸¹Douglas, Hitchcock, and Atkins, Worker in Modern Economic Society, p. 546.

they cannot be forced to combine successfully. The sovereignty must rest in the constituent unions. Besides, the conditions, needs, and problems of workers are different in different industries and in different locales. When the Knights of Labor organization was growing rapidly, it could not be adapted to meet the daily problems of workers in specific industries and trades because it was too unwieldy to be directed efficiently.⁸² Moreover, the extremely mixed character of the membership prevented it from building up a structure compatible with the ideal of including both wage earners and employers, farmers, and shopkeepers, and others of such diverse and opposite interests. When a conflict of interest existed among the membership, each tried to protect his own interest and neglected that of the general organization. This brought friction, confusion, and lack of unity in the actions they took. This error of judgment about class cohesiveness among the employed, economically underprivileged, and the self-employed led to the decline of the Knights of Labor.⁸³ By 1893, the craft organizations had largely left the Knights and the Knights were taken over by socialist reformers and the farmers.⁸⁴

⁸²Harold V. Faulkner and Mark Starr, Labor in America (New York: Harper Brothers, 1944), p. 8.

⁸³Harry A. Millis and Royal E. Montgomery, Organized Labor (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1945), p. 71.

⁸⁴Faulkner and Starr, Labor in America, p. 8.

The AFL, unlike the Knights of Labor, adhered to craft autonomy. Each craft remained autonomous in disciplining its members and in collective bargaining with employees. It is a decentralized and complete organization along craft lines among the entire body of wage earners. It believes that the ends of function of unionism could best be furthered by having a union for each craft, acting independently in its relations with employers, but cooperating with other craft unions in matters of more general concern.⁸⁵

Third, the savage attack of the capitalist class upon the Order was another reason for its downfall. The participation of the great mass of the unskilled of the Knights of Labor in the struggles demonstrated to the capitalists of America as never before that the Order was their most dangerous enemy. Then the employers organized into local and national associations for the struggle. The government and courts were on their side. Nor was there any trouble in financing the assault on the Knights. One after another, blows were delivered. The lock-out, the blacklist, labor spies, discharge of union members, and iron-clad oaths not to join a labor organization were all used in the anti-union campaign. The eight-hour movement during 1886 to 1887, which was handled by the Knights, failed and finally the bombing in Haymarket Square in Chicago in 1886 was used

⁸⁵Edna Bullock (compiler), Trade Unions (Minneapolis: The N. W. Wilson Company, 1913), p. 113.

⁸⁷Bimba, History of American Working Class, p. 191.

⁸⁸Foner, History of Labor Movement, p. 169.

to discredit the Knights.⁸⁶ The entire organization was made practically illegal, prosecuted, and hunted down by the capitalist class. The bourgeois press and church poisoned the minds of the masses with lies about the Order, while the latter, lacking experience and revolutionary leadership, had no means of defending its ideas and actions. Terrorized by unemployment and imprisonment, the workers began to desert their organization.⁸⁷

Fourth, the treachery of the leaders of the Knights of Labor contributed to its downfall. Because of its highly centralized, supreme authority which rested in the General Assembly and which elected the General Executive Board and the Grand Master Workman which in turn possessed considerable control over lower levels, the Knights of Labor was practically a one-man organization.⁸⁸ So the growth or decline of the organization was in the hands of the leaders.

The leaders of the Knights of Labor later became corrupt and lost contact with the fundamental problems of the workers. They were more concerned with winning respectability and of earning applause from the employers and their allies than in gaining basic improvement for the workers. The leaders stood against strikes. So there were

⁸⁶Richard A. Lester, Economics of Labor (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1941), p. 549.

⁸⁷Bimba, History of American Working Class, p. 191.

⁸⁸Foner, History of Labor Movement, p. 169.

no strikes, struggles, or uprisings in which the members of the Knights participated where they were not compelled to face opposition from these leaders. The leadership was clearly under the influence of the petty bourgeois. They considered that strikes were to be avoided at all costs and that if they did take place in spite of all attempts to avoid them, they must be ended as soon as possible. Their policy was a policy of class collaboration.

The rise of the Knights of Labor was a period of the greatest militancy in the ranks of the workers. There was a crusading spirit of the working class. The unity of all workers, Negro and white, men and women, native-born and foreign-born, against their common exploiters, fired the imagination, aroused the initiative, and inspired the great masses to accomplish remarkable deeds. The army of labor was surging forward. It was winning important victories. Its spirit and morale were high. But the leadership of the Order destroyed this unity and this militant morale. The enemy the workers were asked to fight was no longer their exploiters but the militant elements who had made such a vital contribution to the growth of the organization. The radicals in the labor movement and not the employers were made the enemy. More attention was paid to destroying the trade unions than to completing the great task of the organization of the unorganized.

⁸⁹Foner, *History of Labor Movement*, pp. 169-170.

⁹⁰Faulkner and Starr, *Labor in America*, pp. 100-101.

In such an atmosphere it is not surprising that the crusading spirit that had accomplished the rise of the Knights disappeared. It was too much to expect workers to become excited over the prospect of explaining the radical elements who they knew were self-sacrificing, militant fighters, and to shout with joy over the prospect of fighting other unions. Besides, the leaders of the Order reduced the organization to one that served the employers and their allies who earned the scorn of the rank and file. The members had become tired of paying dues to an organization which did nothing to help them in their struggle. Those who were not driven out dropped out of an organization which had given such great promise, but whose destinies were controlled by men who had no interest in and no plans for realizing the promise.⁸⁹ Fifth, the competition of the American Federation of Labor was based upon the policy of federating national craft unions. It offered opposition to the Knights and provided another organization with which craft unions might affiliate and it seemed to meet the needs of skilled labor in America. A number of national craft unions had joined the Knights of Labor as "trade districts" but their particular interests often came in conflict with the general policies of the Order. In the end, they withdrew to find more congenial opportunities in the new federation.⁹⁰

⁸⁹Foner, History of Labor Movement, pp. 169-170.

⁹⁰Faulkner and Starr, Labor in America, pp. 100-101.

Sixth, the conflict within the Knights of Labor was a major contribution to its downfall. Within the Knights there existed a powerful minority of trade unions in the form of trade locals, district locals, and national assemblies. This element, which because of ideological differences later disaffiliated from the parent body and established themselves as independent trade unions, attempted in the 1880's to transform the Order into a collective bargaining rather than a reform body. In so doing, the unionists within the Knights precipitated an internal struggle for control of the organization. The conflict first became evident at the initial meeting of the General Assembly in 1878 in the discussion concerning a proposed resistance or strike fund. The trade opponents hoped that such a fund would be used in support of collective bargaining activities while the reformers advocated that it be applied toward cooperative undertakings.⁹¹

Also, there was a large conflict about political action between the leadership of the Knights on one side and the rank and file on the other. Powderly was deeply interested in political activity. He took part in the Greenback Labor movement and was elected mayor of Scranton in 1878, 1882, and 1884 on third party tickets. At other times he favored pressure politics, supporting Democrats

⁹¹Grob, "The Knights of Labor," pp. 60-61. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1939), pp. 146-147.

⁹²Millis and Montgomery, *Organized Labor*, p. 70.

and Republicans whom he judged favorable to labor's aims. Since other leaders approved such activity and the platform of the Knights was one which could only be accomplished by legislative action, constant efforts were made to commit the Order to a political venture. All such efforts failed because the membership was suspicious of the political aims of many of its leaders who seemed bent on getting labor behind such panaceas as Greenbackism, socialism, or land reform. The other quarrel within the Order arose over the value of strike action and trade unionism. Powderly's ultimate objective for labor was the organization of producer's cooperatives. He was not a wage conscious man and was against strikes. He urged workmen to use their funds for the establishment of producers' cooperatives. But organizers and the rank and file were impatient with such exhortation; they preferred to use strikes and boycotts to achieve higher wages.⁹² These facts all helped the decline of the Knights of Labor.

Seventh, the failure of the cooperative efforts was another cause contributing to the rapid decline in membership and influence of the Knights.⁹³ The Knights sought to establish a cooperative society based upon a large number of small producers. The leaders of the Knights believed that the cooperative was the best means of abolishing the

⁹²Joseph G. Rayback, A History of American Labor (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1959), pp. 146-147.

⁹³Millis and Montgomery, Organized Labor, p. 70.

wage system. During the first half of the 1880's, therefore, a large part of the Knights' energies were channeled into cooperative activities. The General Assembly established a Cooperative Association in 1882.⁹⁴ The Knights adopted numerous laws and resolutions for the cooperative programs. The Knights' cooperatives played a significant role between 1880 and 1887, but in 1887 the cooperative spirit was moribund. The ideal of the abolition of the wage system, through cooperatives within the Knights, held little appeal for the mass of workers. The fact was that sufficient capital could not be raised.⁹⁵

Eighth, activity in political affairs was the result of experience and there was an abundance of precedent in favor of political action. It did not bring strength to the Order.⁹⁶ The Knights of Labor, though it grew up in the depressed seventies and achieved national organization just before business recovery, was not a political organization, but was more nearly a pure and simple labor society than any of its predecessors. But its platform contained demands which could be gained by political action. The early leaders of the Knights were politically minded. An attempt was made at the 1880 General Assembly to push the Order into politics

⁹⁴Grob, "The Knights of Labor," p. 44.

⁹⁵Rayback, A History of American Labor, p. 174.

⁹⁶Douglas, Hitchcock, and Atkins, Worker in Modern Economic Society, p. 546.

by giving its official support in the fall elections "to that political party whose platform more generally embraces the fundamental principles of this Order." But it failed. The failure at this time discredited politics and the Order remained comparatively free from suggestions of political action until 1881 when it was deemed expedient to pass a resolution that political action was necessary to accomplish the objects of the Order.⁹⁷

The lack of a clear economic as well as political program hindered the work of the Order at every step. One of its fundamental aims was to improve the condition of the member morally, socially, and financially, but when the members attempted to better their conditions through struggle, the leaders tried to hold them back and told them to be at peace with their enemies. The constitution approved and wholeheartedly supported the cooperative movement, but experience proved that cooperatives could not improve the condition of the great mass of membership.⁹⁸ The Knights again could not explain the meaning of its main objective, "education." The meaning of this word differed according to different leaders. The basic policies of the Knights of Labor remained somewhat vaguely idealistic and humanitarian and they sometimes appeared to be highly

⁹⁷Foner, Labor Movement in U.S., pp. 356-357.

⁹⁸Cohen, Labor in the United States, p. 189.

¹⁰²Lois Thompson, Labor Problems and the American Scene (New York: Harper Bros., 1938), p. 233.

contradictory.

The decline of the Noble Order of the Knights of Labor from the position of labor leadership in 1886 to a state of futility in the mid-nineties did not mean that the organization had been a failure. Its accomplishments during the short period of domination gave hope for a better economic picture among the semi-skilled and unskilled workers.⁹⁹ The Knights of Labor created a solidarity among the workers that had been but dimly felt before their advent, and they offered a challenge to the power of industry that revealed as never before the inherent strength of organization.¹⁰⁰ For the first time in the history of American labor, there was widespread Negro-white unity and both Negro and white members of the Order acted together for common purposes. The organization of the Knights did this much in the South. In many industries where the Knights exercised influence, Negro and white workers engaged in strikes together.¹⁰¹ Meanwhile, while most of the unions organized Negroes into separate branches, the Knights attempted in the 1880's to include Negro membership through their local assemblies.¹⁰² The Knights of Labor did much successful organization work in their time. After the panic of 1873, it

⁹⁹Rayback, History of American Labor, p. 125.

¹⁰⁰Dulles, Labor in America, p. 148.

¹⁰¹Foner, History of the Labor Movement, p. 170.

¹⁰²Lois MacDonald, Labor Problems and the American Scene (New York: Harper Bros., 1938), p. 258.

helped to reorganize or revive old local unions that had been abandoned by their own national trade unions. It also helped to reorganize old national unions too weak to do the work alone. It helped tremendously to keep alive the labor movement and to provide wage earners with an opportunity to work for better conditions. Many weak unions such as the barbers, horse railway men, miners, trunk makers, and harness makers had been reorganized by the Knights and put on their feet. The United Brewery Workers, established in 1884, was among the strongest units in the Order. In 1893, the United Hebrew Trades of New York joined. So effective had been the work of the Knights that many of their unions, including some industrial unions and some unions of semi-skilled workers, were taken into the American Federation of Labor. The influence and prestige of the Knights brought, perhaps for the first time, a realization on a national scale of the significance of the labor problem. In 1883, a standing committee of Labor was established in the House of Representatives and in the following year, a Bureau of Labor was founded to gather expert information.¹⁰³ The Knights also exercised influence upon legislation. They were successful lobbyists and were mainly responsible for the first restrictive immigration law--the Anti-Contract labor law of February 2, 1885--and for a considerable body of state labor

¹⁰³Foner, The Labor Movement in U.S., p. 345. (New York: Harper Brothers, 1937, p. 345.)

legislation.¹⁰⁴ The Knights of Labor was the first national labor organization in the United States to be active for more than a year or two and its influence extended beyond the immediate membership and beyond the years of its active national existence. Its chief contribution was education. The workers learned the strengths and weaknesses of the big-union type of organization, and the general public, as never before, was made conscious of the bitter discontent which existed among large sections of the industrial wage earners.¹⁰⁵

ed to rely on education and propaganda against the banking power, not against the employers. Believing that the economic system was not operating for the welfare of the people, they wanted to make the necessary corrections by law, so that profitable self-employment in business would be available to all those who sought it. Like many humanitarian reformers that had preceded them in the century, their ultimate ideal lay in a cooperative society. Their contribution to advancing this idea was in developing the solidarity of working people by organizing them into one big union and educating them to the need for economic and political reforms. Since trade assemblies were allowed to belong, it could not be regarded as an organization which advocated an industrial type of labor formation. The Knights

¹⁰⁴Beard, The American Labor Movement, pp. 123-124.

¹⁰⁵Florence Peterson, Survey of Labor Economics (New York: Harper Brothers, 1951), p. 571.

for a long campaign.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The Knights of Labor which formed in 1869 was not a proletarian or revolutionary organization in the maximum sense of those words. Its national leaders neither preached the doctrines of class struggle nor believed in the use of the strike as a weapon to gain their objectives. Rather, they intended to rely on education and propaganda against the banking power, not against the employers. Believing that the economic system was not operating for the welfare of the people, they wanted to make the necessary corrections by law, so that profitable self-employment in business would be available to all those who sought it. Like many humanitarian reformers that had preceded them in the century, their ultimate ideal lay in a cooperative society. Their contribution to advancing this idea was in developing the solidarity of working people by organizing them into one big union and educating them to the need for economic and political reforms. Since trade assemblies were allowed to belong, it could not be regarded as an organization which advocated an industrial type of labor formation. The Knights of Labor could best be regarded as a producers' and not specifically as a wage earners' organization, because it had no program around which workers in industry could rally for a long campaign.

Because it militated against organization along craft lines and the establishment of autonomous trade units, a conflict began between the Knights of Labor and other trade unions. Its struggle was one between groups within the working class, in which the small but more skilled group fought for independence from the larger but weaker group of the unskilled and semi-skilled. The skilled men stood for the right to use their advantage of skill and efficient organization in order to wrest the maximum amount of concession for themselves. The Knights of Labor endeavored to annex the skilled men in order that the advantages from their exceptional fighting strength might lift up the unskilled and semi-skilled.

From the viewpoint of the struggle between principles, this was indeed a clash between the principle of solidarity of labor and that of trade separatism, between autonomous trade unionism and industrial labor, between hard-headed business unionism and idealistic radicalism. Each reflected only the special interests of a certain portion of the working class. When the Knights of Labor insisted on including the trade unions in their organization, the trade unions gathered together, established their own Federation which we now know under the name, "American Federation of Labor," to represent them. As the conflict continued, the Knights of Labor declined but the American Federation of Labor still continued to grow.

The reason for the Knights of Labor's decline lay in the fact that the time was not ripe for a departure from craft autonomy. Mistaken ideas assumed that there was no fundamental disharmony of viewpoint and interest between wage-workers and employers and that the viewpoint and interest of all wage workers were identical, which is not true under the capitalistic wage system and the competition between the skilled and unskilled laborers. The organization was composed of persons in unrelated trades and occupations, which meant that a common interest so necessary for trade unionism was frequently lacking. The Knights could not fulfill any function. The leadership stood against strikes; it was corrupted and under the influence of the employers. Meanwhile, employers organized many groups and were determined to wipe out the labor organization by using various tactics and by supporting the government and the courts. The conflict was between the rank and file and the leadership of the Order. These causes contributed to the decline of the Knights of Labor. Opposite to the Knights, the American Federation of Labor was that of a loose federation of national and international unions. It organized on the principle of craft autonomy with loose federation, for the administration of intercraft union affairs in the belief that the ends or functions of unionism could best be furthered by having a union for each craft acting independently in its relations with employers.

Perlman believed the AFL succeeded in adjusting its organization and policies to the American environment, capitalizing on the scarcity consciousness of the workers, and approving the programs of the intellectuals. The proof of the success of the AFL, to Perlman, rested in the stability of its membership. The fact that it could withstand a series of depressions indicated that it had arrived at a new degree of maturity for American labor movements.

The AFL succeeded

. . . first, because it recognized the virtually unalterable conservatism of the American community as regards private property and private initiative in economic life . . . secondly, because it grasped the definite limitations of the political instrument under the American Constitution and under American conditions of political life.¹⁰⁶

The AFL was under no delusion as to the true psychology of the workingman in general and of the American workingman in particular.

The labor movement could be a potent attack on the institution of private property. Through strikes, boycotts, and rules of work, and through securing governmental restrictions on employers, unions might subvert the absolute rights of private property. In America, unions cannot "afford to arouse the fears of the great middle class for the safety of private property as a basic institution."¹⁰⁷ The AFL satisfied itself with changing the rights of

¹⁰⁶Butler, Labor Economics, pp. 140-141.

¹⁰⁷Ibid.

private property moderately, and never sought to eliminate it as a basic institution in America. Immediate economic

The union attack on private property was never an attack on the American political system. The AFL knew the difficulty of capturing the political instrument for the exclusive benefit of labor. First of all, it is divided into fifty-one separate parts--the federal government and the separate state governments--and thus success in one part does not necessarily mean success in all parts. Second, each of these governments is balanced between three of the competing powers, the legislative, the executive, and the judiciary. This complicates the ability to capture these governments for its own purposes. Third, the nature of the American two-party system frustrates the possible success in forming a third party. Each of the two dominant parties seems capable of adjusting to labor's demands whenever these demands are backed by substantial voting power. of Labor

failed At first, the great difficulty of keeping workers organized arose from the lack of class cohesiveness among American members of the working class, since they did not consider themselves permanent members. They did not think and act as class-conscious workers. Therefore, American workers did not automatically join unions; neither were they willing to make personal sacrifices to maintain operation of the unions on a permanent basis. The AFL adjusted its goals and tactics to this basic factor and

capitalized on the self-interests of skilled workers, concentrating its attention on their immediate economic concerns.

Without class consciousness to hold American unions together, The AFL unions had to resort to overt means to prevent uprisings within their ranks. They adopted the tactics of fighting ruthlessly against dual unionism and "outlaw" strikes. Strikes had to be approved by the regular procedure and if they were in violation of the collective bargaining contract they were suppressed by officers of the union, even by the national officers themselves. When a new organization or discontented faction attempted to raid the jurisdiction of an established AFL union, it was fought with all the power the AFL could command.¹⁰⁸

Thus, through a difference in goals and through knowing how to fit unionism into the particular American situation, the AFL succeeded where the Knights of Labor failed.

¹⁰⁸Ibid.

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