

Débats — Debates

“The Bonds of Unity”: A Comment

by Michael J. PIVA*

In the course of historical debate one does not wish to be too fastidious, yet some problems demand comment. I would like to address a few short remarks on one specific aspect of a recent article by Gregory Kealey and Bryan Palmer which appeared in *Histoire sociale — Social History*. On the whole I find “The Bonds of Unity: The Knights of Labor in Ontario, 1880-1900”¹ an interesting piece of research. However, I also find that on at least one point it exaggerates the significance of the Order both for the labour movement and for Ontario society at large. The authors argue “that the Knights of Labor represented the most important moment in the history of Ontario labour until the coming of the Congress of Industrial Organizations in the late 1930s” (pp. 390-91). They believe that “by examining the structural situation of the Order, where and when it organized in Ontario, and how many (in rough terms) it drew to its ranks, ... we can establish the class character and importance of the Knights of Labor” (p. 372). They devote Section II, entitled “Warp, Woof and Web: The Structural Context of the Knights of Labor in Ontario”, to this task and conclude that “the Knights of Labor represented a quantitative breakthrough for Ontario’s workers” (p. 391). Alas, the data will not support these conclusions. My criticisms are of two types. The first is methodological: I will argue that Kealey/Palmer have drawn questionable conclusions because their data are at times incomplete and often improperly handled. The second is interpretive: I will suggest that the volatility of the membership can be seen in a quite different light from that presented by Kealey/Palmer.

Kealey/Palmer begin their analysis of membership by observing that “any attempt to address the numerical significance of the Order will founder if it is reduced to a count of peak membership at any given point”. Instead they add together “peak official membership at single points in time for some specific locales” (p. 387). Thus, by adding various “peaks”

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¹ Gregory S. KEALEY and Bryan D. PALMER, “The Bonds of Unity: The Knights of Labor in Ontario, 1880-1900”, *Histoire sociale — Social History*, XIV (Novembre 1981): 369-412. All subsequent references to this article will cite page references in the text.

from various places throughout the province at various times “with no account taken of volatility” (p. 388), they conclude that “over the course of their history the Knights organized a minimum of 21,800 members”. They add parenthetically that “a figure double this might not overstate the numbers actually enrolled” (pp. 388-89). Even if we accept this figure as technically correct — that 21,800 people at some point, no matter how fleetingly, joined the Knights — serious doubt remains about its significance. The two questions which immediately pose themselves are: 1) is 21,800 a large or a small number, and 2) is 21,800 the minimum or the maximum estimate of Knights’ membership in Ontario?

Let us turn first to the question of whether 21,800 is a large or a small number. Kealey/Palmer think it a very large number indeed. They observe that 21,800 Knights represent 18.4 percent and 13.1 percent of the total number of “hands employed in manufacturing” in 1881 and 1891 respectively. They then add to the Knights’ membership an unspecified number of trade unionists and conclude that “at a very minimum the 1880s saw twenty to twenty-five percent of the *total non-agricultural work-force* drawn to the ranks of organized labour” (p. 389, emphasis added). If this were the case we would indeed have the “quantitative breakthrough” claimed by Kealey/Palmer, but this conclusion breaks down completely under even superficial examination. Note the shift here from one sentence to the next: first we have “hands employed in manufacturing” and then a conclusion about the “non-agricultural work-force” as if the two were the same. The discussion of Table 3 and Table 4 in subsequent paragraphs continues the confusion between these two very different categories. Kealey/Palmer repeatedly substitute one for the other as if “hands employed in manufacturing” and “non-agricultural work-force” were interchangeable (pp. 389-90). Through this alchemy they manufacture the figure of 20 to 25 percent of the non-agricultural work-force, and then assert that this was a “higher percentage than any period prior to the post-World War II upsurge”. They also observe that this is significantly higher than the “ten percent of the work-force” organized during the first decades of the twentieth century (p. 389). Note that in this final sentence they drop the important qualifier “non-agricultural”. Let us examine these figures more carefully.

We cannot divide 21,800 Knights by the number of hands employed in manufacturing and expect to get a figure that means anything. The reasons should be obvious. To begin, the Knights organized telegraphers (p. 383), letter carriers (p. 387), longshoremen (p. 387), railway workers (p. 388), and many others who did not work in manufacturing. Kealey/Palmer do not tell us what proportion of the 21,800 Knights worked in manufacturing, but we do know that only a minority of Ontario’s workers toiled in this sector of the economy. Many more worked in construction, domestic service, transportation, and other sectors. The two figures of 18.4 percent and 13.1 percent cited by Kealey/Palmer for 1881 and 1891 respectively are, then, totally devoid of meaning. These percentages tell us neither the number of manufacturing workers organized by the Knights nor the percentage of the non-agricultural work-force organized. The aggregate tables on

occupations in either the 1881 or the 1891 census could have been consulted but apparently were not. Had they been consulted the results would have been quite different.

For the purposes of this commentary I shall restrict myself for the moment to the 1891 census. That census grouped occupations into six broad categories. One of these, "non-productive", included people who listed occupations but were not gainfully employed.² Eliminating these, the total work-force in Ontario was a little more than 730,000 in 1891. To calculate the non-agricultural work-force we must look in more detail at the broad category of "Agriculture, the Fisheries, and Mining". Within this group are five occupations we will include in our calculations: lumbermen and raftsmen, miners, officials of mining and quarrying companies, quarrymen and wood choppers. All other occupations in this group are clearly agricultural and can be subtracted from the total work-force to arrive at a reasonably precise calculation of the non-agricultural work-force.

If we accept the Kealey/Palmer figure of 21,800 Knights in Ontario, this represents 5.6 percent of the non-agricultural work-force in 1891. This membership figure in turn represents only 3.0 percent of the total work-force — including agriculture — in 1891. Both of these figures are considerably lower than those presented by Kealey/Palmer. This is hardly surprising since they consider only "hands employed in manufacturing" and, thus, fail to consider the thousands of Ontario men and women who toiled in construction, in transportation, in domestic service, and in other sectors of the economy.

Let us turn to the question of whether 21,800 Knights represent a relatively higher proportion of the organized work-force than during subsequent periods. Kealey/Palmer, we will recall, assert that a higher proportion of the work-force — and in the same paragraph they refer to both the total and the non-agricultural work-force — was organized during these years than at any time prior to World War II. In 1921, after a 17 percent decline in membership from the peak year of 1919, 14.7 percent of the non-agricultural work-force was organized. In 1931, after a decade of trade-union stagnation and after two years of severe depression, 11.1 percent of the non-agricultural work-force was organized.³ Although these are national figures, they remain far higher than the number of Knights as a percentage of the non-agricultural work-force in Ontario in 1891. Kealey/Palmer, meanwhile, cite the figure of 10 percent to show that a significantly lower proportion of the work-force was organized during the first decades of the twentieth century than during the 1880s. This figure of

² Included in "non-productive" are Indian chiefs, members of religious orders, paupers, inmates in asylums, pensioners, the retired and students. See CANADA, *Census of Canada, 1890-1891*, Vol. II (Ottawa, 1893), pp. 163-69, and also Vol. IV (Ottawa, 1897), p. 450.

³ For both 1921 and 1931 the trade-union membership is from CANADA, DEPARTMENT OF LABOUR, *Labour Organizations in Canada, 1932* (Ottawa, 1934), p. 9. Figures on the non-agricultural work-force for both 1921 and 1931 are from CANADA, *Seventh Census of Canada, 1931*, Vol. VII, "Occupations and Industries" (Ottawa, 1936), pp. 2-3, 10-11. All calculations are my own.

10 percent of the work-force — and they say “work-force” deleting the qualifier “non-agricultural” — is more than three times larger than the 3.0 percent of the work-force organized by the Knights based on the 1891 census.

The figures which I cite on the percentage of the work-force organized in 1921 and 1931 include all labour organizations. Kealey/Palmer did not, we must remember, base their estimate of 20 to 25 percent on the number of Knights alone; they added an unspecified number of trade unionists to the total. The question is how many? To arrive at 20 percent of the non-agricultural work-force, they would have had to add nearly 57,000 trade unionists. If we were to accept their assertion that a minimum of 20 percent of the work-force was organized during these years we would, indeed, have the “quantitative breakthrough” claimed by Kealey/Palmer. But it would also mean that Kealey/Palmer had looked in the wrong place for the source of this breakthrough. If 20 percent of the non-agricultural work-force was organized, then the trade unions organized more than two and a half times the number of people who joined the Knights.

Kealey/Palmer’s number of 21,800, then, is not nearly so large as they would have us believe. It does not represent a large proportion of the non-agricultural work-force, nor does it represent a higher degree of organization than during subsequent decades. There is, moreover, some reason to doubt that it even represents the actual membership in the Knights. Kealey/Palmer suggest that this is a minimum estimate of Knights’ membership. They are even so brash as to assert that “a figure double this might not overstate the numbers actually enrolled” (p. 389). I would suggest that there is equal reason to believe that 21,800 is an exaggerated total.

We must first address the question of the representativeness of these figures: do these membership figures, if accurate, represent a probable minimum or maximum of Knights’ strength? Table 4 seems an appropriate place to begin. This table is supposed to demonstrate just “how thoroughly the Order penetrated these small Ontario manufacturing towns, organizing an extremely high percentage of the work-force” (p. 390). I would suggest that Table 4 instead calls into question the “official” membership figures reported by Knights’ locals since in at least one case the reported membership is absurd. It is simply not possible to organize 139 percent of the work-force.

The more relevant column in Table 4 is that which estimates the work-force as 20 percent of the total population. Kealey/Palmer employ two “poles” in their analysis: the first estimates the work-force as 20 percent of the population, the second estimates the work-force as 40 percent of the population. Their reasons for choosing these “poles” are obscure since they also observe that “in no case would the work-force have been more than forty percent of the population, and it is unlikely that it would have even reached twenty percent in these years” (p. 390). I certainly cannot fathom why they consider 20 percent to be an “unlikely” figure; had they consulted the census they would have found that in Canada in 1881, 32 percent of the total population participated in the work-force. And this

percentage would increase in each subsequent decade until 1911 when the participation rate in the country as a whole stood at 37.9 percent.⁴ But many of these gainfully employed persons — bankers, merchants, lawyers, etc. — were not likely to join the Knights. The estimate of the work-force as 20 percent of the population used by Kealey/Palmer would, then, represent roughly two-thirds of the probable work-force. This figure serves as a not inappropriate estimate of the “working-class” population as opposed to those who had “middle-class” occupations. Be that as it may, we must choose between the two poles provided by Kealey-Palmer; I can only suggest that the pole which estimates the work-force as 20 percent of the population seems the more reasonable estimate of the number of people likely to join the Knights.

If we accept Kealey/Palmer’s first column of 20 percent of the population as the more reasonable gauge to measure the Knights’ membership, what do these figures tell us about the probable reliability of “official” membership figures reported. Clearly the Knights did not organize 139 percent of the workers in Merriton. It is also unlikely that they organized 71 percent in Hespeler, 72 percent in Petrolia, or 87 percent in Gananoque. Even if we suspend all doubt and accept these membership figures as accurate, they are mathematically closer to the maximum than to the minimum. They could not be doubled.

Let us, however, accept the figures provided by Kealey/Palmer; let us consider 21,800 an accurate estimate of the Knights’ membership in Ontario. The question becomes whether or not this figure reflects the strength of the Order in Ontario. For example, LA 2305 had, according to Kealey/Palmer, “twenty-nine members in July 1885, swelled to 550 in the following months, and then fell back to forty-five within a year” (p. 388). Which figure is the more representative gauge of the Knights’ strength — the fewer than fifty people who had enough enthusiasm and interest to last the year or the 500 who dropped out almost immediately? How many other cases are there where the bulk of the membership, as in the case of LA 2305, failed to stay with the organization for even one year? LA 2305 may be an extreme case, yet it clearly illustrates the tendency of peak membership figures to exaggerate the significance of an organization because peak membership disguises the volatility of the membership. An analysis of peak membership therefore comes close to interpreting high turn-over as a source of strength when it may very easily be evidence of weakness. High turn-over may tell us a great deal about the importance of a railway station, but it tells us far less about the significance of a labour organization. A far better gauge to judge the impact of a labour organization would be its ability to sustain a minimal level of commitment among its members.

⁴ See CANADA, *Sixth Census of Canada, 1921*, Vol. IV, “Occupations” (Ottawa, 1929), p. XIII. The participation rate in Ontario was marginally higher than in Canada at large. The participation rate in Ontario in 1881 was 32.8 percent. See CANADA, *General Report of the Census of Canada, 1880-1881*, Vol IV (Ottawa, 1885), p. 72. In 1891 the figures on participation in Canada and Ontario were 33.5 percent and 34.5 percent respectively. See *Census of Canada, 1921*, IV: XIII, and *Census of Canada, 1890-1891*, IV: 450.

It is important to know why people join an organization, but it is equally important to know why they quit. This is particularly true when such large numbers quit an organization in such a relatively short space of time. In the case of LA 2305 the figures are staggering: over 90 percent of the people who joined LA 2305 in 1885 quit in less than a year. Is it possible that they dropped out because they discovered almost immediately after joining LA 2305 that the organization offered them little?

This is not a moot point since the historiography of the Knights in the United States suggests that at least one problem — and there were, of course, many other problems — within the organization was the inability of the leadership to address the more concrete interests of the members. Even the most recent regional study of the Knights in the United States, although stressing indigenous regional factors for their decline, does not, as Gerald Grob observes, disagree with this traditional interpretation.⁵ Volatility can be seen as evidence of the inability of the movement to generate sustained enthusiasm, or even interest, among workers. When so many people leave an organization within a short time it is well worth asking why.

I have neither the time nor the space to explore the question of the volatility of the membership in the detail which it deserves; I can only suggest that we should be warned against too sanguine an interpretation of peak membership figures when they are calculated “with no account taken of volatility” (p. 388). This warning is particularly important when the stated purpose of such calculations is to demonstrate “that the Knights of Labor represented the *most important moment in the history of Ontario labour* until the coming of the Congress of Industrial Organizations in the late 1930s” (pp. 390-91, emphasis added). Perhaps we could remind Kealey/Palmer that these years also witnessed the founding and consolidation of the Trades and Labour Congress; it surely had a more sustained and long-term impact on the history of labour in Ontario than the Knights. Moreover, Kealey/Palmer base their interpretation on *peak* membership figures. They will “stress once more that these are minimum estimates” (p. 391), but they should be reminded that a “peak” is always the highest — and never the lowest — point.

But let us not quibble. Let us accept that “more workers were drawn to the cause of the Order in more Ontario communities and in greater numbers than most of us can actually believe” (p. 391). It remains equally true that 21,800 Knights do not represent a particularly large number in terms of the total work-force. Nor was it a very impressive figure compared to the percentage of the work-force organized by the trade unions in subsequent decades. This membership figure did not add up to a “quantitative breakthrough for Ontario’s workers”. Kealey/Palmer mention at one point that aggregate data can “distort the facts dramatically” (p. 389). I would suggest that better data are readily available, and when they are consulted we find the distortion to be in the interpretation rather than in the “facts”.

⁵ Gerald N. GROB, “Review of Melton Alonza McLaurin, *The Knights of Labor in the South*”, *Labour History*, XXI (1979-1980): 116-17.