

# The Knights of Labor in Iowa

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THE ORDER OF THE KNIGHTS OF LABOR ranks as America's largest and most progressive nineteenth-century labor organization. The Knights of Labor forged a labor movement that brought together the activist heritage of American workers in trade unions, social reforms, self-education campaigns, fraternal associations, and independent politics. In a single organization, workers shared impressions about their work experiences, their bosses, and their everyday lives beyond the workplace. Egalitarianism and mutuality became the twin pillars of an emergent community of workers. Dedicated to agitation, education, and organization, the forces of labor Knighthood spanned the nation, carrying their dissenting and reformist message and reaching a climax of influence and power in 1886.

Structurally, the Order of the Knights of Labor was a national federation of affiliated local, state, and regional bodies. Founded in 1869, the Knights' membership reached three-quarters of a million to one million in the mid-1880s and then declined rapidly over the next decade. Between 1878 and 1896, members of the order could be found at one time or another in every state in the Union as well as most Canadian provinces and several foreign countries. Those who joined came from rural as well as urban areas. While a rough parity existed

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This article is a somewhat altered version of a paper presented at the Twenty-third Annual Northern Great Plains History Conference on 23 September 1988 in Eveleth, Minnesota. Assistance with this project came from three sources. The Professional Development Committee at the University of Dubuque helped with the financial costs. Merle Davis generously shared note cards from his own assiduous reading of Iowa newspapers. *Annals* editor Marvin Bergman offered important suggestions for revising the manuscript.

THE ANNALS OF IOWA 50 (Spring 1991). ©The State Historical Society of Iowa, 1991.

between urban and rural locals, urban dwellers accounted for two-thirds of the order's rank and file and three-fourths of its leadership. Half of all places in the United States with populations over 1,000 and all but a dozen communities of 8,000 or more had at least one local Knights organization. A composite national picture of the order shows some 12,000 local bodies, representing more than 1,000 distinct occupations, and organized in more than 3,000 communities.<sup>1</sup>

Membership that cut across skill, race, gender, and ethnic lines reflected the Knights' goal of working-class solidarity.<sup>2</sup> Drawing adherents from the unskilled and foreign-born, the Knights of Labor also welcomed blacks and women. Cooperatives, boycotts, and politics functioned, according to the order's constitution, as vehicles for "organizing and directing the power of the industrial masses."<sup>3</sup> Such concepts as productive work, civic responsibility, wholesome family life, temperance, and self-improvement provided individual norms. Finally, a working-class ethos reverberated through the order's meeting halls, which were the scenes of speeches and debates, political strategizing and data collection, social events and holiday celebrations.

Knights of Labor activities at the state level remain largely unexplored.<sup>4</sup> Of two single-volume histories of Iowa published

1. Jonathan Garlock, "A Structural Analysis of the Knights of Labor: A Prolegomenon to the History of the Producing Classes" (Ph.D. diss., University of Rochester, 1974), xi-xii, 1, 4; idem, comp., *Guide to the Local Assemblies of the Knights of Labor* (Westport, CT, 1982), xv, xxv. Garlock provides a useful compendium of quantitative information.

2. The Knights of Labor opposed foreign contract labor as a greedy scheme by employers to lower wages and displace workers. While the Knights organized large numbers of newcomers, the order joined Far West unions in demanding the exclusion of Chinese immigrants as a "servile race" of unassimilable cheap labor. See Terence V. Powderly, *Thirty Years of Labor, 1859-1889* (Philadelphia, 1890), 210-29; and George E. McNeill, ed., *The Labor Movement: The Problem of To-day* (Boston, 1886), 429-53.

3. *Constitution of the General Assembly, District Assemblies, and Local Assemblies of the Order of the Knights of Labor of America* (n.p., 1885), 3, Terence V. Powderly Papers, Catholic University of America Library, Washington, DC. An enthusiastic endorsement of the order's principles can be found in McNeill, *Labor Movement*, 483-96.

4. There is, however, an interesting state study of the Rhode Island Knights. See Paul Buhle, "The Knights of Labor in Rhode Island," *Radical History*

in the 1970s, one ignores late nineteenth-century labor and the other makes a few disparaging remarks about the Knights and trade unions.<sup>5</sup> The practice of neglecting or maligning the labor movement in Iowa rests on certain understandable yet mistaken perceptions. The state's admittedly strong agricultural heritage, lack of a dominant large city, and large number of independent producers creates an agrarian aura. Nonetheless, rapid industrial development occurred between 1875 and 1895, when the value of Iowa's manufactured goods and the average number of nonfarm employees increased by 60 percent. Meat-packing, grain processing, lumber products, and coal mining ranked as the state's chief economic enterprises. River and rail transportation expanded rapidly to ship the increasing supply of these processed raw materials from farms, forests, and mines. Foundries and machine shops, clothing and footwear factories, and brick and tile establishments added another dimension to the state's industrial output. Industrialism also found expression in urbanization, as the state's urban population rose 50 percent during the 1880s. The 1895 state census classified 42 percent of the state's population as urban. Beyond the farmers living on the rich and fertile land, Iowa was becoming the home of rising numbers of wage earners working in small and medium-sized industries and living in the five largest cities (25,000 to 55,000 population)—Des Moines, Dubuque, Davenport, Sioux City, and Burlington—or the smaller cities (2,500 to 15,000 population) such as Atlantic, Cherokee, Clinton, Creston, Fort Dodge, Glenwood, Independence,

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Review 17 (1978), 39–73. For a cogent analysis of the Knights in a Canadian province, see Gregory S. Kealey and Bryan D. Palmer, *Dreaming of What Might Be: The Knights of Labor in Ontario, 1880–1900* (New York, 1982).

5. Leland L. Sage, *A History of Iowa* (Ames, 1974); and Joseph Frazier Wall, *Iowa: A Bicentennial History* (New York, 1978), 148–49. There are revealing glimpses of the Iowa Knights in a few studies. See Robert D. Winn, "Iowa Labor History," typescript, c. 1975, 3–4, State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City; E. H. Downey, *History of Labor Legislation in Iowa* (Iowa City, 1910), 3–5; Lorin Stuckey, *The Iowa State Federation of Labor* (Iowa City, 1915), 9–13; and Ralph Scharnau, "Workers and Politics: The Knights of Labor in Dubuque, Iowa, 1885–1890," *Annals of Iowa* 48 (1987), 353–77. Articles by William L. Hewitt, Erling N. Sannes, and Roger Horowitz in a special issue, "Perspectives on Sioux City," *Annals of Iowa* 50 (1989/1990), cover social and organizing issues among the laboring population.

Keokuk, Ottumwa, and Waterloo. The Knights of Labor brought the notion of unity to these Iowa workers.<sup>6</sup>

The present study explores the Knights of Labor in Iowa primarily during the 1880s from an institutional perspective.<sup>7</sup> Contemporary newspapers and journals, minutes of meetings, official correspondence and reports, and census data are the basis for this collective portrait of the Iowa Knights. The portrait emerges from an analysis of the Knights' membership patterns, political achievements, and community impact.

BEFORE THE KNIGHTS' ORGANIZING DRIVES, there were a small number of Iowa trade unions. The largest local claimed several dozen members. The state's oldest craft organ-

6. Downey, *Labor Legislation*, 1; Ivan L. Pollock, *History of Economic Legislation in Iowa* (Iowa City, 1918), 251; *Census of Iowa for 1875*, 380-83, 403; *Census of Iowa for 1880*, 164, 189, 236-39, 365-66, 380; *Census of Iowa for 1885*, 244-49; *Census of Iowa for 1895*, 278, 437, 442-45, 703-8; Iowa Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Biennial Report, 1892-93*, 31, 116, 118-19; Keach Johnson, "Iowa's Industrial Roots, 1890-1910," *Annals of Iowa* 44 (1978), 163-90; H. H. McCarty and C. W. Thompson, *Meat Packing in Iowa*, Iowa Studies in Business, no. 12 (Iowa City, 1933); George Bernhardt Hartman, "The Iowa Sawmill Industry," *Iowa Journal of History and Politics* 40 (1942), 56, 66-67; Sage, *History*, 99; Floyd B. Haworth, *The Economic Development of the Woodworking Industry in Iowa*, Iowa Studies in Business, no. 13 (Iowa City, 1933), 28-40, 80; Jacob A. Swisher, *Iowa: Land of Many Mills* (Iowa City, 1940), 73-74, 194, 211-12; idem, "Mining in Iowa," *Iowa Journal of History and Politics* 43 (1945), 311-13; Dorothy Schwieder, *Black Diamonds: Life and Work in Iowa's Coal Mining Communities, 1895-1925* (Ames, 1983), ix-xii; Shelton Stromquist, *A Generation of Boomers: The Patterns of Railroad Labor Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America* (Urbana and Chicago, 1987), 158-63.

7. This institutional perspective contrasts with much of the current literature on the Knights of Labor. That literature commonly treats the order as a "movement culture." See, for example, Kealey and Palmer, *Dreaming of What Might Be*; Leon Fink, *Workingmen's Democracy: The Knights of Labor and American Politics* (Urbana, IL, 1983); David Scobey, "Boycotting the Politics Factory: Labor Radicalism and the New York City Mayoral Election of 1886," *Radical History Review* 28-30 (1984), 280-325; Peter Rachleff, *Black Labor in the South: Richmond, Virginia, 1865-1890* (Philadelphia, 1984); Steven J. Ross, "The Politicization of the Working Class: Production, Ideology, Culture, and Politics in Late Nineteenth Century Cincinnati," *Social History* 11 (1986), 171-95; Richard Jules Oestreicher, *Solidarity and Fragmentation: Working People and Class Consciousness in Detroit, 1875-1900* (Urbana, IL, 1986). Leon Fink answers critics of the cultural theme in his article, "The New Labor History and the Powers of Historical Pessimism: Consensus, Hegemony, and the Case of the Knights of Labor," *Journal of American History* 75 (1988), 115-36.

ization, Dubuque Typographical Union No. 22, was founded in November 1854 and chartered in 1855. Railway employees—engineers, conductors, and firemen—as well as cigar makers and bricklayers had established locals by the early 1880s. These skilled unions, small and poorly organized, protected their membership and shunned independent politics.<sup>8</sup>

Tracing the history of these early unions remains difficult because many, including the Knights of Labor, initially operated in secret to avoid retaliation by employers. Recalling the period of secrecy among Iowa Knights, Lorin Stuckey writes, "The calls for special meetings were chalked in code on the fences, walls of buildings, and sidewalks, much to the alarm of the uninitiated, who believed that these cabalistic signs were the work of anarchists, who must be rapidly increasing in number and power, and who must be planning some terrible deed."<sup>9</sup> Taking their cue from the national organization, the Iowa Knights abandoned secrecy in the early 1880s. The order adopted a policy of openness for several reasons. According to official statements in the *Journal of United Labor*, increased organizational strength made members less likely to be "victimized" or subject to "that malicious persecution which inevitably comes to those who engage in any effort for the emancipation of Labor." By dropping the veil of secrecy, the Knights also defended themselves against the charge of being "labor conspirators" and overcame opposition from the Catholic church.<sup>10</sup>

The move to publicize the order's activities and openly recruit new members resulted in a rapid rise in membership. The Knights' appeal rested partly on its ability to fuse differences in ethnicity, age, race, skill, and gender with an egalitarian pride in all honest and useful work. The demands for improved pay and an eight-hour day resonated with workers who received subsistence wages and labored ten to fourteen hours per day. The insistence on labor-centered work routines

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8. Winn, "Iowa Labor," 1, 3; Stuckey, *State Federation*, 9, 13-14; Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Biennial Report, 1884-85*, 55-57.

9. Stuckey, *State Federation*, 10.

10. *Constitution* (1885), 22; *Journal of United Labor*, 15 June 1880, 15 June 1881; Winn, "Iowa Labor," 3; Powderly, *Thirty Years*, 289, 329; Henry J. Browne, *The Catholic Church and the Knights of Labor* (Washington, DC, 1949).

countered employer-imposed workplace disciplines. The call for workplace health and safety codes made sense as the casualty lists mounted in the state's mining, manufacturing, and construction industries. The Knights saw workers as creators of wealth, and this meant empowering them to challenge employer exploitation on the one hand and to form cooperative experiments on the other. The order's fraternal trappings and meeting halls promised comradeship and identity. A collective voice in politics offered a chance to secure wider democracy and initiate labor reforms. In a unique way, then, the Knights' mixture of democratic idealism and class consciousness struck a responsive chord among Iowa workers.

The Knights of Labor not only organized more workers than all of Iowa's trade unions, but their peak membership of thirty thousand, reached in 1888, exceeded the combined total for trade unions by a ten-to-one ratio. To add to the significance of this accomplishment, half of the wage earners interviewed for state reports expressed opposition to unions. Some workers articulated a preference for individual initiative rather than collective action. Others sympathized with the order's doctrines but found themselves unable or afraid to join.<sup>11</sup>

Organized on the basis of individual membership, the Knights enrolled their converts in basic associate units called "local assemblies." Iowa's first local assemblies were organized in 1878. Coal miners organized four of the six local assemblies founded that year, including the first assembly at Des Moines. The next year brought the formation of District Assembly No. 28 at Des Moines to provide a forum for discussing mutual concerns by representatives of local assemblies. At that assembly's 1883 convention, presiding officer Sanford Kirkpatrick referred to the order as "partially organized." By 1885, however, the Knights claimed forty-one local assemblies with 3,200 members, doubling the membership of Iowa's thirty-five trade unions. The next three years represented the climax of Knights organizing in Iowa. Between 1885 and 1887, 192 locals were

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11. Winn, "Iowa Labor," 3; Stuckey, *State Federation*, 11; *Dubuque Industrial Leader*, 18 February 1888; *Iowa State Register*, 11 February 1888; Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Biennial Report, 1884-85*, 211-13; *ibid.*, 1886-87, 148-50; *ibid.*, 1888-89, 94-96.

organized, more than half in the banner year of 1886. Also in 1886, during a meeting at Cedar Rapids, District Assembly No. 28 reorganized itself into the Iowa State Assembly.<sup>12</sup>

All together, the Knights of Labor organized a total of roughly 320 local assemblies in Iowa. Of these, only 21 were organized before 1880 or after 1890. Seventy percent were short-lived, lapsing after one to three years. One-third lasted only one year. On the other hand, twenty-six continued operating for five to ten years. Five assemblies—those at Cedar Rapids, Newton, Winterset, Clarinda, and Lehigh—functioned for ten to fifteen years. The final organizing thrust came in 1895 with locals established at Glenwood, Onawa, Lehigh, and Incline, but none of these survived a year later. In 1898 the last two assemblies at Winterset and Clarinda expired. This mercurial longevity pattern suggests fluctuating membership rates in local assemblies. Yearly enrollments varied from as low as ten, the minimum required to form an assembly, to as high as several hundred in some of the large miners' locals and mixed assemblies at Burlington, Clinton, Dubuque, and Webster City.<sup>13</sup>

Reflecting the state's agrarian demography, rural areas of fewer than one thousand people accounted for 45 percent of the assemblies, while three-quarters of all locals were located in places with a population of eight thousand or fewer. Cities where five to eight assemblies were founded included Burlington, Dubuque, Keokuk, Cedar Rapids, Marshalltown, Council Bluffs, Davenport, and Ottumwa. Des Moines, the state capital and largest city, accounted for fourteen locals. Geographically, the Knights' local assemblies, located in 86 counties and 228 communities, were scattered rather evenly across the eastern, central, and western sections of the state. The southern

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12. Garlock, *Guide*, 112-29; Garlock, "Structural Analysis," 86; *Journal of United Labor*, 15 May 1880 to 1 January 1887, which list the number, location, and type of local assemblies organized; U. S. Stephens to A. C. Perry, and U. S. Stephens to William Thomas, 2 October 1878, Powderly Papers; *Iowa State Register*, 13 June 1878; Stuckey, *State Federation*, 10, 11, 13; Winn, "Iowa Labor," 3, 5; *Proceedings of District Assembly No. 28, Knights of Labor*, July 11-12, 1883, 4; *ibid.*, July 14-16, 1886, 33-42.

13. The statistical analysis presented here is based on data in Garlock, *Guide*, 112-29 and appendices.

half of the state accounted for approximately 70 percent of the locals. This distribution reflected two factors: the strength of the Knights among miners working in some twenty south central coal-producing counties, and the large southern population centers at Des Moines, Davenport, Burlington, and Council Bluffs.<sup>14</sup>

In Iowa as elsewhere, the Knights of Labor championed the rights of all workers, bringing men and women, blacks and whites, skilled and unskilled, native-born and foreign-born into the fold. With only bankers, lawyers, liquor dealers, stock brokers, and professional gamblers excluded, this union of "producers" attracted large numbers of previously unorganized wage earners. Dual unionism emerged as many trade unionists became Knights members without relinquishing their previous affiliation. While farmers and even a few petty producers and independent merchants also joined, wage earners accounted for a constitutionally mandated minimum of three-fourths of each local's membership. Just over half of the Knights' local assemblies were classified as "mixed," meaning they included people with diverse occupations, whereas the trade assemblies comprised workers in a specific craft or industry. The order's structure brought together workers and non-working-class reformers and sympathizers. The local assembly in Marion embraced "farmers, mechanics, laborers, railway men, public officials, teachers, merchants and ladies." Those who labored in coal mining constituted the single most important occupational grouping. Nearly two-thirds of these miners were British immigrants or native-born whites. They were also the most militant as strikes riddled the Iowa coal fields.<sup>15</sup>

Although the vast majority of the order's membership consisted of native-born, white males, reflecting Iowa's demographic makeup, a few locals had a different identity. The

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14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*; *Constitution* (1885), 59; *Journal of United Labor*, 1 August 1889; Garlock, "Structural Analysis," 86; Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Biennial Report, 1888-89*, 201; Carroll D. Wright, *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Labor, 1886, Strikes and Lockouts*, 742; *ibid.*, 1894, 1456-59; Bill R. Douglas, "Fighting Against Hope': Iowa Coal Miners and the 1891 Strike for the Eight-Hour Day," typescript, 1977, Labor Collection, State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City.

state's foreign-born population hovered around 16 percent between 1875 and 1895. During that period, Germans were the largest ethnic group, rising from 33 to 40 percent of the foreign-born population and increasing the gap between themselves and the second-place Irish from a two-to-one to a four-to-one margin. By 1895 the Swedish population nearly equalled the Irish. These ethnic population configurations found expression in the Knights of Labor. Those of Irish stock dominated some locals composed largely of mining and transportation workers. There was a German assembly at Lyons and two at Dubuque, while Oswalt and What Cheer had Swedish assemblies. Wage earners with German, Irish, and Swedish ancestry constituted, then, an important segment of the Knights constituency.<sup>16</sup>

From 1875 to 1895 the black population in Iowa never amounted to even one percent of the total population. Black settlement was concentrated in four regions of the state. Several hundred African-Americans worked as farmhands in the agricultural counties on the southern border and as laborers in railroad construction at Council Bluffs and Sioux City on the Missouri River. Certain counties on the Mississippi River and in south central Iowa provided employment for most of the state's black wage earners. They held river, railroad, and industrial jobs in the Mississippi River towns of Dubuque, Clinton, Davenport, Muscatine, Burlington, Fort Madison, and Keokuk. The sharpest increases of black population occurred in the south central coal-producing areas. Coal mining, in fact, became the single most important occupation for African-Americans.<sup>17</sup>

While the black population in Iowa nearly doubled, increasing from 5,976 in 1875 to 11,889 in 1895, African-Americans remained a tiny minority group employed as laborers and in service jobs. With such small numbers, they played a minimal role in the Knights of Labor. Although blacks did not move into leadership positions, the Knights organized black

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16. *Census of Iowa for 1875*, 350, 354, 401; *Census of Iowa for 1880*, 2, 21, 170, 193, 214; *Census of Iowa for 1885*, 166-69, 302; *Census of Iowa for 1895*, 272-74, 304-7; Garlock, *Guide*, 112-29; Scharnau, "Workers and Politics," 358-59.

17. Leola Nelson Bergmann, *The Negro in Iowa* (Iowa City, 1969). Bergmann's study first appeared in the *Iowa Journal of History and Politics* 46 (1948), 3-90.

workers, attracting followers roughly in proportion to their settlement patterns. Black membership in the order thus varied from a half-dozen in mixed assemblies to all-black locals in Des Moines, Burlington, and Ottumwa.<sup>18</sup>

The Knights of Labor opened their membership to women as well as blacks while denouncing pay and franchise inequities based on race and gender. The 1885 state census classified the vast majority of Iowa women as "housewives." By 1890, 40 percent of all women who worked outside the home were employed as domestics. The Knights considered housekeeping "productive work" and demanded "equal pay for equal work." These tenets of what historian Susan Levine called "a labor feminism" attracted women wage earners and even some homemakers. In Dubuque, women constituted about 20 percent of the rank-and-file membership; textile workers composed the bulk of an all-female local with several hundred members. At least three other female local assemblies formed at Burlington, Cedar Rapids, and Ottumwa; and local assemblies at Oxford Junction, Marion, and Des Moines had nearly equal numbers of men and women. Some women even attained leadership positions. In 1886 Abbie Drummond, a Dubuque homemaker, temperance advocate, and suffragist, was elected State Worthy Foreman, the second-highest post in the Iowa State Assembly; she was reelected in 1887 and 1888.<sup>19</sup>

This diversity of workers streaming into the order gave a new and distinctive meaning to the term *unionization*. The Iowa Knights of Labor clearly created a mass labor movement. They

18. *Census of Iowa for 1875*, 350, 401; *Census of Iowa for 1880*, 2, 17; *Census of Iowa for 1885*, 166, 302; *Census of Iowa for 1895*, 246, 288; Garlock, *Guide*, 125, 127; *Portrait and Biographical Album of Des Moines County, Iowa* (Chicago, 1888), 751.

19. *Census of Iowa for 1885*, 170; *Compendium of the Eleventh Census of the U.S., 1890*, pt. 3, 394-95; Powderly, *Thirty Years*, 327-29; Susan Levine, "Labor's True Woman: Domesticity and Equal Rights in the Knights of Labor," *Journal of American History* 70 (1983), 337, 339; Ruth A. Gallaher, *Legal and Political Status of Women in Iowa* (Iowa City, 1914), 146; Scharnau, "Workers and Politics," 360; *Woman's Standard*, September, December 1886, August, November 1887, March 1888; *Dubuque Daily Herald*, 16 July 1886, 15 July 1887; Garlock, *Guide*, 112-29; *Journal of United Labor*, 20 December 1888; *Proceedings of District Assembly No. 28, July 14-16, 1886*, 35; *Proceedings of the Iowa State Assembly, Knights of Labor, July 13-15, 1887*, 34, 58; *Dubuque Industrial Leader*, 18 February 1888; *Iowa State Register*, 11 February 1888.

thus became the voice of the producing classes and exerted influence in every part of the state. After organizing local assemblies, leaders turned their energies toward economic and political reform.

ENCOURAGED by an expanding membership base, local assemblies sought to combat the wage system by instituting cooperative enterprises. Local assemblies usually raised the capital required for these experiments from members and other workers. Selling shares of stock at modest prices stimulated widespread participation, and limiting individual stock ownership prevented monopolistic control.

The most common cooperative projects included construction of meeting halls and general stores and establishment of labor papers. Many local assemblies built their own halls that accommodated a range of activities from regular meetings to music recitals. Assemblies at Dubuque, Atlantic, Marshalltown, Newton, Oskaloosa, and Flager launched cooperative general stores. By the middle and late 1880s, about two dozen communities had weekly Knights newspapers. Most of these papers survived for only a few years. The *Burlington Justice*, published from 1885 to 1892 and printed in daily and weekly editions, was the Knights' best-known organ and the state's foremost labor paper.<sup>20</sup>

Other more ambitious cooperative initiatives included a merchant tailoring association at Des Moines, an overalls factory at Cedar Rapids, and a stove manufacturing and mercantile association at Atlantic. Knights participated in cooperative coal mine ventures at Chariton, Angus, and Brazil, in addition to the best-known one, Hawkeye Coal Company at Ottumwa. On the state level, the Knights also founded life and fire insurance companies. These producers' cooperatives lasted only a short time, most succumbing after one to three years. The most successful cooperative was the Lyons Co-operative Association,

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20. Norman J. Ware, *The Labor Movement in the United States, 1860-1895: A Study in Democracy* (New York, 1929), 322; *Dubuque Industrial Leader*, 25 December 1886, 18, 25 June 1887; *Journal of United Labor*, 10 March 1886, 19 November 1887; *Knoxville Journal*, 11 July 1888; Alan M. Schroder, comp., *A Bibliography of Iowa Newspapers, 1836-1976* (Iowa City, 1979).

which sold groceries, flour, feed, dry goods, and meats. With a branch store at Clinton, the Lyons Association operated from 1887 to 1895. These cooperative schemes failed due to a number of factors: inadequate capital, insufficient patronage, intense competition, and management flaws.<sup>21</sup>

Although cooperative associations projected a marketplace presence, the order's commitment to reform politics attracted more press attention, garnered more labor support, and secured more workers' rights.<sup>22</sup> Local assemblies and the state organization collected statistical data on workers, studied candidates' positions on issues, and approved legislative goals. While thus educating themselves, Iowa Knights moved into the political arena. They lobbied elected officials, endorsed regular party nominees, and fielded their own labor tickets. The Knights saw political action as a way of galvanizing workers' power to press for societal reform and to challenge the governing elite.

The order's lobbying campaigns faced a series of obstacles. A majority of legislators in the Iowa General Assembly were farmers who came from the state's rural districts and country

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21. *Irish World and American Industrial Liberator* (New York), 6 July 1889; *Proceedings of District Assembly No. 28, Knights of Labor, January 13-15, 1886*, 24, 31; *Proceedings of the Iowa State Assembly, July 13-15, 1887*, 26-27, 35-40, 44; *Dubuque Industrial Leader*, 18, 25 December 1886, 1 January, 16 July 1887; *Journal of United Labor*, 10 March, 25 April 1886, 21 August, 29 October, 31 December 1887, 4 February, 28 April 1888, 17 January, 26 September, 21 November 1889; S. Kirkpatrick to T. V. Powderly, 23 January 1884, Wesley A. Stuart to T. V. Powderly, 28 November 1885, J. R. Sovereign to T. V. Powderly, 24 December 1887, Powderly Papers; *Atlantic Daily Telegraph*, 22 July 1887; *Iowa State Register*, 26 August 1885, 28 February 1888, 24 February 1895; Douglas, "Fighting Against Hope," 11; *Fort Dodge Messenger*, 30 April 1885; *Lyons Weekly Mirror*, 16 July, 13 August 1887; *Clinton Herald*, 25 February 1895.

22. Accounts of political unrest in Iowa traditionally focus on agrarian movements, especially on supporters of the Grange, Anti-Monopolist, Greenback, Alliance, and Populist movements. This farm-state mentality leaves labor as, at best, a coalition element within the dominant rural organizations. See, for example, Fred E. Haynes, *Third Party Movements since the Civil War with Special Reference to Iowa: A Study in Social Politics* (Iowa City, 1916), 67-88, 153-201, 304-75; Herman Clarence Nixon, "The Populist Movement in Iowa," *Iowa Journal of History and Politics* 24 (1926), 3-107; Charles Roll, "Political Trends in Iowa History," *Iowa Journal of History and Politics* 26 (1928) 508-13; Earle D. Ross, *Iowa Agriculture: An Historical Survey* (Iowa City, 1951), 92-116; Sage, *History*, 188-215; Wall, *Bicentennial History*, 154-68.

towns. These self-employed, property-owning, independent producers had little understanding of the needs and demands of wage earners. Furthermore, the General Assembly met biennially rather than annually, and the sessions varied from 68 to 93 calendar days. The combination of short legislative sessions and a large volume of bills to consider left little opportunity for lawmakers to familiarize themselves with labor issues. Finally, the order encountered opposition from powerful mining and railroad corporations, wealthy industrialists, and influential businessmen. These factors led one analyst to conclude, "The natural conservatism of farmers and the fear of frightening capital and enterprise away from the State make the legislature reluctant to adopt any measure distasteful to these interests. Hence, it is only by the pressure of public opinion or by the political power of the class most concerned that legislation in the interest of labor has been or can be secured." Despite these drawbacks, the Knights managed to score some legislative victories by virtue of "class" cohesion and "public" support.<sup>23</sup>

Understanding the plight of workers, the order held, required systematic collection of data on the "commercial, social, educational, and sanitary conditions of the laboring classes." The 1884 act creating the Iowa Bureau of Labor Statistics resulted primarily from the sustained lobbying of the Knights of Labor. Knights leaders drafted the bill, appeared before the committees, and secured enough supporters to ensure passage by the General Assembly.<sup>24</sup>

The bureau gathered information by correspondence, investigation, and testimony. Unfortunately it suffered from insufficient funding, inadequate staffing, and ineffective enforcement. The bureau was essentially a one-person operation, headed by a commissioner appointed by the governor with the advice and consent of the Executive Council for a term of two years. The commissioner's salary of \$1,500 per year

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23. Downey, *Labor Legislation*, 3. See also Frank J. Stork and Cynthia A. Clingan, comps., *The Iowa General Assembly: Our Legislative Heritage, 1846-1980* (Des Moines, 1980), 1, 9, 11.

24. J. R. Sovereign to T. V. Powderly, 24 December 1887, Powderly Papers; 1884 *Laws of Iowa*, chap. 132; Pollock, *Economic Legislation*, 261-62; Downey, *Labor Legislation*, 193-205; John E. Briggs, *History of Social Legislation in Iowa* (Iowa City, 1915), 106-8.

remained unchanged from 1884 to 1907. Despite repeated requests by the commissioner and the Knights, the legislature refused to appropriate more money, and ignored pleas for another staff position until 1894. The commissioner could subpoena witnesses, but could not compel employers to submit reports on their employees. Not surprisingly, then, business compliance was minimal before 1896, when reporting was made compulsory. Many large employers obstructed the bureau's operation by ignoring the questionnaires mailed to them, refusing to allow the commissioner access to their factories and financial records, and preventing their employees from furnishing information. These frustrations reduced the effectiveness of the bureau, but it won more grudging cooperation from the state's business community as the years passed. Under these circumstances, the commissioner appreciated the crucial assistance rendered by Knights statisticians. The bureau's suggestions for labor reforms essentially replicated the Knights' legislative platform. When a leader among the Iowa Knights, James R. Sovereign, was appointed commissioner in 1890, he gloated that the order now controlled the bureau.<sup>25</sup>

Beyond their influence with the Bureau of Labor Statistics, Knights lobbyists initiated legislative drives to secure workplace improvements for wage earners. Reflecting its large membership of miners, the Iowa order pressed for ameliorative mining laws. Coal mining was a perilous, oppressive, and exhausting occupation. Weighing and screening practices, monthly pay, health and safety hazards, and frequent layoffs were the major job-related grievances of Iowa miners. They also complained about company stores, poor housing, and the isolation of the coal camps and company towns.<sup>26</sup>

25. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Biennial Report, 1884-85*, 12-14, 47-50, 363; *ibid.*, 1886-87, 1-6; *ibid.*, 1888-89, 1-2, 386, 404-8; *ibid.*, 1890-91, 1-3, 246-47; *ibid.*, 1892-93, 5-12; *ibid.*, 1894-95, 5-6, 20-22; *Journal of United Labor*, October 1883; J. R. Sovereign to T. V. Powderly, 28 April 1890, Powderly Papers; Petition from Iowa State Assembly of the Knights of Labor asking for appointment of Sovereign as Labor Commissioner, February 1890, and appointment of Sovereign as Labor Commissioner, 27 March 1890, in Iowa Governor's Office Correspondence, State Archives, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.

26. Douglas, "Fighting Against Hope," 7-9; Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Biennial Report, 1884-85*, 207-25, 363; *ibid.*, 1886-87, 188-90, 211-17; *ibid.*,

Before the Knights' arrival on the legislative scene, the Iowa General Assembly passed an act in 1872 that provided for county inspection of mines upon written application of a mine's owner, operator, or employees. Another law in 1874 required semiannual county inspections of all mines with ten or more employees. The 1874 act also prohibited any mine employment of women and children under age ten. But limited competence, funds, and powers reduced the effectiveness of county inspectors.<sup>27</sup>

Building on this regulatory foundation, the Knights played the leading role in securing passage of mine legislation intended both to extend regulation and to enhance enforcement. A new inspection law, promoted by the Knights of Labor and passed in 1880, moved mine inspection from the makeshift county system to the state level. The act provided for a State Mine Inspector, who was appointed by the governor with the consent of the senate, served a two-year term, and received an annual salary of \$1,500. Knowledgeable about mine engineering, the inspector issued annual reports on the state's coal mines, gathering data on production, employees, accidents, and other matters. Small mines, employing fewer than fifteen persons, were exempted from the law's provisions. The 1880 act also raised from ten to twelve years the age limit below which children could not work in mines. The Knights supported subsequent enactments that improved the basic 1880 law: in 1884 the inspector's salary was increased to \$1,700 per year and the exemption for small mines was repealed; in 1886 the state was divided into three districts with one inspector for each district; and in 1888 the mine inspectors were appointed on a merit basis.<sup>28</sup>

A series of specific state enactments sought to protect the health and safety of miners and to give them full control of their wages. The Amalgamated Association of Miners of the

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1888-89, 170-73, 386; *ibid.*, 1890-91, 247-56; *Proceedings of District Assembly No. 28, July 11-12, 1883*, 8.

27. 1872 *Laws of Iowa*, chap. 44; 1874 *Laws of Iowa*, chap. 31; Swisher, "Mining," 333; Downey, *Labor Legislation*, 33-64, 111-12; Pollock, *Economic Legislation*, 254; Briggs, *Social Legislation*, 110-17.

28. 1880 *Laws of Iowa*, chap. 202; Swisher, "Mining," 334; Downey, *Labor Legislation*, 37-40, 111-12; Pollock, *Economic Legislation*, 254-55.

State of Iowa—organized in 1882 and composed of Knights miners—helped draft a comprehensive law called the Mines and Mining Act of 1884. The provisions covered such matters as requiring a sufficient number of mine exits, setting standards for the mode and amount of ventilation, mandating proper timbering of rooms and entrances, and making safeguards for hoisting machinery obligatory. The Amalgamated and the Knights also cooperated to help secure 1888 legislation ensuring that miners receive fair compensation for their labor. This was accomplished in two ways. First, the law ended the opportunity for operators to defraud miners by exclusive control of the weighing and screening of coal. Miners received the right to appoint a “check-weighman” and to secure compensation based on “full weight” before screening. Second, the payment of wages in cash replaced the truck system under which operators often enriched themselves by paying employees in scrip redeemable only at company-owned stores. In addition, pay-days now occurred semimonthly rather than monthly.<sup>29</sup>

The Iowa General Assembly passed more legislation benefiting coal miners than any other classification of laborers largely because miners were a large and cohesive group of wage earners who militantly refused to accept deplorable working conditions. When strikes occurred, Knights miners could be found as both participants and strategists. The Knights provided Iowa miners with leadership both on the picket line and in the legislative arena. Assisted by the labor commissioner, Knights activists persistently documented the abuses suffered by miners and formulated corrective measures. Members of the Iowa Assembly proved responsive to this lobbying because they understood the strength of the miners’ vote.

Another hazardous occupation that drew the order’s reform efforts was railroading. Between 1878 and 1893, 1,027

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29. 1884 *Laws of Iowa*, chap. 21; 1888 *Laws of Iowa*, chaps. 54, 55; Douglas, “Fighting Against Hope,” 14; Swisher, “Mining,” 334–35; Downey, *Labor Legislation*, 35–36, 65–71; Pollock, *Economic Legislation*, 255–57; *Proceedings of District Assembly No. 28, January 13–15, 1886*, 19–20; *ibid.*, July 14–16, 1886, 21; *Proceedings of Iowa State Assembly, July 13–15, 1887*, 30–32; *ibid.*, February 11–13, 1890, 7–8; *ibid.*, February 10–12, 1891, 21–22; *Journal of United Labor*, October 1883, 25 April 1886; *Dubuque Industrial Leader*, 18 February 1888; *Iowa State Register*, 11 February 1888.

Iowa railway employees died and 5,862 suffered injuries in work-related accidents. Two-thirds of these casualties occurred during operation of the trains. An 1878 law established the State Board of Railroad Commissioners. The Railroad Commissioners typically investigated collision and derailment accidents resulting in personal injury or loss of life. The Knights and railway workers complained bitterly that the commissioners neglected the dangers from routine train movements. While collisions and derailments accounted for 10 percent of the casualties to railroad employees, nearly 55 percent resulted from coupling or uncoupling cars, falling from trains, and getting on or off moving trains.<sup>30</sup>

The principal cause of these deaths and injuries was the use of manually operated link and pin couplers and hand brakes referred to as "man-traps" by railroad workers. Railroads initially resisted technological improvements promising safer coupling and braking. Following the development of the Westinghouse air brake and Janney automatic coupler in the mid-1880s, few railroads proved willing to incur the expense of adopting the new devices. Thanks to years of persistent crusading by Lorenzo S. Coffin and enthusiastic support from the Knights of Labor and railway employees throughout the state, the Iowa legislature finally passed the automatic-coupler and power-brake law of 1890. Railway companies secured time extensions, but, with full installation of the safety appliances in 1900, the landmark law drafted by Coffin produced dramatic results. The employee accident rate declined by 60 percent and the railroads themselves benefited financially from installing more durable and efficient equipment.<sup>31</sup>

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30. Downey, *Labor Legislation*, 76-77.

31. *Dubuque Industrial Leader*, 25 June, 15 October 1887; Downey, *Labor Legislation*, 77-85, 88-89; Briggs, *Social Legislation*, 117; Pollock, *Economic Legislation*, 259; Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Biennial Report, 1892-93*, 341; L. S. Coffin, "Safety Appliances on Railroads," *Annals of Iowa* 5 (1903), 561-82; Roger B. Natta, "Lorenzo S. Coffin," in Robert L. Frey, ed., *Railroads in the Nineteenth Century*, a volume of the *Encyclopedia of American Business History and Biography* (New York, 1988), 53-57. Lorenzo S. Coffin, farm leader and political activist, served as president of the Iowa Farmers' Alliance (1880-1883) and as Iowa Railroad Commissioner (1883-1885). His long struggle to secure railway safety legislation in Iowa was replicated at the national level with a similar measure passed in 1893.

One safety issue in factories was addressed in an 1882 act that gave incorporated cities and towns the authority to require and regulate the construction of fire escapes. Local officials generally ignored the law, however.<sup>32</sup> But in Dubuque, female garment workers, recently unionized under the Knights banner, won a significant victory following a confrontation with their employer in 1886. The employees were angered by locked doors and inadequate fire exits at the overalls factory where they worked. The company responded to their protest by claiming that there were sufficient exits, that the locked doors prevented unauthorized entry and departure, and that designated males had keys to open the doors in case of an emergency. Appalled by these rationalizations, the women asked for an investigation and petitioned the city council. Finally their employer capitulated, agreeing to leave a side door open on the first floor and to install three fire escapes on the other floors of the four-story building.<sup>33</sup>

The Iowa General Assembly also enacted some other labor legislation. While the state had no general law governing the hours of labor on public works, an act passed in 1884 set a nine-hour day for work on public roads. An 1888 law outlawed the practice of blacklisting. In 1892 three labor measures were enacted. One provided that employers in mercantile and manufacturing establishments must maintain seats for female employees. Another prevented the counterfeiting or unauthorized use of union labels. The final 1892 law permitted qualified voters to absent themselves from work for two hours on election day without penalty or wage deduction. Each of these measures received the Knights' endorsement, and order lobbyists pushed for their adoption.<sup>34</sup>

Many of these labor laws, sadly, were weakened by language loopholes, enforcement problems, or limiting compro-

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32. Downey, *Labor Legislation*, 98; Pollock, *Economic Legislation*, 264.

33. Dubuque City Council Record, 3 May, 7 July 1886, Carnegie-Stout Public Library, Dubuque; *Dubuque Daily Times*, 1, 4, 5 May 1886; *Dubuque Daily Herald*, 1, 5 May 1886.

34. Downey, *Labor Legislation*, 101-2, 186, 187, 190-91; Briggs, *Social Legislation*, 110; Pollock, *Economic Legislation*, 267; Federal Writers' Project, *Iowa*, 99; Gallaher, *Status of Women*, 148; Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Biennial Report, 1890-91*, 254; *ibid.*, 1892-93, 343.

mises. In the area of mine legislation, children as young as nine continued to work in mines despite the law making twelve the minimum allowable age for such labor. No testing provisions existed to determine compliance with ventilation standards. About one-third of the scales used to weigh coal proved to be defective. The law requiring miners to be paid by the coal weight before screening was rendered inoperative by the words, "unless otherwise agreed upon in writing." The mine owners simply insisted on enforcing the old contracts with screen clauses, and all new contracts made the screen a condition of employment. Although prohibited by law, the payment of wages in scrip or truck continued in some parts of the Iowa mining industry. Delays in full compliance with the 1890 law requiring all railroad rolling stock to be equipped with automatic couplers and power brakes caused some needless casualties among railway employees. The 1888 law prohibiting black-listing was generally ignored, particularly in the Iowa coal fields. In addition to these legal problems, the lack of adequate funding and staff continued to hamper the Bureau of Labor Statistics.<sup>35</sup>

Facing strong opposition from well-financed legislative committees or special representatives of employer associations formed in mining, railroading, retailing, and manufacturing, the Knights of Labor also suffered outright defeat on a number of labor measures. E. L. Hutchins, first commissioner of the Bureau of Labor Statistics, completed an exhaustive study of the state's three contracts to provide private employers with convict labor. He concluded that the contracts should not be renewed as they angered workers, hurt manufacturing, and disgraced the state. Neither the commissioner's study nor the Knights' consistent characterizing of contracted prisoners as cheap, unfair, and involuntary labor persuaded legislators to abandon the practice, however. In his role as second commissioner of the Bureau of Labor Statistics, Knights leader James R. Sovereign recommended that the bureau be authorized to maintain a free employment agency. Although securing the endorsement of the governor, Sovereign's proposal never

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35. Downey, *Labor Legislation*, 48, 64-66, 46, 80-85, 186; Pollock, *Economic Legislation*, 259; Douglas, "Fighting Against Hope," 12-14.

reached a vote in either branch of the General Assembly. The order's call for free school textbooks provided by the state met a similar fate.<sup>36</sup>

The Iowa Knights of Labor also garnered little support among legislators for more comprehensive labor measures. The State Assembly drafted a bill in 1886 to create a State Board of Arbitration both to settle industrial disputes and to prevent them from occurring. Decisions of the board would be binding on both the employer and the employees with non-compliance constituting a misdemeanor. Despite pressure from the Knights and Commissioner Hutchins, the General Assembly rejected the idea. Instead, a substitute, enacted in 1886, permitted the establishment of county tribunals of voluntary arbitration that could only make unenforceable decisions. This voluntaristic scheme proved unworkable and was ultimately dropped.<sup>37</sup>

The two most ambitious Knights' bills also failed. One concerned the abolition of child labor. The other called for establishing general health and safety codes as well as a general employers' liability for employee injury. Aside from prohibiting youth under age twelve from laboring in mines, no general child labor laws existed before 1900. The Knights wanted to enjoin the employment of children under fifteen years of age in all of the state's mines, factories, and workshops. A bill incorporating these principles was introduced by Senator W. W. Dodge of Burlington in 1886 and again in 1890. Despite pressure for passage by the Knights and investigations of child labor

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36. Pollock, *Economic Legislation*, 253; Downey, *Labor Legislation*, 28-32, 188-89; Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Biennial Report, 1884-85*, 123; *ibid.*, 1886-87, 232-93; *ibid.*, 1890-91, 2-3; *ibid.*, 1892-93, 11-12; *Proceedings of District Assembly No. 28, January 13-15, 1886*, 25-36; *ibid.*, July 14-16, 1886, 27-29; *Proceedings of the Iowa State Assembly, July 13-15, 1887*, 30-32; *ibid.*, February 11-13, 1890, 7-8, 18-19; *ibid.*, February 10-12, 1891, 21-22; *Dubuque Industrial Leader*, 18 February 1888; *Iowa State Register*, 11 February 1888.

37. *Proceedings of District Assembly No. 28, January 13-15, 1886*, 16-17; *ibid.*, July 14-16, 1886, 28; *Proceedings of the Iowa State Assembly, July 13-15, 1887*, 30-32; Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Biennial Report, 1884-85*, 363; *ibid.*, 1890-91, 242-45; Downey, *Labor Legislation*, 191-92; Pollock, *Economic Legislation*, 268; *Dubuque Industrial Leader*, 19 November 1887, 18 February 1888; *Iowa State Register*, 11 February 1888.

by Commissioner Hutchins, the Dodge bill was twice killed in committee.<sup>38</sup>

Dubuque Knights took the initiative in drafting a labor protection bill. They convinced Senator William J. Knight, a Dubuque Democrat and railroad lawyer, to sponsor the proposed legislation. Iowa factories were places of foul air, dangerous machinery, and filthy work areas. The Knights measure, introduced at the 1886 legislative session, called for proper ventilation, safety guards on equipment, and adequate fire escapes and restroom facilities. Manufacturers labeled these provisions unnecessary and costly. They reserved their strongest condemnation, however, for a section making employers liable for on-the-job injuries to employees. The bill reached the floor of the state senate, but intense pressure from a Dubuque-led delegation of Iowa manufacturers and ineffective lobbying by two Knights officials sent the bill back to committee where it was postponed indefinitely.<sup>39</sup>

The Knights of Labor compiled a mixed legislative record in the Iowa General Assembly. They were the state's foremost advocates of progressive labor laws. Local assemblies had active legislative committees. Where the Knights had large local assemblies, in cities like Clinton, Des Moines, Burlington, and Dubuque, they worked closely with sympathetic legislators to draft labor bills. State Assembly gatherings often included reports from delegations sent to lobby statehouse committees. The two great advantages that opponents of Knights-backed labor legislation had, of course, were money and time. Workers with meager earnings could not afford to leave their daily toil and descend upon the state capital. Even after passage, moreover, labor laws frequently required amendment, repeal, or reenactment because their provisions proved inadequate or ineffective.

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38. Downey, *Labor Legislation*, 112-13; Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Biennial Report, 1886-87*, 203, 408-9; *ibid.*, 1888-89, 405-7; Pollock, *Economic Legislation*, 206; *Proceedings of District Assembly No. 28, January 13-15, 1886*, 26; *Proceedings of Iowa State Assembly, July 13-15, 1887*, 31; *ibid.*, *February 11-13, 1890*, 7.

39. See Scharnau, "Workers and Politics," 362-63.

IN ORDER TO SECURE FAVORABLE LEGISLATION, the Iowa Knights vowed to vote for candidates sympathetic with their aims. The two major parties were forced to tolerate the Knights of Labor as an influential interest group, but they generally did so without relinquishing their control of electoral politics. Because Republicans dominated state politics, Democrats were somewhat more amenable to cooperation with the order. Nevertheless, both Republican and Democratic party leaders resorted to a number of devices to manipulate the labor vote. Members of the two old parties tried to portray themselves as devoted to working people. They attended Knights meetings, adopted platforms with labor planks, traded charges of harboring antilabor sentiments, and put token workers on their tickets. Once the election was over, though, party regulars usually forgot about any campaign promises made to the Knights and returned to politics as usual. This penchant for trying to preempt the labor vote drew a scathing editorial response from a Knights paper. "The Democratic party," it said, "is simply an organized appetite for office, just as the Republican party is an organized pool of corporate plunderers."<sup>40</sup>

Disappointed with the "friends of labor" in the major parties, frustrated by the slow and uncertain path of lobbying, and emboldened by the political clout of burgeoning assemblies, a number of strong local assemblies turned to independent politics. In the spring elections of 1886 and 1887, local assemblies fielded labor tickets in well over a dozen communities. Despite hostility from the daily press, scorn from the regular party bosses, and hysteria from boards of trade, Knights nominees won mayoral contests in Clinton, Marshalltown, Waterloo, Lyons, Boone, Dubuque, Missouri Valley, Cedar Falls, and Stuart. The Knights also claimed other executive offices and aldermanic posts in many of those races. The banner cities were Dubuque and Marshalltown, where the laborites scored a clean sweep of elective positions. Marshalltown was probably the only city, however, where the Knights were able to reelect their ticket. In Dubuque and Clinton the two major parties fused to defeat the incumbent laborites and to "save the city," as a

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40. *Dubuque Industrial Leader*, 18 June 1887.

Dubuque daily newspaper put it, "from the noxious weeds of socialism." After the election, the editor of the *Dubuque Industrial Leader* bitterly commented,

There is not a shade of difference in principle between a Democrat and a Republican, because neither have any principles at all, simply a greed of office; and the political parties are simply machines to put men into positions where they can live off the public treasury and sell official power to the wealthy incorporated criminal classes. The two parties are but two tails to the capitalistic kite, and when the interest of capitalism can be better subserved by uniting these tails into one, or when the spoils of office can be more surely secured thus, it will be done, and you can always depend upon it.

Although not successful, labor tickets also appeared in Burlington, Sioux City, Cedar Rapids, Creston, Muscatine, and Des Moines. The Knights ticket prevailed at Lehigh in the spring of 1888, but apparently the last election of a labor mayor occurred at Newton the following spring.<sup>41</sup>

Local Knights regimes enacted class-related ordinances and enlarged public services. In Dubuque, for example, reorganization of the police force meant staffing it entirely with Knights members. The Knights-dominated city council also abolished private subcontracting for street work, hired day labor, and raised wages for city work by 40 percent. Reforming the city's tax structure by instituting fairer and more progressive taxation rates resulted in both greater revenues and a slightly lower tax levy. Finally, the labor rulers at city hall financed improved river, road, and railway transportation and installed a new fire alarm system. Dubuque's labor council managed to administer city affairs without the class warfare or economic disaster predicted by some influential citizens. The

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41. Quotes from *Dubuque Daily Times*, 3 April 1888, and *Dubuque Industrial Leader*, 3 September 1887. See also *Dubuque Daily Herald*, 3 March 1886, 5 March, 5-8 April 1887; *Dubuque Industrial Leader*, 27 August 1887; Fink, *Workingmen's Democracy*, 28; *Labor Enquirer* (Denver), 9 April 1887; *Cedar Rapids Evening Gazette*, 15 February 1887; *Iowa State Register*, 3, 4 March 1886, 8, 9, 10 March 1887; Arnold Walliker to T. V. Powderly, 4 March 1886, Powderly Papers; *Journal of United Labor*, 4 April 1889; *Fort Dodge Messenger*, 22 March 1888.

laborites raised public consciousness of labor issues and instituted some modest reforms.<sup>42</sup>

Even the order's short-lived success in municipal elections was not matched in other contests. The Knights nominated candidates for county, state, and congressional races in 1886 and 1887. Election victories, however, usually came only with major party endorsements. If the Knights ran an independent ticket, they generally could muster no better than a third-place finish. The Knights' electoral power was like a meteor flashing across the Iowa political sky in the mid-1880s. By the late 1880s a sharp decline began, and the order turned its energies to building coalitions with farmers.

As a matter of fact, farmers had been an important element in the Iowa Knights of Labor from the beginning. Farm planks on money, land, credit, and transportation regularly appeared in the proceedings of the state assembly. The order's literature contains repeated references to farmers "clamoring" for membership and "rapidly coming into the ranks." Several all-farmer local assemblies were founded. Before the Knights of Labor arrived in Iowa, the task of mobilizing farm protest fell to the Greenback party formed in 1876. Greenback party members served in the Iowa General Assembly in 1878, 1880, 1882, and 1884, but they never claimed more than eight seats in the 150-member body. Getting the prominent Iowa Greenbacker and former Republican James B. Weaver elected to Congress, moreover, required fusion with the Democratic party. A significant number of Greenbackers joined the Knights of Labor and took leadership roles. Order members, in turn, frequently supported Greenback candidates in state and congressional contests. While the Greenback party ebbed in the mid-1880s, the Knights enjoyed their brief moment in the political sun.<sup>43</sup>

42. For an account of the Dubuque Knights of Labor in city government, see Scharnau, "Workers and Politics," 368-74.

43. Nixon, "Populist Movement," 23-25; Haynes, *Third Party Movements*, 153-201; Stork and Clingan, *Iowa General Assembly*, 52, 53, 119, 122, 128, 129, 130, 142, 144, 146, 171, 203, 215, 216, 221; *Proceedings of District Assembly No. 28, January 13-15, 1886*, 17-20; *ibid.*, July 14-16, 1886, 6, 27-29; *Proceedings of the Iowa State Assembly, July 13-15, 1887*, 6, 30-32, 42; *Dubuque Industrial Leader*, 18 February 1888; *Iowa State Register*, 11 February 1888; *Journal of United Labor*, 10 July, 10 September 1886, 6 August 1887; M. L.

At the Iowa State Assembly that met at Des Moines in 1888, nearly half of the delegates were farmers. With declining political clout and rising farmer participation, the Knights looked to greater cooperation between wage earners and independent producers. The Union Labor party represented the Knights' attempt to secure a labor-farmer fusion. This national party held its inaugural convention at Cincinnati in February of 1887, and the state convention followed in June. In Iowa, Knights and Greenbackers rallied behind the new party. Politically, however, the Union Labor party proved to be a disappointment. Beginning in the fall of 1887, the party ran local, county, state, and congressional candidates who regularly finished a distant third. By 1890 the Union Laborites had managed to elect only one representative and one senator to the General Assembly.<sup>44</sup>

The poor showing of the Union Labor party did not diminish the hopes to solidify the producing classes into a formidable political entity. This time the agrarians, rather than the Knights of Labor, provided the organizational vehicles for a third-party movement. In Iowa, the decline of the Greenback party was matched by the rise of the Farmers' Alliance. The Iowa Alliance, formed in 1881, had cooperated with the Knights of Labor in a number of ways. Alliance members had attended and addressed meetings of the Iowa State Assembly. Both groups held virtually identical views of labor and farm issues. Some members of the Alliance affiliated with the Knights, and the two organizations occasionally did joint lobbying. Despite this close partnership, the Alliance initially refused to consider

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Wheat to T. V. Powderly, 9 August, 9 November 1886, J. R. Sovereign to T. V. Powderly, 17 February 1890, U. D. Brown to T. V. Powderly, 17 May 1887, George W. Lin to T. V. Powderly, 13 March 1888, Powderly Papers; *John Swinton's Paper* (New York), 7 March 1886, 29 May 1887; *Atlantic Daily Telegraph*, 26 July 1886.

44. *Dubuque Industrial Leader*, 18 February 1888; Haynes, *Third Party Movements*, 195, 206, 310; Nixon, "Populist Movement," 29-31; Stork and Clingan, *Iowa General Assembly*, 82-169; *Iowa State Register*, 10 June 1887, 11 February 1888; J. R. Sovereign to T. V. Powderly, 13 June 1887, Powderly Papers; Luke McDowell to L. H. Weller, 12 August 1889, Luman Hamilton Weller Papers, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison. The Union Labor party ran Anson J. Streeter for president of the U.S. in 1888. He received about 150,000 votes.

offers of fusion with the Knights and clung to nonpartisan support of the major parties. Nonetheless, cooperation on some issues, at least, reached the national level, when representatives of both groups signed a platform agreement at St. Louis in December 1889. The waning strength of the Knights of Labor was indicated by the number of representatives from each body: the Alliance had eighteen while the Knights had only three. The political breakthrough for the Alliance came in early 1890. With a reported statewide membership of fifty thousand, the Iowa Farmers' Alliance finally dropped its nonpartisan stance. The Alliance ran its own independent candidates and drew closer to the politically minded Knights. Meanwhile the Union Labor and Greenback parties had founded the Union Labor Industrial party of Iowa in August 1890 at Des Moines. This fledgling attempt at coalescing and reviving the two moribund parties served merely as a temporary bridge to the bigger and more inclusive Populist party. When the Iowa People's party convention opened in Des Moines on June 3, 1891, it included Knights and trade unionists, Greenback and Alliance supporters, and an assortment of representatives from other agrarian and industrial groups.<sup>45</sup>

The forging of this farm-labor coalition continued the reform tradition during the 1890s. As the strength of the Knights diminished among urban workers, they became more concerned with farm issues. Both General Master Workman Terence V. Powderly, head of the order's national organization, and his successor, Iowan James R. Sovereign, signaled this shift toward a more rural agenda. In a letter to Iowa's popular Greenback Congressman, James B. Weaver, Powderly expressed his support for Weaver and stated that the order should press ahead on the triumvirate of agrarianism: "finance, transportation, and land." In a Labor Day address, Sovereign called "land, money, and the tariff" the three great issues of the day.

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45. Nixon, "Populist Movement," 16, 32-34, 38-39, 44, 55-56; Haynes, *Third Party Movements*, 214-15, 230-31, 308-14; *Iowa State Register*, 26 January 1887, 12 February, 8 June, 5, 15, August 1890, 12 February, 4, 5, June 1891; *Proceedings of District Assembly No. 28, January 13-15, 1886*, 14; *ibid.*, July 14-16, 1886, 19-20; *Proceedings of the Iowa State Assembly, February 11-13, 1890*, 6, 23, 24, 31; *ibid.*, February 10-12, 1891, 20-21; *Journal of the Knights of Labor*, 7 August 1890, 28 May 1891; *Burlington Gazette*, 17 November 1892.

Sovereign, who served as State Master Workman and State Labor Commissioner before his election as General Master Workman in 1893, devoted about half of his Bureau of Labor Statistics report in 1891 to agricultural data and views of farmers. The Knights had built a robust and distinctive labor movement in the 1880s. By the 1890s, farmers took the lead in forging a reform movement and appealing for unity among the producing classes.<sup>46</sup>

THE IOWA KNIGHTS' RAPID RISE to prominence, then, was followed by an equally swift decline. Membership losses in the late 1880s cut the order's numerical strength in half. By 1890 the signs of deterioration were unmistakable: local assemblies lapsed, labor papers expired, cooperative ventures failed, labor candidates were defeated, and halls closed. A series of interrelated factors precipitated this organizational disintegration. While the Knights promoted working-class solidarity, economic and cultural divisions remained. Wage earners experienced different working conditions, skill levels, wage structures, and job security. Background, nationality, attitudes, ambitions, and religion provided another fragmenting dimension. Competing cultural loyalties and contrasting work experiences provided the backdrop for the collapse of the movement. Organizational fissures appeared. Arguments over whether to pursue independent or fusion politics and whether to focus on strict labor issues or wider reforms brought controversies that weakened electoral unity. Some assemblies could be classified as "paper locals" because workers joined, refused to pay dues, balked at organizational work, and soon departed. Speaking of another problem, State Master Workman William T. Wright complained, "Localities that thought they were safe allowed their organization to disappear."<sup>47</sup> Other Knights leaders blamed "foes and traitors" or "curiosity seekers and political

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46. Powderly to Weaver, 3 October 1888, Powderly Papers; *Journal of the Knights of Labor*, 13 October 1892; Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Biennial Report, 1890-91*; *Proceedings of the Iowa State Assembly, February 11-13, 1890*, 6. Despite his prominence among laborers and farmers, there is no book-length biography of James R. Sovereign.

47. Wright to L. H. Weller, 30 December 1888, Weller Papers.

opportunists" in the ranks. Struggles for "personal supremacy" in the order also created acrimonious relations.<sup>48</sup> Thus factionalism destroyed the elan and optimism that had characterized the Knights-led Iowa labor movement. Even success itself was a cause of the decline. The recruits came so swiftly in 1886, for example, that the resulting chaotic mass of workers undermined efforts to create a disciplined rank-and-file committed to Knights principles. Finally, the order confronted the rivalry of a resurgent traditional trade unionism and the concomitant development of craft-oriented central bodies affiliated with the rising American Federation of Labor.

In addition to internal strife, a bourgeois counterattack crushed the once powerful forces of Knighthood. Employer resistance took a variety of forms: reduced wages, stricter supervision, longer hours, and leader firings. Equally important in quelling the Knights insurgency was the often united front of "citizen" opposition through smear tactics used by business leaders and the daily press. On the political front, leaders of the old parties contained the labor vote by a series of campaign maneuvers from blandishment and castigation to infiltration and cooption. Mounting a successful independent political action effort brought workers face to face with certain realities. Established party loyalties, hostility from elected officials, inadequate funds, inexperience in political organization, major parties' patronage, and outright corruption and fraud thwarted labor party effectiveness. Consequently, the entrenched two-party system and political power structure endured. In a larger sense, though, the failure of the Knights of Labor meant that its cherished democratic and egalitarian ideals could not prevail against a capitalist system based on managerial control of the work force and motivated solely by profit margins.<sup>49</sup>

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48. *Journal of United Labor*, 31 December 1887, 17 January 1889; *Proceedings of the Iowa State Assembly*, February 11-13, 1890, 22; Report of Leonora M. Berry, General Investigator of Woman's Work and Wages, Knights of Labor, 15 October 1888, Powderly Papers.

49. *Journal of the Knights of Labor*, 26 February 1891; Henry S. Wilcox to L. H. Weller, 4 January 1888, E. S. Wicklin to L. H. Weller, 5 April 1888, Thomas Meredith to W. T. Wright, 5 March 1889, W. T. Wright to L. H. Weller, 24 June 1889, Luke McDowell to L. H. Weller, 12 August 1889, J. R. Sovereign to L. H. Weller, 12 October 1889, Weller Papers; *Proceedings of the Iowa State Assem-*

Despite its demise, the Knights of Labor had a profound impact on Iowa. The rise of the order complemented the industrial stirrings in a leading farm state. The Knights championed the rights of wage earners and produced an Iowa labor movement unprecedented in its size, reach, diversity, and power. Belonging to the Knights meant more than simply being a union member, as the order succeeded for a brief time in forging a new labor unity. Going beyond job-conscious concerns with wages, hours, and working conditions, members formed a network of formal and informal associations reflecting a movement based on class experience and cultural cohesion. Their civic participation and partisan allegiance found a new identifying strength in productive labor. The Iowa Knights both opposed the corporate elite's consolidation of control over economic and political life and promoted an alternative labor vision of egalitarianism and communal relations in the workplace and at the statehouse. Independent politics contested rule by the wealthy. Cooperatives reflected dissatisfaction with economic individualism unrelieved by social responsibility. The Iowa Knights of Labor refashioned the working-class community by providing a new vehicle for self-assertion and societal reconstruction. Expanding into every part of the state, the order's impact seemed revolutionary.

The Knights' presence at the community level manifested itself in dramatic ways. The formation of local assemblies occasioned a good deal of "street talk" and often created alarm among local merchants. In Iowa the Knights controlled many local Fourth of July celebrations, identifying labor with the resistance and struggle in the American patriotic tradition.<sup>50</sup> Regular meetings, social gatherings, and cultural events in the order's halls transcended the traditional image of trade unions meeting in saloons. Seeing "Lady Knights" turned many heads accustomed to thinking of unions as male-only preserves. The doors to the order remained open to blacks and the unskilled,

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bly, *February* 11-13, 1890, 12-13; *ibid.*, *February* 10-12, 1891, 16-17; J. R. Sovereign to T. V. Powderly, 24 December 1887, 25 November 1893, Powderly Papers; Winn, "Iowa Labor," 4-6; Stuckey, *State Federation*, 11, 16-19.

50. *Journal of United Labor*, 6 August 1887.

two groups generally considered beyond the reach of craft unions. Cooperative enterprises added a new and different dimension to the mercantile scene of Iowa towns. What Paul Buhle wrote about the Rhode Island Knights also applies to the Iowa Knights: "Almost inadvertently, the Knights found themselves the expression of a working class moving from life-in-itself, isolated from the centers of power and influence, toward a class-for-itself, the center of a forward-looking, wide-ranging social force."<sup>51</sup> Like their Rhode Island counterparts, Iowa Knights moved the labor element into the whole fabric of daily activities in scores of localities.

The Knights' brand of what labor historian Richard Oestreicher calls "independent laborism" caused a political stir in dozens of Iowa towns and cities.<sup>52</sup> Local Knights members challenged the major parties' proclivity for ritualistically embracing the status quo. Platforms and candidates that ignored the working class were no longer good enough. In communities where they were strong, moreover, the Knights had the audacity to field their own labor tickets. Their sweeping victory in Dubuque was referred to by a local newspaper as a "social earthquake" so overwhelming as to cause "surprise and mortification."<sup>53</sup> Then there was the Iowa State Assembly that coordinated organizational work, mounted political campaigns, and lobbied for labor legislation. State organizers crisscrossed the state, chartering new locals, visiting old ones, and helping to build a united and powerful voice for a membership that reached thirty thousand. The labor legislation passed by the Iowa General Assembly in the 1880s stands as a monument to the power and influence of the Knights of Labor. These laws, imperfect though they were, represent a breakthrough for a rural state coming to grips with the forces of industrialization.

The Iowa Knights of Labor made several contributions to the progressive tradition. The order provided a training ground for labor leaders and political activists. They carried the order's

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51. Buhle, "Rhode Island Knights," 55.

52. Richard Oestreicher, "Urban Working-Class Political Behavior and Theories of American Electoral Politics, 1870-1940," *Journal of American History* 74 (1988), 1276.

53. *Dubuque Daily Times*, 5, 8 April 1887.

experience and principles into the emergent trade unionism of the American Federation of Labor and the agrarian reformism of the Populist party. The Knights launched the state's first mass labor movement. The labor legislation and electoral success attest to the Knights' accomplishment of making Iowa wage earners effective participants in the political process. By virtue of sheer numbers and wide-ranging activities, local assemblies left their imprint on more than two hundred communities. The Knights' legacy of inclusive organizing, political action, and a labor ethos of respect, dignity, and self-improvement can still challenge and inspire Iowa's working class today.

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