

Unions and Masonry

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Presented on the following pages is an article from *The Masonic Philatelist* in Vol. 40, No. 2, June 1988, page 8. It is an outstanding presentation and deserves close attention. Many of us were likely involved in unions, or in fact still are. Such were brought about for the well-being and protection of the working man/woman. They were an “outcropping” of the Masonic Order and were totally committed to the precepts of Freemasonry. That the

passage of time brought about corruption in some unions must not be taken as a reason to look down on all unions. They are a highly necessary part of our democratic way of life. Without them, the standard of living for “those who labor” would be greatly diminished.

From an historical perspective, unions (guilds) effectively brought about Freemasonry, so the two are traditionally connected.



The US postage stamp seen here carries the message “Labor is Life.” The epic Masonic sculpture on the right is called “Labor is Worship.” They both extol the “beauty” of honest labor, both as an honorable pursuit and a form of prayer. Masons will recall the lesson of the 24-inch gauge. (USA #1082)

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Since the institution of Freemasonry was originally adapted from the craft of the stone workers, one of the guilds or building trades, it should not be surprising that many similarities can be traced between the various labor organizations and the Masonic fraternity.

Whether these points of agreement have descended from time immemorial, as some have claimed, or are, as I personally believe, merely purloined from the Masonic Order for the purposes of developing a ritual and establishing an organization and a format for holding the meetings of the unions, the fact with which we must be concerned is simply that such similarities exist. For all practical and useful purposes Speculative Freemasonry was founded in the year 1717. Regardless of whatever may have existed prior to that time, we can state with authority that it was certainly not speculative Masonry as we now know it.

Beginning with this date of 1717 as the date of origin of present-day Masonry, we find that little more than 100 years later (1827) the first federation of trade unions was organized. This organization was called the Mechanic's Trade Association of Philadelphia. Although there were many trade unions prior to this time, especially in the pre-1820 era of the Democratic societies and the Democratic-Republican party, the national labor federations, as we now know them, began with the foundation of this organization. This, and other trade unions similarly organized, continued to exist throughout the next 40 years, making a few gains, but failing to write a

very productive chapter in the history of the United States.

During the Civil War a number of these workmen's associations fostered wartime strikes, published incendiary pamphlets, and endeavored to found a National Labor Party. These labor parties, founded whenever a few disgruntled workmen chanced to become associated, were abortive attempts to establish firm class lines within the American economy. Fortunately, not only for our organized labor, but also for our American form of government, these labor parties were not successful.

The ritualistic, fraternal type of labor organization with which we are now concerned did not come into existence until 1869. In that year a small, disgruntled group of members from the Garment Cutters organization founded a fraternal society under the grandiloquent title of the "Noble and Holy Order of the Knights of Labor." One of the founders of this society, **Uriah Stevens**, was firmly convinced that the failure of unions to make a lasting contribution to society, etc. was due merely to a lack of secrecy and of ritual. Consequently, the Knights of Labor adopted various modes of secrecy, formulated a ritual and gave their officers such titles as Grand Master Workman, Venerable Sage, Worthy Foreman, Unknown Knight, and other strange and wondrous appellations.

For some unexplainable reason, any organization of workmen, once it has become firmly established, appears to be ashamed of the humble origin of the order and finds it necessary to en-



Photos by Ralston James

IDENTIFICATION OF UNION INSIGNIA

Beginning at top left and reading across: AFL-CIO Union Label; Pulp, Sulphite & Paper Mill Workers; Operative Plasterers and Cement Masons; Stage Employees and Motion Pictures Operators; Machinists and Aerospace Workers; Tool and Die Makers Union Shop Label; Carpenters Union; Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union; Bill Posters, Billers and Distributors Union; Amalgamated Meat Cutters & Butcher Workers; Fling Glass Workers Union Label; and Machinists Union Label.

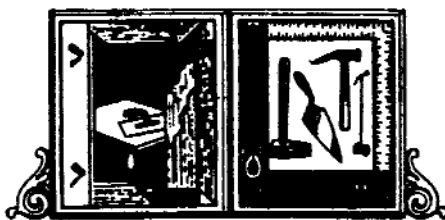
deavor to trace its beginning to one part or another of the late, unlamented age of chivalry. Certainly knighthood and all its appendant evils was nothing to which the average citizen of today, and more especially the average workman, would aspire. The role of the workman in the chivalric society of the middle ages was only a little lower than that of the knights' horses and hounds. But regardless of the incongruity involved, workmen usually seemed discontented with the origin of their organizations and endeavor to prove, to themselves at least, some type of noble origin. The Knights of Labor blessed their organization with elaborate ceremonies, many of the reminiscent of the Masonic institution.

Each candidate, before his reception into the order, was required to give his honest and unequivocal answers to three questions, as follows:

1. Do you believe in God, the Creator and Father of all?
2. Do you obey the Universal Ordinance of God, in gaining your bread by the sweat of your brow?
3. Are you willing to take a solemn vow binding you to secrecy, obedience, and mutual assistance?

Upon the affirmative answers being given, the candidate was then required to assume a pledge to "obey all laws, regulations of the order, and promise to defend the life, interest, reputation, and family of all true members of the order, help, aid, and assist all employed and unemployed, unfortunate or distressed Brothers to procure employment, secure just remuneration, relieve their distress and counsel others to aid them, so that they and theirs may receive and enjoy the just fruits of their labor and exercise of their art."

This order maintained great secrecy, and until about 1880 was not even called by its proper name in communications, the symbol for the name of the order being a "triangle within a circle" or, at other periods, "five stars." In fact, the order carried its secrecy to such a



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degree that in many cases calls were even chalked in secret symbols on sidewalks or fences to summon the membership to the meetings. Most of this secrecy and indeed most of the ritual of the order can be traced to **Uriah Stevens**, who belonged to a great number of fraternal organizations, including the Masonic fraternity. Actually the thing which he and his contemporaries were trying to create when they founded the Knights of Labor was not particularly a trade union but a type of Masonic order for the working classes.

In this brief article we will not endeavor to present any history of the labor movement in the United States, but will merely content ourselves with stating that the Knights of Labor could not possibly exist in the form which their founders had forced upon them and quickly gave way to the better organized trade unions. The influence which the Knights had obtained from the Masonic institution, however, did not decline with the demise of the original labor organization, but was adopted by the trade unions and is evident in the many labor unions of this time.

Probably the first thing that a Freemason notices about all unions is that they use the Masonic appellation. "Brother" in their addresses to one another and that they designate their meeting room or place as a "Lodge." The lodges of the various labor organizations are normally set up in the

approximate form of a lodge of Masons, and a union member who later becomes a Freemason has a strange feeling that somewhere he has heard the ceremonies before. The vows administered to a candidate for the unions, whether called a pledge, an oath, or an obligation, are usually couched in quasi-Masonic terms. We will quote only one such obligation here. It is that of the Bricklayers, Masons, and Plasterers International Union of America. The pledge reads as follows: "I hereby solemnly and sincerely pledge my honor as a man that I will not reveal any private business or proceedings of this union or any individual action of its members; that I will, without equivocation or evasion, and to the best of my ability, so long as I remain a member thereof, abide by the constitution and by-laws, and the particular scale of prices of work adopted by it; that I will acquiesce in the will of the majority, and that I will, at all times by every honorable and lawful means within my power, procure employment for the members of the B.M. & P.I.U. of A." Thomas Murphy, the president of the Union, might quite understandably be surprised if he were made acquainted with the source of much of his union's ritualistic work.

The reason for the use of this pledge, rather than one of the many others, some of which are even more Masonic sounding, is that this pledge was published in the January 1968 issue of the Union magazine, *The Bricklayer, Mason, and Plasterer*. Normally this pledge has been taken at a regular meeting of the union local and a ritualistic type ceremony has been given to the candidate. In the past few years, however, this union, as well as most of the other American labor organizations, has become much more concerned with membership than with ritualistic work, and has even given permission, when absolutely necessary, to administer this obligation at the job site.

Along with the adopting of much Masonic language, and many forms and

ceremonies, the various unions have also adopted insignia patterned upon various aspects of Masonic symbolism. The Switchmen's Union of North America uses a serpent for its emblem. At one time an important Masonic symbol, the serpents appear now only in the clasps used to fasten grand officers aprons, and in the Scottish Rite degree, "Knight of the Brazen Serpent." From the use of this emblem the switchmen are normally called by the colorful appellation "snakes."

The Machinists Union and its closely associated crafts use as an emblem a square and calipers set in the usual fashion associated with the Masonic institution. These implements are set within a circle, centered with a point. In order to avoid confusion, the founder of the Machinists' Union used an operative square and a pair of calipers, rather than a try square and a pair of compasses, and exposed the opposite point of the calipers above the square. The Carpenters Union uses a pair of compasses and a 24 inch gauge, centered with a small plane, forming a Masonic type emblem. Many of the organizations use a pair of clasped right hands as their symbol, and the various grips, given by this pair of hands, are worthy of note. However, the Bricklayers, Masons, and Plasterers Union, which we have before mentioned, and which one might assume would have the closest connection to the Masonic fraternity, uses a composite emblem of various working tools, and it would require great imagination to trace any similarity to Freemasonry. The similarities between the Masonic institution and the labor unions are a phenomenon peculiar to this country where the laboring man, especially the member of one of the larger unions, is a part of an elite middle class.

In many of the European countries, where the man who works with his hands is considered a member of the lower classes, there is usually little desire or opportunity for the laboring man to become a member of the Free-

masons. Here, though, where we have no labor party nor any particular laboring class, all types of men join the Masonic order. If they do not immediately found some Masonic affiliate body, as is done so many times, they may, quite possibly, use the various Masonic concepts to enrich the ritual and symbolism of their labor organization. Not that symbolism and language are all that the unions have borrowed from Masonry. The men such as **John L. Lewis, Uriah Stevens, Terence Powderly, William L. Hutcheson, Bob Coutts,**

Art Covington, and many other leaders in the field of organized labor, who are also members of the Masonic brotherhood, have brought their Masonic principles into the labor movement. This is only one of the many reasons why in this country there is not the distrust and antagonism between labor and capital that is found in many other countries, and also one reason why most of the great trade federations subscribe to our Masonic principles of fraternal love and mutual assistance.

