

In the history of occult traditions, secret societies, such as the fraternity of the Freemasons (significantly originating from the medieval stonemason guilds of Britain and Europe), shows that they were, from the premodern period on (the 16th and 17th centuries), involved in politics, with the liberal and left-wing factions promoting large-scale social reform and even envisioning egalitarian utopias of universal brotherhood. In the late 19th century, this kind of social reformist agenda became embodied in the Knights of Labor.

Originally founded as a secret society of tailors, the “Noble and Holy Order of the Knights of Labor,” or simply The Knights of Labor, an American labor federation founded in 1869, eventually grew to become a national union with a labor force of 700,000 workers. The motto featured on their official seal is “An injury to one is the concern of all.” At its peak in 1886, the Knights of Labor represented approximately 800,000 members.

As indicated, there is a direct and intentional connection between the Knights of Labor and secret, occult societies, notably Freemasonry.

The title “Grand Master Workman” used by the Knights of Labor was heavily inspired by the nomenclature of Freemasonry and other 19th-century fraternal organizations. When Uriah Smith Stephens and a handful of Philadelphia garment cutters founded the organization in 1869, they didn't just call it a union; they named it “The Noble and Holy Order of the Knights of Labor.” Stephens, who drafted the group’s initial constitution and rituals, was himself a dedicated Freemason (initiated in 1864), as well as a member of the Odd Fellows and the Knights of Pythias. The structural and linguistic DNA of the early labor movement was deeply intertwined with fraternal culture for several critical reasons.

(1) The Architectural Blueprint of the Rituals: Stephens

envisioned the Knights of Labor not merely as a “bread-and-butter” trade union negotiating for wages, but as a sacred brotherhood dedicated to the moral, intellectual, and social elevation of the working class. To achieve this, he built a deeply secretive, esoteric culture known as the “Adelphos Kruptos” (Secret Brotherhood). Thus, the leadership hierarchy explicitly mirrored Masonic grand lodges. Local meeting halls were referred to as “Sanctuaries,” and early assemblies featured symbolic altars (including a square altar and a red triangular altar) and an open Bible.

(2) Secrecy as a Practical Shield: In the late 1860s and 1870s, labor organizing was incredibly dangerous. Corporate syndicates used private detectives and security agencies (such as the Pinkerton agency), blacklists, and yellow-dog contracts to destroy early trade unions and even assassinate their leaders. By structuring the Knights of Labor like a Masonic lodge—using secret signs, passwords, handshakes, and coded symbols (like the

“Five Stars” representing the inner circle)—Stephens provided his members with an ironclad layer of operational security. If an employer didn't know who belonged to the "Noble and Holy Order," they couldn't fire them.

(3) The Shift from “Grand” to “General:” The Masonic influence eventually created a massive internal crisis for the organization. The Catholic Church, which strictly forbade its faithful from joining oath-bound secret societies, barred Catholics from joining the Knights. Because a massive portion of the industrial workforce consisted of Irish and Central European Catholic immigrants, this restriction severely bottlenecked the union’s growth. When Terence V. Powderly (who ironically died a 33rd-degree Freemason himself) succeeded Stephens as the leader in 1879, he recognized that the strict Masonic-style secrecy had to go if the union was to survive. Thus, in a historic pivot in 1881, the Order voted to make its name public, abolish its initiating oaths, and strip the esoteric “Grand” titles to make the organization

more secular and acceptable to the Church.

Consequently, the “Grand Master Workman” became the “General Master Workman” and the “Grand Secretary” became the “General Secretary.”

This modernization allowed the Knights to experience a meteoric rise, surging to nearly 800,000 members by 1886. Even though the secret society titles were replaced, the linguistic lineage remained a fascinating artifact of a time when the labor movement borrowed the armor of medieval chivalry and Masonic mysticism to protect the American worker.