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RADICAL HISTORY REVIEW

Labor and Community Militance in Rhode Island

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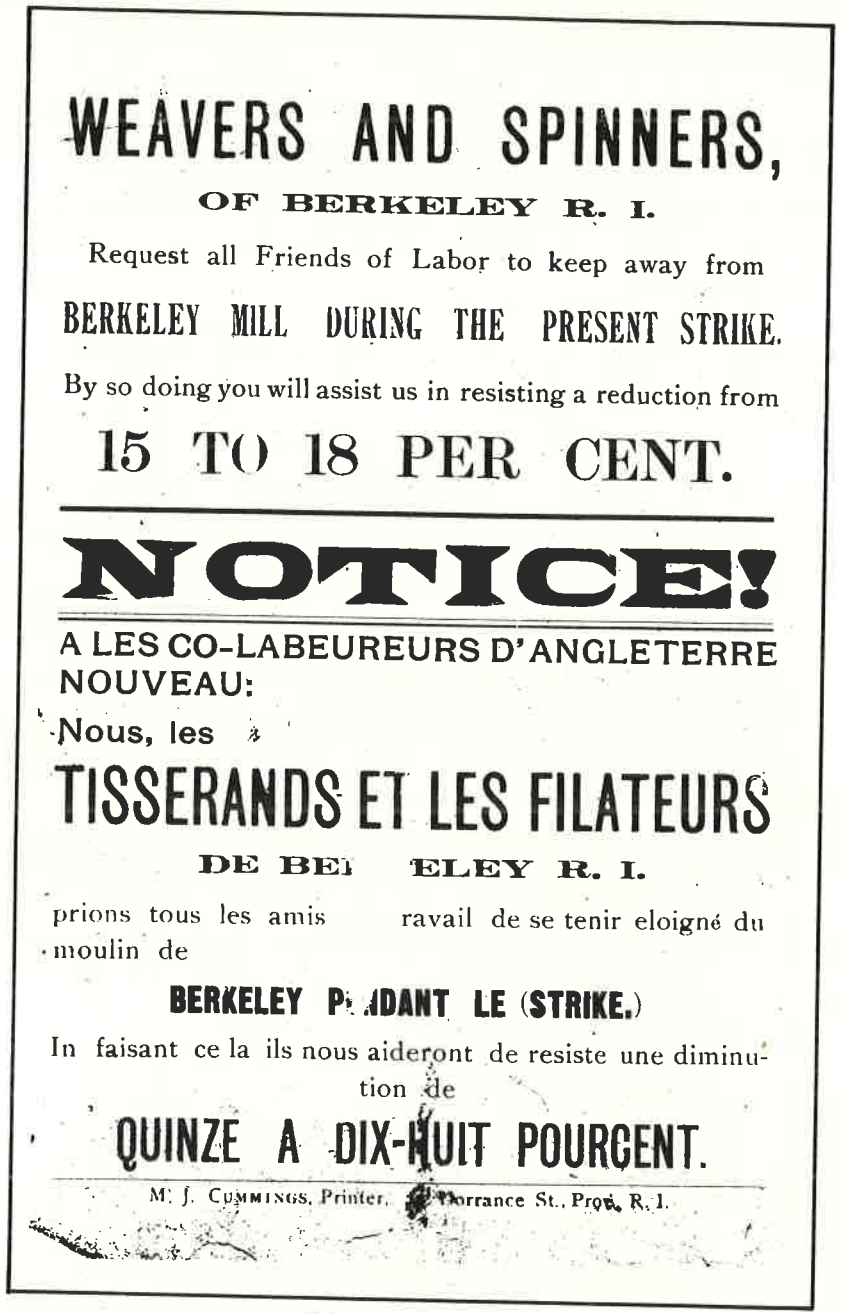

WEAVERS AND SPINNERS,

OF BERKELEY R. I.

Request all Friends of Labor to keep away from

BERKELEY MILL DURING THE PRESENT STRIKE.

By so doing you will assist us in resisting a reduction from

15 TO 18 PER CENT.

NOTICE!

A LES CO-LABEUREURS D'ANGLETERRE NOUVEAU:

Nous, les

TISSERANDS ET LES FILATEURS

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prions tous les amis ravail de se tenir eloigné du moulin de

BERKELEY P ADANT LE (STRIKE.)

In faisant ce la ils nous aideront de resiste une diminution de

QUINZE A DIX-HUIT POURCENT.

M. J. Cummings, Printer, Torrance St., Prov., R. I.

Paul Buhle

Q: What did thy masters promise for thee?

A: They did promise and vow many things in my name: First:--That I should renounce the comforts of life through working for less wages than the weavers in other towns, and starve my wife and hunger my children for the same cause. Second:--That I must not in any way try to better my condition, but be content to work at any price which they think proper to give; neither must I join the Knights of Labor as that is contrary to their by-laws. Third:--That I must bear patiently the insults of all that are put in authority over me, and a host of other things too numerous to mention.

Q: Dost thou not believe that thou art bound to do as they have promised for thee?

A: No, verily; for I have come to the determination to free myself, and to strive to get as much for my work as the weavers in other places for the same kind and quality, and that is the Knights of Labor's duty.

Q: Rehearse the articles of thy belief.

A: I believe in the Golden Rule--do unto others as you would have them do unto you--and in Honesty, his only son, who was conceived by our Common Right, born of the Virgin Truth, suffered under Cotton Treason, was crucified, dead, and buried in Rhode Island, for many years, but is now risen again, and sitteth on the right hand of Justice and Liberty.

Q: What dost thou chiefly learn from these articles of thy belief?

A: I learn to believe that the time has now arrived when I must make a firm stand for a fair share of the profits of my industry, which is nothing less than the Union List, have nine hours' work, seven hours' play, eight hours' sleep, and fair wages every day.

"Labor's Catechism," The People (Providence), Dec. 17, 1887

The Knights of Labor remain very largely a mystery for American historians. A movement which shot across the horizon like a meteor and fell quickly into insignificance had attracted more than a half-million workers, appealed to working people across the divisions of sex, race and ethnicity, legitimated opposition to the great industrialists and encouraged the formation of numerous cooperatives to replace the monopolies. Seemingly out of nowhere, labor had summoned a democratic revolution--and failed.

What factors enabled the Knights of Labor to reach so far at one moment, and fade away in the next? The rise of the Knights must first be seen as the expression of a profound social upsurge which found its institutional home in the labor movement but which reached far beyond the priorities and limits of trade unions themselves. This is evident in the formation of cooperatives, nurseries, and neighborhood clubs; and in the political expression which the Knights gave to labor conflict. The sharpened class divisions of the Gilded Age, the result of the growing monopolization of wealth and political power and the vastly increased scale of American industrial life, prompted a vigorous contest over the American heritage. Refusing to accept capitalist domination, workingmen and workingwomen, with a distinct vision of the proper development of democratic society, insisted that the true producers of wealth had a natural right to its blessings, that production should be administered cooperatively, that the social order could be reorganized from within, and that democratic means would suffice to sweep the usurpers from the seats of power. With such a political vision, the Knights mobilized hundreds of labor candidates, gaining office in numerous cities, towns, and state legislatures. Intent on making local government more responsive to workers and the general citizenry, Knights in office did little to aggravate class tensions. Despite their caution and propriety, the measure of political control which they had won threatened the two-party system, threatened the power of capitalists to define the limits of acceptable politics, and prompted vigorous counterattack.(1)

While the politicians attacked at one level, using gerrymanders, racial invective, and crude ethnic politics, the major industrialists, the federal government, and the press combined to break strikes, legitimate "blacklisting," and propagate "red scares." With the failure of labor leadership in the face of the new and aggressive employer associations, the political and industrial pressures proved to be more than the fledgling movement could withstand. Too trusting in the power

of the electoral process to correct industrial exploitation, naive about the capacity of small-scale cooperatives to supersede the giant corporations, unable to mobilize the political potential of the poor, the Knights were beaten. Universal male suffrage had no automatic economic counterpart. No political system by itself could render equal the power of a railroad baron and a poor immigrant worker. By their credulous faith in the democratic process, the Knights had tested its limits.(2)

Labor's revolt in the 1880s effected important industrial and political changes. Industrial autocracy had been permanently modified by the increasing enforcement of child labor laws, by shorter hours for a minority of workers, by the memory of what labor under duress might do. The Democrats and Republicans searched more extensively for the workingman's support, offering ethnic groups in particular a share of political power in return for maintaining order. But the promise of some fuller emancipation, a democratic revolution from the hometown city hall up through the nation's capitol, gradually faded from view. The "New Immigrants" arriving from eastern and southern Europe, Blacks in their trek to the northern cities, found political representation only through the sufferance of a New Deal Democratic party thoroughly compromised by old-line political machines and allied with elements of the rich. Labor's own political voice, echoed through the agrarian People's party in the 1890s, a weak Socialist party in the 1910s, still later the Democrats' PAC and COPE, never again attained the simple clarity, directness and volume of the labor party movement in the 1880s. If labor found its greatest advances through union movements, and its greatest satisfaction in the "apolitical" social life of blue-collar communities, the cause might be laid in no small part to the defeat of the 1880s.

Rhode Island offers a unique field to understand the growth and decline of the Knights, and to fathom the limits of politics. All foreign-born male workers could not vote without first meeting a property qualification. Largely disenfranchised, the state's predominantly English and Irish workers nevertheless utilized quasi-political agitation to set forth their demands. In a matter of months, the Knights became the organizational center of an encompassing cultural, social, and political movement. Here, the democratic faith nurtured by the Knights' leaders proved the movement's Achilles'heel. While they feared to use the potential might their organization possessed, they could not transform the political character of the state through the votes of the voteless. Because the industrial crisis corresponded to a political crisis in the state,

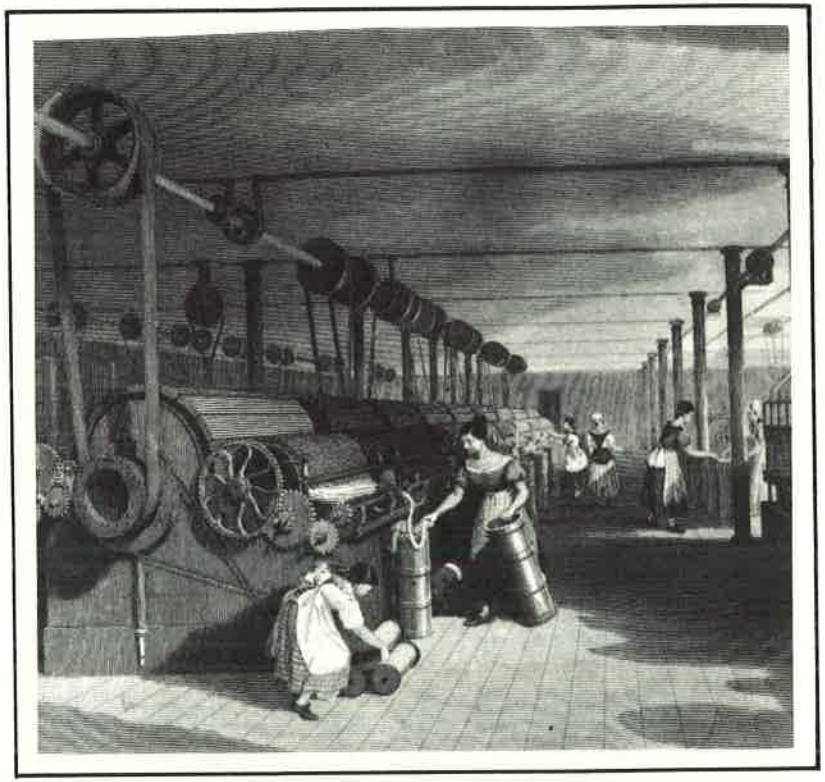
the inextricability of the two proved more obvious than elsewhere, the results more definitive.

The rise of the Rhode Island Knights is best seen against the economic and social backdrop of the post-Civil War era. From 1865 to 1885, the state reached its stride as a major producer of textiles. Overwhelmingly dominated by a textile industry, concentrating in fewer and fewer hands, Rhode Island had been at the center of cotton production since the 1790s and rapidly expanded into wool and worsted in the 1860s. By the mid-1880s, over $23 million was invested in Rhode Island cotton mills, nearly $9 million in wool and worsted, sustaining a work force of 36,000 men, women, and children stretching from the metropolitan sites of Providence and Pawtucket to the bucolic mill towns of Manville, Quidneck, and Arctic.(3)

With the state's industrial expansion, Rhode Island elites displayed the industrial and political self-confidence characteristic of the Gilded Age. Old family fortunes grew through shrewd investment as a majority of Rhode Island industrialists reaped the benefits of their well-to-do origins. In a few cases, men of middling origins, like Benjamin B. Knight and Hezikiah Conant, rose to financial power. Industrially forward-looking and "progressive," the state's mill owners encouraged the technological innovations that promised continuing success, and with the superb arrogance of wealth erected the largest cotton mills of their time in Manville and Lonsdale. Industrial might was easily translated into political power. "In no other state," writes a student of the field, "was such a small proportion of the population in command." This domination, reinforced by the utter defeat of democratic forces in the Dorr War, actually gained new life with the development of a modern party system. The Democratic Party, crushed by Republicans during the Civil War, remained virtually impotent, divided between Yankees and mostly voteless Irish. Republicans played upon this situation to the fullest. They supported the tariff needed so badly by the crystallizing elite, and at the state level manipulated liquor dealerships to control votes. By the 1870s, two political giants emerged. Nelson Aldrich, later Republican champion in the Senate, and Charles "Boss" Brayton, state political magician, led their party in thwarting reform challenges for nearly two generations.(4)

The working people of Rhode Island, largely foreign-born, uneducated, and unskilled, had little opportunity to participate in its industrial or political rule. By the end of the 1870s, Rhode Islanders of foreign stock

outnumbered the native-born, and by the mid-1880s formed well over sixty percent of the state's population, with some 40,000 Irish, 20,000 British and 20,000 French-Canadians actually born abroad. Extraordinarily Catholic for the times--nearly double the national average of six percent--the state had a high rate of illiteracy, about fifteen percent among Irish, nearly forty percent among French Canadians. The immigrant groups together monopolized the largely unskilled industrial positions, from weavers to burlars, back boys to piecers. Irish and French-Canadian children, some as young as seven or eight, also supplied the bulk of the state's child labor. The work of their older sisters and mothers gave Rhode Island the highest percentage of female workers in the nation. Women, one-third of the state's work force and approximately forty percent of all mill operatives, were concentrated in jobs like cotton card-room operatives weavers, spoolers and



worsted burlars. The few skilled positions available, like wool-sorting, mule-spinning and loom fixing, were largely claimed by a few thousand British and Irish workers, many trained in Britain's textile industry.(5)

The textile mill, the "mother of industry," had

produced the unskilled, undifferentiated labor of twentieth-century production, and created the veritable prototype of the skill-less machine-tender. The character of textile production in the last decades of the nineteenth century tended to undercut the significance of the remaining skilled labor, while intensifying the work for all and offering low wages during booming profits. Cotton mills, where job categories had been initially established and the proportion of female employees had been highest (roughly sixty percent for the 1870s-1880s), had entered a slow transition from mule spindles tended by skilled mule spinners to ring spindles suited to unskilled (often women and children) mass workers. Wool production, losing a portion of its market to worsteds, went through a parallel process of phasing out the skilled jackspinners. Worsted production, peculiarly subject to standardization and high-speed machinery, employed the highest percentage of unskilled labor. Meanwhile, all mill industries participated in the intensified competition of the late nineteenth century. Factory overseers operating with considerable autonomy gained their reputations by "pushing" their workers, driving down piece-rates and thereby money wages to a bare standard of living made possible by the falling prices of food and clothing. The fines system, inaugurated by factory owners for the essential purpose of quality control, became in the hands of unscrupulous supervisors a means of driving the pace of work to the edge of intolerability while undercutting wages still further.(6)

The conditions of the millworker, harsh even by contemporary standards, were harder to bear because of the rarity of advancement and the sheer futility of hopes for escape. Written in the mid-1880s, the following description of Rhode Island mill life expresses well a wide-spread sense of sadness and near-desperation:

> Life in a factory where any textile industry is carried on is perhaps, with the exception of prison life, the most monotonous life a human being can live....[a weaver] has got at least six looms to tend. They are arranged in a double row and his position is between them. He passes from one to the other. He must keep his eyes on them all and be ready to "change the shuttle" when the "filling runs out." He tramps thus back and forth up and down his "alley" for five hours, with no time to sit down and rest for a moment. After dinner he resumes his position at the looms and repeats the story and this goes on day after day, week after week, for months and years, the same round of toil, with little or no change from year end to year end, realizing even by this unremitting toil only just sufficient to feed and clothe himself and his family, and however desirous he may be to save a little sum for a rainy day he finds himself unable to do so.
>
> This is the lot of the weaver. There is not a particle of the romantic in his life....(7)

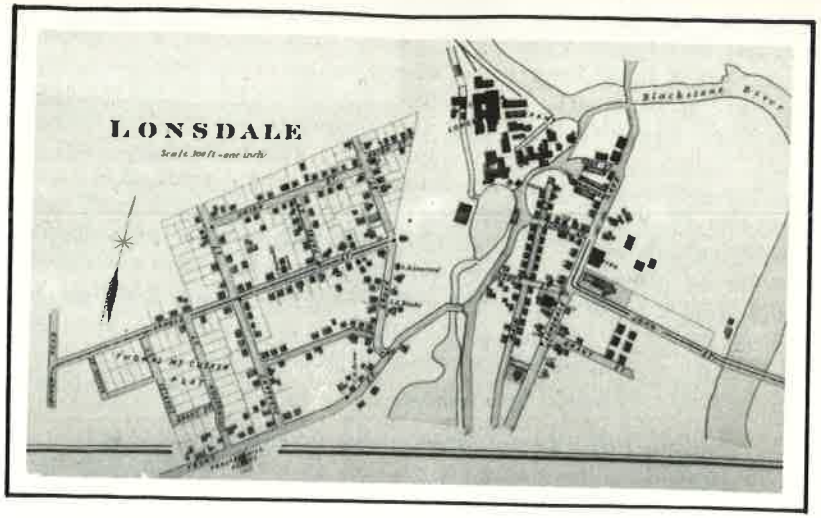
Against this tyranny, millworkers relied upon their old-world traditions and a thin strain of Yankee democratic heritage to nurture a legitimacy for resistance. Many British and Irish workers had passed through Lancashire on the way to the United States, acquiring a union heritage along with a skilled trade. Their fellow craftsmen had managed to gain scattered industrial recognition in the Old Country, and set about early to acquire similar status in Fall River, Massachusetts, the "Little Lancashire" bordering upon Rhode Island. Even English and Irish-American workers detached by generation or particular experience from this union tradition had contact with those who recalled the old ways. Politically, the resentments which had led to armed rebellion in the Dorr years had been transmuted by population shifts and the development of industrial-urban society. But the Dorrite demand of "Equal Rights" for all citizens gained new life among the immigrants. "Free-Born Englishmen" expressed surprise that America seemed less democratic in many respects than the constitutional monarchy they had departed, notably with fewer legal protections for workers. Irishmen in Rhode Island found in émigré radicalism a form for their social grievances, as the Irish Land League in such towns as Providence, Pawtucket, and Newport served as a surrogate for class conscious expression, by rallying the laborer's sense of oppressed national identity. Although weak and short-lived, a Greenback Labor Party in the mid-1870s sought to bring together these ethnic strains, combining an appeal to labor's misery with the popular slogans of contemporary agrarian radicalism--cheap land, easy credit and devalued money. The Greenbackers' lack of success pointed to the limits of political protest during the 1870s. Frozen out of politics, labor resentments focused upon factory conditions and wages. The first mass strike outbreaks in Rhode Island gained shape from the British worker's pride, the peculiar metropolitan toughness of the Irish-American and the leadership women workers exerted.(8)

Olneyville, long to be the rudder of Rhode Island labor and radicalism, was the first site of concentrated labor activity. A compact working-class section, in-

cluding nearly 5,000 inhabitants by 1875, it later became known as the "Terrible Tenth" ward of Providence largely because of its rambunctious Irish population. Textile mills had sprung up here as early as the War of 1812, but the first substantial cotton and wool operations came with a burst in the 1840s-1850s, growing to maturity in the post-Civil War period. Two mills proved crucial for labor in the 1870s-1880s. The Atlantic-Delaine, built in the late 1850s, had entered a period of great expansion which would by the late 1880s encompass more than 2,000 workers in wool, worsted and cotton warp fabrics, dyeing and finishing. The Riverside Mill, rebuilt after a fire in 1865, had become known by the early 1870s for its technological advancement in producing fine worsted goods.(9)

Booming profits and a national strike wave in the early 1870s encouraged millworkers to demand improved conditions. The national eight-hour law for government employees, the Massachusetts ten-hour law, and the long-standing British Factory Acts helped provide shape for the demands and the means taken to dramatize them. First gathering petitions reminiscent of the public appeals of the Labor Reform Association in the 1830s - 1840s, a Ten Hour Association united this tactic with direct action. A Ten Hour strike and demonstration in Providence during the first weeks of May 1873 found surging crowds of mostly young, Irish-American women striking the Riverside and other mills, jostling police and seeking to shut down the entire district. This movement spread from Olneyville to Pawtucket and Woonsocket, the walk-outs first ending in failure but the impetus continuing as a large-scale educational effort with mass parades, picnics and outings. Only with the panic of 1873, flooding the market with superfluous labor, did the movement die away.(10)

By the mid-1870s, the locus of activity shifted to the village cotton and woolen mills. Towns like Ashton, Lonsdale, Arctic and Quidnick had, by the 1870s, populations ranging from several hundred to a little over a thousand, British-American in the highest skilled sectors, but increasingly Irish and in several cases heavily French-Canadian. Diverse in their products, the mills experienced a roughly comparable growth in scale and sophistication to the urban factories in the 1870s-1880s. Churches, schools, libraries and the few other public institutions existed by virtue of the mill owners' largesse. Mill housing and "truck" wages (in groceries rather than cash), decreasingly in use by the end of the century, still remained major sources of discontent. Thus in the Blackstone Valley villages of Lonsdale and Ashton, where British workers retained



their old-world loyalties and social patterns, bitter complaints could be heard against the lack of social autonomy, so severe that laborers feared to continue the British workingman's custom of singing at night lest they lose their lodgings. The mill superintendent, similarly, came to be ruefully considered "monarch of all he surveys," the "Policeman, Judge, Jury and Almost King" whose control of life made the workman hesitate to "blow his nose" without looking over his shoulder.(11)

Wage cuts and intensification of labor turned resentment into revolt. Used to a more leisurely pace in Britain, weavers complained of bosses observing them "like two terriers watching so many rats." Their wages reduced by up to one-third in 1875-1876, banned even from collecting strike funds for their fellow workers in Fall River, Blackstone Valley workers struck in their own right, marching from site to site, reportedly inspired by the "pluck and perserverance" of female activists. Company control over food and living arrangements, police interference with demonstrations and the isolation of workers in their separate villages doomed these outbreaks, but not before a framework for solidarity had been reaffirmed, and the formation of village textile unions had been attempted.(12)

With the economic upturn at the end of the decade, village and urban operatives moved in greater numbers toward aggressive strikes for wage increases. They were aided, and sometimes led, by the International Labor Union, a Socialist organization directed from Fall River by the outstanding British-American labor figures in the nation. "Secret chapters" and open protest meetings focused operatives' demands upon shorter hours along

with better pay. Several manufacturers with what were called the "best class" of operatives actually granted the 10 1/2 hour day. And the few local unions sought to congeal a national, amalgamated organization of cotton and wool operatives. The new economic slump of 1880-1881 ended this promising burst of labor energy, but left a permanent mark on management and labor alike. For the first time, old-world labor traditions had been tested on Rhode Island soil. And millowners reportedly emerged from the strikes of the late 1870s more united, more acutely aware of the dangers that labor offensives posed.(13)

II

As the eighties opened, the economic conflict died away and the demands of the fledgling labor movement took a decisive turn toward political agitation. In the context of a major political upheaval in the Republican party, reformers hoped to upset the entire system of political privilege by creating their own coalition. Emerging leaders in the Knights looked to a wider political democracy to give labor a new, powerful role; they were sorely tempted to believe that labor's enfranchisement would, in itself, bring decisive social change.

A Congressional investigation in 1881 cited Republican officials for the disfranchisement of 10,000 to 15,000 naturalized citizens not only through formal election laws but also by millowner intimidation and obstructive practices such as closing polls early. The same year, party leader Charles Brayton was indicted for embezzlement. Several thousand Republicans resigned from the Party en masse, stimulating the alignment of reform coalitions and creating the impression that political power in the state might well shift hands dramatically.(14)

Democrats were equally in disarray as rural Yankee leadership observed with uneasiness the increase of Irish-Americans ambitious to assert themselves. In a heated gubernatorial race in 1883, the issue of equal rights gained new attention and ethnic political activists showed their muscle. But when they were defeated, the Democrats fell back into quarreling among themselves; Protestant versus Catholic, rural against urban. The issues raised from within the two-party system now might be taken up by other forces outside.(15)

A new Ten Hour League, launched by former International Labor Union leader George Gunton, seized the initiative for labor. With the help of Fall River activists including spinners' leader Robert Howard, these radicals held public meetings, delivered editorials in the Fall River Labor Standard, polled legislators and formed local clubs to ensure, in Gunton's words, that "the people of Rhode Island...come into line with the civilization of the age...that the legislature pass a law giving as much protection to women and children in the factories as they do to the ox and the horse, to the dogs, cats, birds and fishes..." From the endorsement of many state newspapers to the blessing of a former governor to the emergence of a labor champion in the state legislature, radical Democrat L. F. G. Garvin, this activity coalesced a reform movement around a ten-hour bill.(16)

Between 1883 and 1885 a battle was fought between the legislature and an increasingly powerful grassroots movement supporting the ten-hour bill. Petition drives and public hearings put pressure on the recalcitrant assembly until "the desire to get it out of the way in politics" led to passage in May of 1885.(17)

Far from eliminating the source of grievances, however, the legislators had actually lowered the legal age of child labor in 1883, and failed to provide enforcement mechanisms for any factory legislation. A skeletal group of labor leaders, developing contacts and enthusiasm through the ten-hour agitation, now moved out of the shadow to call labor to its own enforcement. The politicians had, a labor paper noted, actually "showed the workers what they might do if once they were united."(18)

The Knights of Labor appeared in Rhode Island in this quasi-political context. The national organization, founded in 1869, had by the early 1880s just begun to emerge from its past as a "secret" labor society, and take on the public responsibility of organizing workers for their economic defense. Its strategic posture remained vague, centering upon a faith in organization by the "producing classes" (workers, small merchants and farmers) to overcome the power of monopolism, and through education, cooperatives and the evocation of good will to turn back the steady movement in the United States toward a permanent class society. But the practical formation of union locals had already begun to supersede this ideological bent, and the balance hung between education and agitation.

In Olneyville, an Assembly took shape under the nom de plume of the "Industrial Association," passing word of its meetings through symbols in code on sidewalks and outside meeting halls, to ward off repres-

sion. This Assembly outstripped its initial status as a lecture club for regional notables when the Ten Hour agitation gave it purpose and direction. The same could be said for other, newer Knights' outposts in the state. Prospect Assembly, a weak Pawtucket Spinners' local, drew in militant cigarmakers when it "took up the gauntlet which the legislature had thrown down when it refused to pass the ten-hour bill," inaugurating large public meetings shortly before the bill's final passage. Several other Knights locals which would play central strategic roles had similar origins, especially where the more skilled English and Irish-English workers had a background in labor activities.(19)

One might contrast these educational-political origins to the development of a state craft union movement, which took shape in the same period. Considering the industrial density and English labor traditions, the skilled unions remained small and poorly organized, discouraged by an anti-labor political atmosphere and the lack of labor formations in the all-powerful textile industry. While a handful of craft unions could trace their origins back to the late 1860s, most organized in the late seventies or early eighties. The case of the bricklayers and masons can be considered indicative. Meeting secretly in the homes of members during 1879, they organized clandestinely until in 1880 they could collectively refuse to enter agreements with contractors for any amount less than $1.25 per day. By the mid-1880s, they were enjoying the princely sum, by existing standards, of $3 per day. Carpenters, painters, and plumbers among others sought to do likewise, with varying degrees of success, mostly in Providence, Pawtucket and Newport. By 1884, the craft groups formed a Rhode Island Central Labor Union.(20)

Such a contrast illuminates the distinction between the power of craftsmen to exert some measure of control over their labor market, their consequent concentration upon the more "practical" aspects of trade unionism, and the concern of weaker mill workers for state intervention. The differences appeared less severe at the time, because the Knights leaders and their craft equivalents shared so much in personal background and social perspective. Together, they articulated a theme of labor harmony crucial to the Knights' short-lived success.

Both types were predominantly English or Irish-English, close to craft traditions and long attached to political reform. Fiercely idealistic, imbued with the hopes for labor's solidarity, they shared the belief that "The workmen of the country are not in favor of bloody revolution, but they do believe that the existing order

is not the best possible one."(21) Their task lay in providing leadership for the improvement of conditions, the preparation of ordinary workers to help create a constructive alternative. The Knights and RICLU leaders likewise shared the same allies in the community, including Lucius Garvin, a firebrand Democrat who supported labor's cause in the legislature, liberal Unitarian and Congregational ministers, and some sympathetic Catholic priests. Fearful of industrial violence, sometimes warning against class-consciousness as a divisive evil, these religious leaders nevertheless helped popularize the social effects of poverty and labor's right to industrial representation. Finally Socialists, usually German-Americans, threw themselves into support for industrial unionism as early as the late 1870s and continued to exert an influence beyond their numbers in the RICLU and the Knights.(22)

All these elements, in varying degrees, found their public voice in the *People*, the Knights' official newspaper which began appearing in late 1885. Dedicated to the "presentation of the difficulties, dangers and privations with which all classes of workers have to contend," the paper disdained any narrow political partisanship as limiting its responsibility to speak for the coming *civilization*.(23) As one of its editorialists wrote in early 1886, this meant the heralding of ordinary citizens come to the day of democratic reckoning. "We are now rightly spoken of as the 'masses,' the 'working masses,' meaning separate, disunited disorganized units, but I believe the time to be not too far distant when we shall be 'mass,' the solid 'mass,' the unified and organized community."(24) Then society would break free from the shackles of privilege, and industrial life move from competition toward cooperation. How could this be accomplished? The *People* printed frequent descriptions of cooperative experiments elsewhere, urging the formation of local enterprises. At the same time, the paper maintained that the Knights, with the balance of the vote between the two major parties, might in Rhode Island effect such immediate reforms as they deemed necessary. How to leap beyond the present system entirely, to destroy the roots of political privilege or supersede the mighty monopolies, the *People* ventured not to speculate. Its forte lay rather in moral exhortation alongside reportage of industrial and social conditions, where it posed polemics about company stores, blacklistings, long hours and child labor, pestilential sewage facilities and miserable company lodgings, against the conservative papers' rhapsodizing description of working people's lives. Whether the ultimate answer or not, self-organization of labor through the Knights and

craft unions seemed the great feasible step towards a better world.(25)

The Knights distinguished themselves, outstripping the smaller but more stable RICLU, in the late months of 1885 and early months of 1886. Neither press nor pulpit, labor leader nor Socialist had predicted the suddenness of the Knights' advance. In part, the movement's sudden leap from a few hundred members to nearly 12,000 by the middle of 1886 may be attributed to the slight upturn in economic conditions after a half-decade of recession, offering workers the opportunity to demand long-delayed improvements. In part, laborers flocked to the Knights in hopes of recovering wage reductions they had suffered since the early eighties and especially in the months following the statutory reduction of the workday. And in part, the national role of the Knights, particularly in the western railroad strikes which tied up the nation's most monopolized, powerful and hated corporations, served to buoy up hopes for the emancipation of all labor. Whatever these reasons, thousands of Rhode Islanders with no background in labor organization had made so bold as to risk their livelihood for it. That step taken, they could not easily retreat. Founded by a band of idealists as a quasi-political, cooperation-minded organization, the Knights rapidly became the vehicle for something more.(26)

The story of the Wanskuck Assembly, formed in the industrial suburb of Providence close to one of the state's largest worsted mills, suggests a kind of bridge from one type of organization to another. Producing high-grade worsted fabrics, the Wanskuck Mills drew a work force of about 1600, English, Irish and German, with a majority of women. A Providence Journal reporter remarked flatteringly that the bulk of the operatives seemed "steady going, provident people," a "particularly orderly and law-abiding class of citizens," sober and thrifty, working for the most part in family groups of three to four for a combined income of $17 - $22 per week.(27) The first years of the Knights' efforts to organize seemingly confirmed the nature of the community. In 1883, a group of ten workmen began to meet in the hall of the Young Men's Literary Association "to devise some means of improving their condition both socially and financially." Creating the Enterprise Assembly, they soon experienced difficulty drawing enough members for a quorum. By January 1885, a visit from Grand Master O'Keefe found the branch in a virtually moribund state. Spurred by the agitation around the ten-hour bill, club membership gained in the spring. Toward the end of the year, encouraged by their Olney-

ville neighbors, the operatives tested their strength by intervening into a dispute over quality control and fines. As the People explained, Wanskuck employees were in fact bitter over the provision of "coarse threads," due to management's short-cutting the learning process of wool sorting. In England, the craft demanded years of apprenticeship; in Rhode Island, superintendents or overseers speeded the process to a year, then fined the operatives for poor quality products. Because of the Knights' influence, the company agreed to compromise on "fair" fines. Suddenly, the Assembly swelled to more members than any hall in the area could hold. Particular sectors of the plant, such as the female inspectors known as burlars, gained an especial reputation for resisting encroachments on their autonomy. The Assembly moved toward administering the shop-floor life as a whole, by establishing the pace, cooperation between workers, and evaluation of the final product. Supervisors complained that they now lacked the authority only the union could provide in disciplining the work force. Within limits, the Wanskuck Knights had achieved "workers' control." What happened here over a period of months strongly resembles David Montgomery's description of craft workers reasserting their prerogative to conduct the work processes in their own way--except that Wanskuck workers were mostly female, hardly "skilled" by any existing craft definitions, and evidently united across lines of job classifications. The Knights had essentially provided an ideology and means for carrying out workers' inclinations, not so much to strike (for no major flare-up occurred at Wanskuck) as to redress management's presumed prerogatives.(28)

Similar conclusions could be drawn from the few other cases well documented. In Lonsdale and nearby Ashton, where the maintenance of relatively high wages and fine quality work gave the mostly English millhands an enviable reputation, the Knights offered an institutional framework for continuing the challenges of the 1870s. According to the Providence Journal, life had greatly improved in the recent past: milk was delivered and sewage facilities had been added to the usual company-supplied religious and educational institutions. Indeed, to the observer sympathetic to business, these rural factory villages seemed to enjoy the best of both city and country. The critics complained that profits had actually soared while living conditions deteriorated: tenements remained dilapidated, the sewage system so archaic in most places that privies were emptied into the public square by wagon, "malarial privileges" provided in the summer months at "no additional sum...for rent," while health inspectors paid off by the textile

companies turned a blind eye to real conditions.[29] Public health changes would come slowly. But intensified industrial exploitation now met open resistance. Where management played the old trick of stretching out the hours by readjusting the clocks, operatives pledged in 1886 to begin and end work at the approach of the proper time according to the electric clock in the plant. Supervisors who sought to "push" female weavers demanded that one clean her four looms in a half hour, fired her upon refusal, and took her back (as well as accepting a more reasonable schedule) when all the weave-room help threatened a walkout. If operatives could not establish standards, they could maintain existing ones against violation. As a Lonsdale correspondent proudly reported a victory over one particularly troublesome supervisor, "his days of barking like a dog at the help are gone."[30]

Olneyville workers had perhaps the best institutionalized patterns of resistance. The area's population had increased sixty percent since 1880 alone, and along with Pawtucket it shared the dubious distinction of having the lowest urban housing vacancy rates in the state. Decreasingly foreign-born, Olneyville had a high proportion of second-generation English, and especially Irish. Despite the expense and difficulties of city life, moving there was a choice of those who (in the words of a weaver testifying at a public hearing) did not "care to live in a country place," away from the urban bustle and social freedom. Factories in Olneyville had a reputation for having the highest wages, and largest fines, in the state. Scarcely a more militant crew of weavers existed any place than in the historic Riverside Mills, where in early 1886, the removal of men's stools on the pretext of "bum" work precipitated one of many minor disputes. Seizing the occasion, workers rehearsed to the supervisor "the whole history of petty tyrannies that they had been subjected to for many weeks past, and informed him that they belonged to an organized body and that the bulk of weavers, including all the best ones, belonged to the organization...." Apparently cowed by the implied threat, management returned the stools. The neighboring Atlantic Delaine Mills gained notoriety for their bad treatment of child labor, the threat and practice of physical abuse earning the moral condemnation of the People. The Knights, along with their craft union and political allies, sought to ameliorate this condition through the enforcement of compulsory school laws. But such was the climate for unionism in Olneyville that the children themselves struck back, as during 1887 when eight to twelve year old girls staged their own walkout and won their point the same day.[31]

Outside the perimeter of relatively well-paid and industrially sophisticated mill hands, the struggles remained more difficult and rudimentary. The Knights could claim locals in mill towns like Clyde, Arctic, Warren, Burrillville, and Bristol, off the beaten track of unionism. Elsewhere, they might more readily influence workers ill-prepared or unable to join the movement nevertheless to make their demands felt. In Pontiac, center of Swedish immigration and notorious for child labor, millowners kept the tenements dirty and unattractive and paid help through the hated "truck system." Employees struck successfully for the ten percent increase gained by workers in nearby Lonsdale. Elsewhere, particularly among the French-Canadians around Woonsocket, Manville and Natick, similar stories could be told.[32]

Perceptibly, the Knights became more than a union. Moving beyond a factory organization into a vehicle for labor communities' self-assertion, the Knights gave voice to the deepest urge for social reconstruction. Its leaders became neighborhood heroes, their cause the unifying element in variegated populations. Embedded in the routines of daily life, the labor movement imparted a distinct timbre to a wide variety of activities and vaguely expressed goals. Almost inadvertently, the Knights found themselves the expression of a working class moving from a life-in-itself, isolated from the centers of power and influence, toward a class-for-itself, the center of a future-looking, wide-ranging social force.

Rural Westerly, at the southwest tip of the state, offered a startling example of how Knights' activities might dominate town life. In this small town of 3,000, where Irish immigration had only begun to change the native-stock and English domination, the union tradition in the granite quarries went back to the 1860s. By the mid-eighties, some 350 men worked in a quarry about 150 feet deep, chipping at the sides with steamhammers, clearing away debris by shovel and mechanical derrick from the bottom and preparing the rock for use. Wages were high but dangers great, including the threat of accident and lung disease. At the announcement of a wage reduction in December 1884, and in defense of a weakened union, stonecutters prepared themselves for a strike they began officially almost three months later. When the men refused to work, the superintendent sent out a blacklist of employees to other New England quarry companies. So tight was labor solidarity, however, that management could recruit no more than thirty strike-breakers. Matters went on in this way for nearly ten months. As enthusiasm for the strike continued, Westerly

Knights gained too many members to meet comfortably in even the largest hall in town. The company moved toward compromise. Local Knights demanded not only that the wage cut be rescinded, but now added a demand for the firing of "blacklegs." Management refused this request. At last, Knights state officials intervened directly. The executive board rendered a decision that wages should be returned to normal, and scabs be forced to join the union.(33) As even the superintendent was sworn into the Knights, the bitter conflict ended. Now all Westerly embarked on a vivid ritual celebration:

> The granite cutters met in their room early in the evening and at 7:45, headed by the Westerly band, they paraded through the streets to Blivens' opera house. Their route was illumined with a profuse display of red fire along the entire way, and crowds of citizens assembled in the streets to look on while at points, cheers were given by the crowds.

On the opera house stage, state and town officials [illegible] the superintendent, national union officials and other notables. The program was climaxed, significantly, by the performance of the Italian Glee Club, "consisting of eight Italian granite cutters, who not one month before were almost sworn enemies, but who had thrown away all unfriendliness and joined hands" in the union. The 1300 observers applauded them to the rafters, later sharing refreshments and dancing "until the 'we sma' hours." Labor had met its most severe test, conquered the community and imparted a friendly spirit among diverse ethnic groups.(34)

Only Olneyville could rival this spectacular outpouring. Factory conflicts at the Riverside and Atlantic Delaine mills had for more than a decade taken the aspect of community issues. With the Knights, the long-awaited Liberator had apparently arrived. No hall could be found large enough for the Assemblies' meetings. And in the small shops and casual gathering spots, the Knights' spirit reigned. It was said to be impossible to buy a scab cigar or hat anywhere in the neighborhood, and the visage of Terrence Powderly could be seen in the windows of many businesses, even in a prominent tavern (notwithstanding the leader's fanatical support of temperance).(35)

In all the communities where they exerted influence, the Knights seemed to refashion the autonomous elements of working-class culture, to give them a notable verve or labor interpretation. Many times this took specific ethnic forms. The indirect support that the

Irish-dominated Church lent to the Knights can doubtless be traced to the prominence of the Irish in the organization, both nationally and in Rhode Island. Centers of the Irish Land League clubs in the early 1880s, Providence, Pawtucket and Central Falls, became Knights' strongholds and simultaneously sprouted new organizations, like the Irish National League, conducting lectures and hosting Irish notable Michael Davitt for a memorable public reception. In this super-charged political atmosphere, St. Patrick's Day took on a special labor significance. During the Pawtucket celebration of 1886, factories universally closed. The Central Falls Knights of Labor Drum Corps, marching in the parade, gave living proof of labor's presence in the events. Inspired perhaps by this outpouring, French-Canadian workers in Woonsocket, Natick and elsewhere dropped tools on the Saint's Day of Jean Baptiste in July of that year to board trains for their own lavish celebration in Providence.(36)

More subtly, the Knights' existence provided the mechanism for working-class groups to interpret their own daily experience, the lessons, hopes of self-improvement, comprehension of life's turning points. Thus the cricket clubs, foot races and marching drills in British Ashton, Lonsdale and Berkeley, which filled the columns of local events in the People, became almost an extension of Knights' discipline, gaining a crypto-political content when police sought to break up betting or enforce Sabbath prohibition ordinances. Not that the Knights favored vice. Indeed, they claimed to promote temperance more successfully than legal authorities in the villages. But they viewed enforcement as their own responsibility. Where the order grew strongest, as in Central Falls, the local Knights institutionalized self-improvement by equipping their own hall with a reading room and organ, expressly designed to give the "young folks" healthful outlets.(37) Amateur poetry suggested that outsiders, the wealthy and powerful, could not comprehend the Knights' struggles. A "magic dream" one writer recreated in verse described a world "turned...completely over," rendering Jay Gould a brass-band musician, Commodore Vanderbilt a doctor and President Cleveland a street-car conductor, all unhappy because they were paid only a dollar per day.(38) Only the lowly in their own organization could properly interpret their joys and sorrows. Thus the People greeted marriages and births in the Order as partnerships and the beginning of new lives of honest labor; a eulogy in Olneyville began, "Whereas it having pleased the great Director of the Universe to call a higher Association of our beloved sister...."(39)

Perhaps the finest expression of the Knights' all-inclusive nature could be found in their comprehensive approach toward women workers and family members. As Susan Levine has suggested, the Knights nationally organized women by the thousands, yet for the most part tended to do so conditionally, in order that labor might gain sufficient power to return them to their proper place in the home.(40) No such inhibitions weighted down the Knights' approach to women in Rhode Island. As Lucius Garvin wrote in the People, the permanence of women in the mill work force had lent a sense of economic self-support. The Knights' leadership expected that formal participation in labor organization would accustom women "to the discipline of self-governing bodies," enabling them to strengthen themselves for full participation in society.(41)

From the first days of Rhode Island activities, the Knights sought to resolve the unique problems women faced as wives, workers and mothers. John O'Keefe organized a mixed women's local in Olneyville as early as 1884, later resurrected as the Ladies Social Assembly. Expanding its membership from a few to several hundred almost overnight, the Social Assembly gained the reputation of "containing some of the hardest workers for the Knights of Labor in Olneyville," and lived up to this praise with incessant activity, balls and fairs, fund-raising and propaganda. Those outside the factories could join women shop-workers and male family members in boosting the movement. Out of this activity grew a most remarkable institution, a "socialistic" day nursery in one of Olneyville's largest churches, for the women mill workers to leave their children in safe charge.(42)

Because women's activities in the Knights developed more slowly than men's, the rapid decline of the organization proved all the more tragic for female activists. In 1886-1887, they had just begun to seize the organizational initiative, conducting occasional factory protests through the guise of "sickouts" and other measures occasionally noted in the People, joining Ladies Assemblies and mixed assemblies in many towns and villages to the extent of perhaps 3,000 members. Over six months in 1887, the Knights leading female national organizer, Leonora Barry, toured the state intermittently, drawing large and enthusiastic audiences in Providence and Pawtucket. From the Rhode Island Knights' ranks Barry's successor, Mary O'Reilly, grew to national prestige and responsibility.(43)

Finally, Rhode Island Knights avidly supported woman's prerogative as a politically-deprived sex. From

its first days, the People carried woman suffrage propaganda, and repeatedly urged the coalition of suffrage and labor supporters around common political demands. Where women Knights possessed the greatest self-confidence, they merged the two interests. Thus a reporter from Olneyville noted in 1886 that "some of the girls out here claim they have the right to vote...."(44) During the evanescence of the movement, the People went a step further, installing as columnist one of the most vocal supporters of woman's full freedom in the labor press. Ellen M. Bolles campaigned for the vote equally with improved industrial conditions, urged women to acquire training and courage to become "neither more nor less than man's equal...a self-respecting and self-reliant individual."(45) By introducing women into the work force, Bolles insisted, industrialism had already begun to eradicate female dependence and submission; the coming change to a cooperative order would essentially complete the process, freeing men as well as women.

If such views proved sanguine or far too advanced for current social options, they nevertheless illustrated the range of possibilities suggested by the Knights' rise to relative power. The Knights might fail by dint of insufficient human resources or cultural misunderstanding to reach far into the French-Canadian and other foreign-language pockets of the state, or to begin the systematic organization of women workers as an early priority. But by intent, the Knights had seized the democratic legacy of the state, and expanded its meaning dramatically. Elderly veterans of the Dorr War testified they had seen the democratic crusade resurrected. An anonymous writer perhaps put it best in verse:

> Within these walls we know no creed
> No nation, sex or clan
> For "Justice unto all," we plead
> Based on "The Rights of Man"(46)

The logical extension of this democratic claim surpassed the tradition, as the Knights had given a class content and organizational form to their idealism. They envisioned their institutions as the "constructive" basis for a new social order growing within the old. They launched a thin network of cooperative shops and small factories, mostly in Olneyville and Pawtucket. They announced the Olneyville day nursery to be only a transition toward the day when "everything shall be managed on a large and scientific basis," with cooperative cooking and childcare for all.(47) These steps required initiative and vision. But the development of cooperative methods at the very center of capitalist

production demanded a detailed consideration of industrial etiquette, what might be done to democratize work procedures without disrupting the labor process or provoking management into aggressive counteractions. The Knights convinced themselves that, at least in Wanskuck, they had accomplished this goal. They prepared their own list of fines and it being accepted, elected a committee to ensure the company's agent live up to the agreement. A complaining worker thereafter called the chairman of the committee, who could effect a settlement directly or call upon the entire committee for arbitration. No member of the Order could be arbitrarily fired, and seniority was to be strictly enforced, favoritism stamped out, and new laborers given work equitably as they entered the shop. The Knights settled for themselves the particular hours to be worked under the ten-hour law. In their own words, they achieved "cooperation," or co-management, a process which "takes a little starch out of the overseer," but stabilized the work and established better relationships on all sides.(48)

Here, it is unusual, might be found the immense strength and inner weakness of the Knights' accomplishment in Rhode Island. When Terence Powderly spoke before a Providence crowd of thousands in February 1886, flanked by Reverend Hinckley and a Father Burns, his grandiloquent rhetoric evoked a sense of certain victory, as if the Knights, organized so righteously for a better world, could not lose. Publishing a special edition to reprint his address, the People marked the occasion as an epiphany of labor's expectations. "Say what we will, do what we will," Powderly reflected, "the line of battle lies between but two forces in the world of ours, and that line of battle is the wage system...Whether a man shall receive what he earns for his labor or whether he shall not receive it is the question...."(49) Framed in this fashion, the burning issue of the hour in Rhode Island became less one of what immediate steps the Knights could make to bolster and extend their power, than the volume of idealism they might gather from all citizens and classes to leap into a better world.

III

This perspective possessed fatal limitations. The very diffuseness which characterized the Knights' sudden, all-encompassing growth in Rhode Island offered no solid basis for the organization to survive unexpected defeats; the generosity and good will conveyed by Knights' leaders proved inadequate, even wrong-headed, to meet the challenge industrialists threw down. The impressive integration of the Knights into working-class culture

lacked the depth and resilience that a longer, more steady development might have allowed. And the opportunity to overcome Rhode Island workers' special electoral disabilities, finally, redoubled the leaders' determination to throw the organization's energies into the achievement of political democracy, when the political odds against even an enfranchised, male proletariat remained for a variety of reasons overwhelming.

In Rhode Island, as in the nation, the spring of 1886 brought growing antagonisms to a crisis. The outcome depended largely upon whether management or labor moved forward first and most effectively through programs and decisive action to establish confidence in its leadership. Most simply put, the problem of management revolved around the re-establishment of discipline over the labor movement, unchallenged supremacy in the community and on the shop floor. The problem of labor was to extend formally its own influence from the Knights' (and the craft unions') initial advance into a more commanding position of power.

Leading Rhode Island manufacturers joined hands in the state's first powerful management association, the Slater Club, formed at the end of February 1886. The Club announced that its members were pooling their resources to strike a counter-blow. Wanskuck managers warned they found interference in their prerogatives intolerable. Other club members reportedly planned a "blacklist" against Knights members.(50)

The state's "respectable" classes, in a position between labor and the industrialists, found themselves divided. One judge expressed his hope to a Knights' cooperative that the organization would grow too powerful for its foes, heralding a day when all officialdom would become obsolete and each man "his own lawyer, doctor and parson." Elsewhere supervisors were observed entering meetings distant from their homes, sympathetic or merely curious, but unwilling to expose themselves to identification by their industrial underlings.(51) Along with members of the church hierarchy, small businessmen, Democratic politicians and a host of others, citizens either expressed sympathy or declined to attack the movement.

Labor appeared ready to move forcefully if attacked. A New York Sun reporter warned in March 1886 that the "present relation between manufacturers and operatives is one of the utmost tension" in Rhode Island and that "the only reply to an attenuated enforcement of the Black List, in case of any considerable number, would be a general strike throughout the state, and...

the result could hardly fail to be disturbances that would take the form of rioting."[52]

The Knights' leadership, however, drew back from the prospect of confrontation. During 1886 and 1887 they were hampered both by their own ambivalence about industrial militance and by forceful counterattacks from manufacturers in politics and in the factories. As tensions grew locally and in the nation, the Rhode Island Knights' leadership was moved to disclaim militant intentions. The People warned that "the aim of the Knights of Labor is not to promote strikes, but unfortunately many persons have joined the Order under the impression that such was the object." If only "the workers will perfect their organization, and will keep from striking unless imperatively demanded, and if the employers will only be gentlemen...a great deal of the present industrial irritation will be allayed," they pleaded.[53] Such moderation did not represent a change of policy but a continuing tendency to downplay the importance of wage issues in comparison with larger political ideals.[54]

With an apparent sense of relief, Knights' leaders turned in early 1886 from industrial to political questions. As prohibition advocates, woman suffragists, and Democrats pressed the legislature to convene a Constitutional Convention for their own reasons, the People unloaded a new barrage of Equal Rights propaganda aimed at congealing a movement like that around the Ten Hours question a few years earlier. Knights and craft unions rallied for suffrage on a snowy April day, drawing up to 2300 carrying placards with slogans like "Few Workingmen Vote, All Pay Taxes" and "When Will Rhode Island Join the Union?"[55] Rhode Island remained limited to building Equal Rights Clubs while in the fall elections of 1886 independent labor candidates elsewhere in the nation were achieving state and local office. Rhode Islanders contributed money to Henry George's "United Labor Party" campaign for the New York mayoralty, but his defeat and the subsequent collapse of the coalition behind his candidacy marked, perhaps, the outermost limit of labor's political momentum. In Rhode Island, the Equal Rights clubs never attained the popularity engendered by the ten-hour campaign. Eventually, state Republicans and Democrats each claimed the suffrage cause, undercutting reformers. By the time universal male suffrage (except on municipal finance issues and city council elections) was achieved in 1888, the Equal Rights clubs had been practically absorbed into the Democratic Party. They played no independent part in the final suffrage victory and ceased to be a political force for labor.[56]

The response of Republicans and industrialists to the Knights' political efforts was severe. Before an election, Republicans issued party tickets to mill workers through employers, hammered home the message that their tariff brought prosperity, and took advantage of the familiar divisions between old-line and Irish Democrats nearly to sweep the lesser party from even local office. Labor tried to merge with Democrats in some places, but this meant little when the bulk of labor could not vote.[57] Millowners attacked through the conservative press as well, using the Providence Journal on Mayday 1886 to assail the union shop as striking "at the very root of individual enterprise, ambition, integrity of character," a shorter-hours movement for contravening "the irresistible laws of business," and child-labor measures for "coddling" of workers.[58]

The Knights' defensive position in the political arena was shown, too, in interchanges over the Chicago Haymarket events. The violence there spurred local papers to attack the "revolutionary and socialistic foreign element" and call for tougher labor discipline against strikers.[59] Immediately after the Chicago violence, the People counseled calm, blaming poverty rather than foreigners for the violence. But as the hue and cry against radicalism continued, the People sought to dissociate the respectable Powderly from the "insane anarchist, Johann Most" and the revolutionary forces he represented. True Knights policy, the paper tirelessly repeated, meant to heal wounds, not sow discord.[60]

Industrial defeats and internal dissensions had meanwhile cancelled out the Rhode Island Knights' basic source of power. After a drift in the summer and fall of 1886, marked with fewer conflicts and Knights' initiatives than the previous six months, an economic dip opened the job market on employers' terms. They responded with vigor. The largest silver-plate manufacturer in the nation, Gorham's of Providence, used the pooled funds of the Slater Club to quash a strike and break one of the most important Knights' locals outside textiles. As other defeats followed,the vast Knights' membership began to melt away. A key symbolic battle was fought, again, in Westerly, where the Moss Manufacturing Company with the backing of the Slater Club provoked a strike in September 1886, by a simultaneous increase in the number of looms tended and a decrease in piece-rates. The strike raged for fifteen months, with the familiar enthusiastic public support. At one point some thirty Italian immigrants, brought by train from Hoboken to serve as scabs, were

greeted, told of the strike, and then sent off again by a crowd of 1500 and a band playing the strains of "Never more will they come again." Management retaliated with legal measures, having strikers arrested, charging conspiracy against local leaders, Rhode Island Knights' state officials, and even the Boston Herald for printing the details of events. Through the support of the labor movement in Rhode Island and Massachusetts, the strike dragged on. When it was settled late in 1887, there was no repetition of the 1886 stoneworkers' celebration.(61)

Meanwhile, locally as nationally, solidarity turned to internecine strife. An investigator for the national Knights in 1887 reported instances when Rhode Island employers had been able to use one employee against another, replacing women unwilling to violate the ten-hour law with men, whose actions in turn sparked jealousy and hostility. As the observer lamented, "the years of cruel oppression and injustice which these people have endured has so sapped the milk of human kindness from their hearts that the same system of selfishness applied to them by their employers they in turn practice on each other...."(62) Likewise, the People's columns now occasioned more complaints of employers' labor recruitment abroad, as Rhode Island's first Industrial Commission the same year quoted many respondents declaiming the "foreign" and "poor" workmen stealing jobs and dragging down wages. German-American Socialists bitterly attacked the national dictatorship of Powderly over the Knights, following his plainly undemocratic treatment of Socialists and his mishandling of strikes, exhorting local comrades to continue as an opposition within the movement "under the Banner of Socialism." While thousands of disaffected members nationally withdrew from the Knights and spirits ebbed, differences among the state Knights' leaders became so severe that nothing short of a thorough change in the executive staff could dampen the conflict. By the end of 1887, no more than a thousand Knights in Rhode Island remained in good standing.(63)

Once again, a comparison with the craft unions illustrates the Knights' mercurial nature. By building more slowly and certainly, the RICLU managed to support both radicalism and durable trade unionism. By mid-1887, the craft unions took over the financially flagging People, sustaining it for nearly another year. Under their auspices, it took up the demand for a labor party and for a Christian Socialism both humane and class-conscious. Along with the American Federation of Labor to which it had affiliated itself, the RICLU pressed a nine-hour campaign toward the end of the

eighties, actually gaining the day for the Carpenters and establishing standards for other unions.(64)

In a curious, ambivalent way, both the emerging socialistic leadership in the RICLU, and the fact that craft labor's successes tended to further distance the skilled from the unskilled, were part of the Knights' legacy in Rhode Island. Seeking to create a brotherhood (and sisterhood) between the most elevated and most thoroughly downtrodden workers in the mills, the organization could have succeeded only through a dramatic social change. At the peak of the Knights' strength, an Olneyville weaver expressed his dismay at the continuing haughtiness of some craft workers:

> It has long been a complaint of weavers that loom-fixers do not treat them as man and woman, as their peers in regard to work, but as a sort of inferior laborer and many are the silent tears that have flowed from the eyes of a sensitive woman, and many have been the curses of the man weaver at the positive insults offered them when they have had the occasion to call the fixers' attention to some fault in the mechanism of the loom...in this one mill quite a number of weavers have within a short time preferred idleness to submission to the unjust and intolerable demands and treatment of men who may be brothers in the assembly room but who in the weave room are perfect despots.(65)

After the Knights' reduction to a small and barely significant group, the spinners, loom-fixers and to a lesser extent weavers maintained whatever beachheads existed in textiles, as craft locals. The RICLU repeatedly supported efforts to create an industrial union, but without success. No movement came as close as the Knights to bridging the gap within the work force, through uniting the experience and authority of the radicalized craft worker, with the aggressiveness and sheer mass strength of the operative. Short of such a movement, textiles could not be organized. The failure to gain a decisive union basis in the eighties doomed textile unionism for nearly another half century to division between the small and ineffectual craft locals on the one hand, and a scattering of determined, but insufficiently strong, advocates of industrial unionism on the other.

IV

The political legacy of the Knights is more difficult to measure. The labor upsurge without question prompted many reforms in public policy. Widened suf-

frage might have waited another generation without the impetus given by the labor movement of the mid-1880s. Improved truancy and child-labor laws, protective legislation for women, the creation of a Bureau of Labor Statistics, even the promotion of better public education may be credited to their championing by the Knights' leadership and the People. An incident so minor as the appointment of Lucius Garvin to public health inspector for Cumberland suggests careful investigation could turn up more subtle victories, however mediated through the major political parties. Perhaps it is not too far-fetched to suggest that the Democrats' choice of an Irish Catholic for nomination as lieutenant governor in 1887, the first time such an ethnic crossover had been made for a high government post, had a basis in the Irish Knights' participation. As Leon Fink has suggested, the upsurge could not leave local politics, especially Democratic party politics, unchanged. The "labor vote" passed into calculation once and for all.(66)

On the other hand, the political "friends of labor" in the major parties proved unable and perhaps unwilling to summon the kind of energies the Knights had drawn upon in the mid-1880s, for "political" concerns above and beyond activity at the ballot box. By disarming unorganized labor, business and the conservative middle classes succeeded in maintaining a thoroughly reactionary Republican administration. Perhaps the greatest tragedy of all was that Rhode Island's newer immigrants, Italians, Jews, Poles and others from eastern and southern Europe, entered the state in the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first two of the twentieth when the Republican machine had an almost unchecked capacity to deliver new victims to the textile giants, and when the potential solidarity of labor across ethnic lines had been sorely diminished.

Still, the Knights had made an important point about labor and society. An editorial in the People during the most hopeful spring Rhode Island labor had seen, reflected upon the psychological difference the movement had made:

> One need not go to the state house to perceive that labor breathes freer in Rhode Island than ever before. The time was, and not so long ago, when an artisan in the presence of his employer or overseer scarcely dared say that his soul was his own, or to speak above a whisper; but the Order of the Knights of Labor has changed all this. There is an atmosphere of independence on all sides. It is felt in the workshop, the mill, the cars, on the street; even the boys and girls show a spirit that they lacked before...(67)

The mixture of idealism and hard class consciousness inspired an extraordinary vision. Leading New York labor editor John Swinton, lecturing in Providence near the end of April 1886, spoke of the Knights' organization as a "key that unlocks the portals of that mysterious, majestic temple of the future, into which whoso enters has felt the touch of the ultimate ghost."(68) Labor with power in its hands might vindicate the ages of human suffering, its cooperation might prove the answer to the old questions of human destiny.

This vision was, however, too grand and uncalculating for the world of the 1880s. As David Lyons suggests, the Knights "accepted industrial and modern production only in the sense that it belonged to some other world where universal love and cooperation reigned."(69) They emphasized their ideology of salvation in part because they could not admit the reality of bitter class conflict without uprooting their hopes of peaceful transition--but the less weight they put on practical goals like the advance of wages, the more their promises seemed vacuous, their strategic conceptions fuzzy and unreal.

The next generation of labor radicals in Rhode Island, Italian-Americans around the Industrial Workers of the World, had no such illusions. But neither could they summon the idealism of the entire labor movement for a grand expectation. The Rhode Island Knights had sacrificed themselves with a nobility of character that proved a luxury. A darker and more difficult conflict lay ahead.

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FOOTNOTES

1. The most promising recent study of the Knights is Leon Fink, "Workingmen's Democracy: The Knights of Labor in Local Politics, 1886-1896." (Ph.D. thesis, University of Rochester, 1977).

2. On these points, see also Alan Dawley, Class and Community:The Industrial Revolution in Lynn (Cambridge, 1976).

3. Melvin T. Copeland, The Cotton Manufacturing Industry in the US (New York, 1917), 17,27; Arthur Cole, The American Wool Manufacture,II (Cambridge, Mass., 1926), 60-62, 83, 103fn.

4. Men of Progress (Boston, 1896), 270-72. Biographical History of the Manufacturers and Businessmen of Rhode Island at the Opening of the 20th Century (Providence, 1901), 42, 236. Robert C. Power, "Rhode Island Republicans in the Gilded Age" (Honor's Thesis, Brown University, 1972), 6. See also Jerome L. Sternstein, "Nelson W. Aldrich: The Making of the 'General Manager of the United States,' 1841-1896" (Ph.D. Thesis, Brown University, 1968); and Mary C. Nelson, "The Influence of Immigration on Rhode Island Politics" (M.A. thesis, Radcliffe College, 1954).

5. Amos Perry, Report on the Rhode Island Census (Providence, 1887), 441, 451-73.

6. Copeland, The Cotton Manufacturing Industry; 70, 83-84. Richard Hinton, "American Labor Organizations," North American Review, 55 (1885).

7. "The Struggle for Existence," People, May 15, 1886.

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