

T. V. Powderly, A Political Profile

IN THE American labor movement of the last quarter of the nineteenth century two figures stand out. Historians have explored the personality and ideas of one of them—Samuel Gompers of the American Federation of Labor—but have given relatively little attention to the other, T. V. Powderly, who briefly won worldwide fame as leader of the Knights of Labor.¹ What manner of man was Powderly? An examination of one dimension of his career, the political side, casts significant light on his makeup and motivations and suggests a comparison with his rival and contemporary, Gompers.

Terence Vincent Powderly was born in 1849 in Carbondale, Pennsylvania, in the anthracite coal region. His parents had come from Ireland soon after their marriage in 1826 and had settled on the future site of Carbondale, where the father, in true frontier fashion, cleared the land he was to farm. He and his wife had twelve children, of whom Terence was the eleventh. A slight, near-sighted boy, Terry usually got the worst of it in fist fights with his schoolmates. As he later recalled his farm boyhood, he had to spend much time in household chores—helping with the dishes, even mending his own clothes. In the election of 1856, when his father was “a pronounced Democrat” and his mother “a pronounced abolitionist,” Powderly sided with his mother, as indeed he seems to have done generally.²

Powderly's parents were Catholics, and he grew up a faithful member of the Church. He remained a Catholic, though over the

¹ The principal biographical assessments are found in Norman J. Ware, *The Labor Movement in the United States, 1860-1895* (New York, 1929), and Harry J. Carman, “Terence Vincent Powderly—An Appraisal,” *Journal of Economic History*, I (May, 1941), 83-87. Gerald N. Grob, “Terence V. Powderly and the Knights of Labor,” *Mid-America*, XXXIX (January, 1957), 39-55, is primarily a summary of Powderly's policies as leader of the Knights. Ware's characterization of Powderly reflects to some extent the debunking era in which it was written, but a perusal of Powderly's own papers—unavailable to Ware—bears out Ware's judgment in nearly every respect.

² Powderly, *The Path I Trod* (New York, 1940), chapters 1 and 2.

years his loyalty weakened as he struggled to keep the Church from condemning the Knights of Labor.³ During the 1870s and '80s Powderly was an enthusiastic supporter of Irish nationalism, at a time when the Irish cause in America was closely linked with the labor movement.⁴ Yet he showed little of the clannishness of the Irish immigrants in eastern seaboard cities. He did, however, marry a local Irish girl, Hannah Dever. They had no children.

In his autobiography Powderly says little about his education, which apparently took him through the sixth grade. He pursued further education on his own. During his twenties (as his diaries record) he sought to improve himself by serious reading; he joined literary and debating clubs and went to temperance meetings, helping to organize in 1868 a county branch of the Father Mathew Society.⁵ On the evidence of his correspondence, he early developed a broad range of knowledge and a good deal of eloquence and polish in the use of language. It was not so much the Irish "gift of gab"; he seems to have been an effective speaker, but public speaking did not come easily to him. On the other hand, though he constantly complained about the number of letters he had to write, he wrote them with gusto and style. The written word was his most comfortable medium.

Powderly went to work at the age of thirteen as a switch tender on the local Delaware & Hudson Railroad, which hauled anthracite coal to market. At seventeen he became an apprentice in the railroad's machine shop. Five years later he joined the Machinists' and Blacksmiths' International Union, becoming president of his local. With the panic of 1873 he was fired and blacklisted as a union leader, but he eventually found employment in the Dickson locomotive works in nearby Scranton, where he remained, with another interval of unemployment, until receiving his first public office.⁶

Powderly's political career and his connection with the Knights

³ Henry J. Browne, *The Catholic Church and the Knights of Labor* (Washington, D. C., 1949).

⁴ Powderly, chapter 14; Thomas N. Brown, *Irish-American Nationalism, 1870-1890* (Philadelphia, 1966).

⁵ Browne, 39; Powderly to Father Mathew T.A.B. Society, Scranton, Jan. 29, 1890. This and subsequent letters, unless otherwise specified, are in the Powderly Papers, Catholic University of America, Washington, D. C. (Powderly's outgoing letters are letterpress copies in bound letter books.)

⁶ Powderly, chapters 3 and 4.

of Labor both began in 1876. He was then twenty-seven. Four years earlier, in 1872, while still in the patriotic glow of the Civil War, he had cast his first presidential vote for Grant. In 1876, however, he organized a Peter Cooper Club in Scranton and worked for the Greenback ticket.⁷ Joining the Knights of Labor, he was that fall elected Master Workman (head) of the newly organized local assembly in his plant. The following spring he became corresponding secretary of the Scranton District Assembly.⁸

A wave of political activism swept through the American labor movement in the wake of the railroad strikes of 1877. Powderly and his fellow Knights in Luzerne County, caught up in this surge, organized a Labor party, worked vigorously in its support, and carried most of the county offices.⁹ Three months later, in February, 1878, Powderly himself won election as mayor of Scranton, over the combined opposition of the two old parties.¹⁰

For the next few years, Powderly, like most Knights of Labor, remained an active supporter of the Greenback-Labor Party, the national group which coalesced out of the earlier Greenback Party of Peter Cooper and the independent labor parties of 1877. Powderly helped to effect a merger of the two elements within Pennsylvania at a statewide convention in 1878, and he and a sizeable contingent of Knights participated, as individuals, in the national Greenback convention of 1880.¹¹

But Powderly's enthusiasm for the Greenback Party soon began to wane. In this, as in much of his later political evolution, the decisive influences were personal and local; Powderly's political horizon seldom extended far from home. In 1878, the same year in which he had been elected mayor, his county Greenback-Labor Party nominated for Congress Hendrick B. Wright, an old-time Jacksonian Democrat and a genuine friend of labor. The Democrats

⁷ *Ibid.*, 67-68; Diary (Powderly Papers), Sept. 16-Nov. 7, 1876.

⁸ Powderly, 44, 56-57.

⁹ Various letters to Powderly, e.g. from Bernard FitzPatrick, Aug. 18, John Ross, Aug. 30, Oct. 23, Nov. 5, George S. Boyle, Oct. 24, Michael T. Mangan, Oct. 22, 1877. See also Powderly, 68-70.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 76.

¹¹ Edward T. James, "American Labor and Political Action, 1865-1896: The Knights of Labor and Its Predecessors" (Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard, 1954), 163-166, 171-174, 177-178, 180-183.

endorsed Wright, and he was elected.¹² Two events of that year, however, began to sour Powderly on third-party action. At the state Greenback-Labor convention—where Powderly tried, unsuccessfully, to have Wright nominated for governor—a spokesman for the conservative or Greenback wing of the party called Powderly's Luzerne County labor delegates a "mob of Molly McGuires"; the slur still rankled in his memory several years later.¹³ More galling was the accusation, lodged by a Scranton Democratic newspaper on the eve of the state election, that Powderly, who was supporting the Greenback ticket, had received campaign funds from Republican headquarters. This was a common enough charge for a third party to face in a normally Democratic district, but Powderly was always abnormally sensitive to criticism; besides, the story was apparently true.¹⁴

Although Powderly was re-elected mayor of Scranton in February, 1880, running on the Greenback-Labor ticket,¹⁵ the party was declining. When Hendrick Wright ran for Congress again that fall, with Powderly's earnest support, he was defeated by an Irish machine Democrat, Daniel Connolly. In the course of the campaign both Powderly and Wright received threats against their lives from outraged Irish supporters of Connolly. In the home country of the Molly Maguires such threats were not to be taken lightly. "The last campaign came near killing me, in more ways than one," wrote Powderly that November.¹⁶

Personal ambition, not party principles, determined Powderly's next moves. He was already mayor of Scranton and national head

¹² *New York Times*, June 18, 19, 1878; Hendrick Wright to Powderly, June 22, 1878; *Tribune Almanac* (1879), 109. See also, for Wright's labor sympathies, his book *A Practical Treatise on Labor* (New York, 1871).

¹³ Powderly to Frank S. Heath, June 2, 1882; *New York Times*, May 10, 1878.

¹⁴ Scranton (Pa.) *Sunday Free Press*, Nov. 17, 24, 1878 (clipping scrapbook, Powderly Papers); Powderly to John C. Delaney, Nov. 10, 1878. Powderly's letter in effect admits receiving the funds but denies that they were for the purpose of aiding either the Republican or the Democratic candidate.

¹⁵ Powderly to Gilbert Rockwood, Jan. 10, 1880; to Samuel Leavitt, Feb. 23, 1880.

¹⁶ Various letters, September–November, 1880, especially J. D. Harris to Powderly, Sept. 1, A. A. Chase to Powderly, Sept. 3, Nannie Wright to Powderly, Oct. 26, Powderly to Hendrick B. Wright, Oct. 26, Hendrick Wright to Powderly, Nov. 8, 25, Powderly to Charles Litchman, Nov. 21, 1880. The original of an anonymous threat received by Powderly and a copy of one received by Wright are in Powderly's files.

of the Knights of Labor, having succeeded Uriah Stephens as Grand Master Workman in 1879, but his goal now was the United States Congress. To this end he began negotiations in 1880 with the state Democratic leaders. The record is incomplete, for he later destroyed most of his own letters on the subject, but enough evidence remains to indicate that Powderly agreed to swing his influence within Pennsylvania toward the Democratic Party in return for the promise, or at least the strong assurance, of receiving the Democratic nomination for Congress in 1882.¹⁷ Early that year he was elected to a third term as mayor of Scranton, this time with both Democratic and Greenback-Labor support.¹⁸ In May, however, the state Greenback-Labor Party, in a revival of strength, nominated a ticket headed by Thomas A. Armstrong, Pittsburgh labor editor and Knight of Labor, for governor, with Powderly for lieutenant governor.

Powderly had been chosen without his consent, and the nomination put him very much on the spot. To accept meant jettisoning his own well-laid congressional plans; to refuse would seem rank desertion of the labor cause. He early decided not to accept; but this brought him the problem of how to justify his course—always a compelling necessity with Powderly. He could hardly give his real reason, though he finally entrusted it to a few people, including Armstrong. For the many others who urged him to remain on the ticket he produced a variety of arguments: that he would be accused of trading on his position as Grand Master Workman for personal advantage (“I must not tarnish the handle of the helm placed in my keeping by the sainted Stephens”); that he would set a bad precedent for local politicians in the Knights of Labor; that his correspondence as G.M.W. took up all his time; that too much would be expected of him if he were elected and he would be charged with “selling out”; and even, in one instance, that his wife’s health couldn’t stand “another tirade of such abuse as is heaped on my

¹⁷ This conclusion is based on evidence contained in the following letters: William A. Wallace (U. S. Senator and state Democratic leader) to Charles Litchman, Sept. 25 (copy in Powderly Papers); Wallace to Powderly, Oct. 23 (two letters) and telegram, Nov. 1; Andrew H. Dill (chairman of Democratic State Committee) to Powderly, Oct. 9; Powderly to Hendrick Wright, Oct. 26, 1880.

¹⁸ Powderly to David Barry, Jan. 16, 1882.

head when I run for any thing." Clearly, Powderly had an ingrained dread of campaigning; his skin was too thin, his pride too tender, for the rough-and-tumble of nineteenth-century electioneering; each such contest was, as he once put it, a "moral crucifixion." But above all, as his choice of arguments unwittingly reveals, he flinched from criticism.¹⁹

For more than three months Powderly was pressured to accept the Greenback-Labor nomination for lieutenant governor, but he held grimly to his decision, whatever anguish it cost him. The Democrats, in the end, failed to come through with the congressional nomination, but Powderly stuck by his Democratic alliance and campaigned for the man who had displaced him, Daniel Connolly. By the end of 1882 Powderly was fed up with politics—Greenback-Labor above all. "I would have been a member of the present Congress," he wrote to a friend two years later, "but for the stab Tom Armstrong and the Greenbackers gave me by that nomination for Lt. Gov."²⁰

The election year of 1884 saw a new third-party movement in the field, the Anti-Monopoly Party, which nominated Ben Butler for president. Butler and the party had some labor supporters, notably Charles Litchman of Massachusetts, the General Secretary of the Knights of Labor. Litchman sought to swing the support of the Knights behind Butler, but Powderly squelched the move.²¹

Once again, Powderly's own political ambitions were uppermost. The Scranton Democrats failed to renominate him for mayor in 1884, but he was given to understand that they were saving him for Congress.²² That nomination went again, however, to Daniel Connolly. But by this time Powderly was head over heels in another

¹⁹ This account is based on Powderly's correspondence of April-June, 1882 (for specific documentation see James, "American Labor and Political Action," 195-200). See also Powderly's statement in *Journal of United Labor*, June, 1882, 241-242. The quotations are from Powderly's letters to J. H. Burt, May 25; to Frank A. Kauffman, June 11; and to O. G. Moore, May 29.

²⁰ Powderly to H. H. Bengough, Feb. 28, 1884.

²¹ Charles Litchman to Powderly, Nov. 19, 27, 1883; Powderly to Litchman, Nov. 26, 1883; Litchman to Powderly, Jan. 25, Feb. 4, 1884; Powderly in *Journal of United Labor*, February, 1884, 645; Litchman to Powderly, June 17, 1884; Henry A. Coffeen to Powderly, June 20; Powderly to Frederick Turner, June 23; Turner to Powderly, June 24; printed "Secret Circular" to the Knights of Labor, dated June, 1884 (Powderly Papers).

²² Powderly to A. E. Ford, Jan. 24, 1884; to Gilbert Rockwood, Jan. 29, 1884.

quest for office. Congress was about to pass the bill setting up a Bureau of Labor Statistics, and Powderly was gunning for appointment as its head. He went about the task with a thoroughness and intensity never found in any of his work for the Knights of Labor. As soon as the bill reached the Senate he began building his case. To all assemblies of the Knights he sent out petitions in his behalf, to be signed and returned for him to submit to the President. "Get such journals as will favor my appointment in your vicinity to say something in my favor," he urged, "and mail me a copy."²³ He dug up endorsements from all possible sources: his connections in the Irish movement, a businessman he had met at a tariff meeting, the head of the local Board of Trade. Henry George, who had met Powderly through the Irish Land League and had joined the Knights of Labor, volunteered his aid.²⁴

Most important of all were Powderly's political connections, but here he was somewhat at a loss. His influence, such as it was, lay with the Democrats, but a Republican administration was in power. He sought what help he could from Congressman Connolly and the latter's fellow Pennsylvania Democrats, James H. Hopkins and Samuel J. Randall. For the Republicans he turned to John C. Delaney, a boyhood friend who had become a party wheelhorse at Harrisburg, and appealed to the very heads of the Pennsylvania machine, Matthew Quay and Senator J. Donald Cameron.²⁵ With Cameron, at least, he seemed to be successful. When the bill passed its final hurdle in June, Powderly set off for Washington to push his cause in person. Senator Cameron escorted him to an interview at the White House and personally recommended him. Powderly presented his "satchel full" of endorsements, a scrapbook of newspaper editorials and reams of petitions, by his own account more than a thousand from labor organizations alone. But Powderly had enemies as well as friends; he later learned that even Cameron, for all his show of favor, had privately opposed him. Early in July President Arthur nominated not Powderly but John Jarrett, recent

²³ Printed circular letter dated May 23, 1884 (Powderly Papers). See also editorial in *Journal of United Labor*, May 25, 1884.

²⁴ Powderly to M. S. Quay, June 20; to John Roach, June 19; to Col. J. A. Price, June 19; Henry George to Powderly, June 14, 22, 1884.

²⁵ Powderly to D. W. Connolly, June 5, 17; to J. C. Delaney, June 17; to M. S. Quay, June 20; to C. L. Magee, June 24; to Charles Emory Smith, June 24, 1884.

president of the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers.²⁶

The situation, however, dragged on with tantalizing uncertainty for months to come. Though the Senate promptly confirmed Jarrett's nomination, Arthur refused to make the appointment, having discovered that Jarrett had recently made a "gross personal attack" upon his character. The place was once more open, but Arthur now made no move to fill it.²⁷ Perhaps Republican campaign strategists saw better capital in a hope than in a reality: many could be promised but only one could be chosen. Some evidence suggests that Powderly, at least, was offered the job if he would come out for Blaine.²⁸ Sticking to his guns, Powderly stayed out of the electoral contest, but the outcome brought him new hopes. With a Democratic administration in the offing he might now stand a chance even at Arthur's hands and, if not, then at Cleveland's. Once more, on a more modest scale, he started the wheels turning. But late in January the post finally went to Carroll D. Wright, respected nonpartisan head of the Massachusetts Labor Bureau, with the apparent understanding that Cleveland when he took office would keep Wright.²⁹

In the presidential campaign of 1884 Powderly was scrupulously neutral. This was partly because his own loyalties were not deeply aroused, for he regarded all three candidates with less than enthusiasm. While favoring "the principle" of the Butler movement he had "doubts of the man," and he was equally cool toward the two major contenders, sharing the Irish distrust of Cleveland but not the Irish enthusiasm for Blaine.³⁰ At the height of the campaign he seized the chance to get away from it all and went on a tour of assemblies in Canada. In the end Powderly probably cast his vote for Butler, as he had privately said he would.³¹

²⁶ Powderly to Dr. William Carroll, June 20; to Henry George, June 25; to August Donath, June 19 July 4; to Gilbert Rockwood, July 30; to Henry M. Teller, July 5, 1884.

²⁷ James Leiby, *Carroll Wright and Labor Reform* (Cambridge, Mass., 1960), 70.

²⁸ Powderly to D. W. Connolly, Nov. 11, 1884; to John F. Doyle, Sept. 21, 1888.

²⁹ Powderly to President Chester A. Arthur, Nov. 11, 1884; to D. W. Connolly, Nov. 11, 1884; to J. Donald Cameron, Jan. 9; to M. S. Quay, Jan. 9; to Henry M. Teller, Jan. 9; to F. M. Gessner, Jan. 16; to Edwin M. Blake, Mar. 11, 1885; *Journal of United Labor*, Feb. 25, 1885, 917; John Lombardi, *Labor's Voice in the Cabinet* (New York, 1942), 37; Leiby, 72-73.

³⁰ Powderly to Thomas Doyle, Aug. 2, 1884. See also Powderly to Hume H. Cale, July 22; to Dr. William Carroll, June 20; to Henry George, Aug. 5, 1884.

³¹ Powderly to Frederick Turner, June 25, Sept. 22; to R. Edwards, July 5, 1884.

The next four years saw the Knights of Labor begin the rapid growth of membership that reached a peak in the Great Upheaval of 1886. That upheaval, like the earlier one of 1877, had a political phase, but Powderly was little interested in it. Only reluctantly did he lend a hand even to the major manifestation of the new political movement, Henry George's campaign for mayor of New York. On election eve he addressed a rally for George in Cooper Union which drew an overflow crowd and a rousing response. Powderly, who always spoke, as he put it, "from the stomach" and "perspired so that my clothing was wet through," and who was subject to recurrent attacks of a throat ailment he called "quinsy," appeared afterward on the porch of Cooper Union for the benefit of those who had been unable to get inside the hall. As a newspaper reporter described the scene, Powderly "had the collar of his overcoat up and a handkerchief tied around his throat and did not feel very well."³²

Henry George's strong showing in the New York election sparked exuberant talk of a Labor presidential ticket in 1888, though the idea soon faded.³³ In the end, the tariff issue dominated the election of 1888, but labor was very much drawn into the campaign. From both sides great pressure was brought to bear on labor leaders to come out for protection or free trade. The ever-ambitious Charles Litchman, General Secretary of the Knights of Labor, gave way under the strain: at the end of August he resigned his office and volunteered his services (and, as it turned out, the Knights of Labor mailing list) to the Republican National Committee.³⁴ He was rewarded next spring with a Treasury Department berth and never returned to the labor movement.³⁵

Powderly, in common with much of organized labor in the East, particularly in the Pennsylvania iron and glass industries, was a protectionist by conviction. In 1883 he had spoken, along with John Jarrett, at a high-tariff meeting in New York's Cooper Union.³⁶

³² *New York Times*, Oct. 30, Nov. 2, 1886; Powderly to Richard Griffiths, Jan. 11, 1888.

³³ *Public Opinion*, Nov. 13, 1886, 81, 86.

³⁴ Front page story in *New York Tribune*, Aug. 31, 1888; A. M. Dewey in *Journal of United Labor*, Nov. 1, 1888, 2725.

³⁵ *Who Was Who in America*, I (Chicago, 1943); brief obituary in *Boston Evening Transcript*, June 23, 1902.

³⁶ Powderly to John Jarrett, Nov. 3, 1885; to Edward A. Greene, Apr. 21, 1887; *New York Times*, Feb. 16, 1883.

Inevitably, he too was pressed to take a stand during the 1888 campaign. Outwardly he remained neutral, though behind the scenes he dallied secretly, for a time, with both parties.

Powderly's dealings with the Democrats were largely the work of his chief ally and confidant at the Knights' Philadelphia headquarters, John W. Hayes, who succeeded Litchman as General Secretary. Congress had just voted to create a new Labor Department (not a cabinet post, despite the name), to be headed by a Commissioner of Labor. Hayes, who had some Democratic connections in his home state of New Jersey, persuaded Powderly to try for the job. On July 11 Hayes reported that he had arranged with Congressman Patrick A. Collins of Boston for President Cleveland to offer the commissionership to Powderly.³⁷

This time, however, unlike 1884, Powderly apparently did not really want the job. Ever reluctant to move away from Scranton—so much so that he defied all dictates of administrative efficiency rather than take up offices at the Knights' Philadelphia headquarters—he dreaded the thought of living in Washington.³⁸ What he wanted was the *offer* of the labor commissionership, which he could then use as a club against his enemies on the Knights' General Executive Board. Hayes took pains in his negotiations to avoid promising that Powderly would accept the position. "Every thing is fixed for you to walk into the [Department]," he announced at last, "and no string fast to it either." "You notified the last G[eneral] A[sssembly] that you would not accept the G.M.W. again. . . . You can now say, 'GIVE ME THE SELECTION OF MY BOARD AND I WILL SERVE YOU,' and they will not dare refuse it."³⁹ But the offer of the labor commissionership never came—probably for the very reason that Powderly would give no positive assurance that he would accept.

While these negotiations were in process, Powderly was also flirting with the Republicans. The go-between here was his old friend John C. Delaney. With the Knights of Labor now declining, Powderly's salary was in arrears, and he was feeling the financial pinch. Meanwhile he had begun work on a book that eventually became his *Thirty Years of Labor*.⁴⁰ In mid-summer of 1888, very

³⁷ Various letters, Hayes to Powderly, July 2–11, 1888.

³⁸ Powderly to Hayes, July 29, Aug. 6, 1888.

³⁹ Hayes to Powderly, July 24, 1888.

⁴⁰ Powderly to Tom O'Reilly, Jan. 11, 1888.

likely at the behest of Matthew Quay of Pennsylvania, the Republican national chairman, Delaney conferred privately with Powderly.⁴¹ There followed an elaborately secretive correspondence in which each addressed the other simply as "My dear friend," with Delaney signing himself "Anon." and Powderly "Incog." As a further subterfuge, each letter was carefully enclosed in an outer envelope addressed, in a different handwriting, to the recipient's wife.⁴² This time the bait was apparently a subsidy for Powderly's book. Delaney had talked, he reported in one of his letters, to "our mutual friend" (Quay?), who knew just what Powderly needed and would furnish it "in such a way that your splendid manhood will *never* be in the least *compromised*." "Your book," he went on, "will sell like hot cakes, and will bring you in a revenue that will make you independent of the sharks and curs that have been snap[pl]ing at you for years." The unnamed friend wanted a private conference with Powderly in New York on July 29. Bring "your manuscript," Delaney advised, "and in the mean time finish your chapter on the Tariff so that you can read it to him."⁴³

The conference never took place; at that very moment John Hayes sent word that the offer from the Democrats was assured, and Powderly had to play for time.⁴⁴ Before long his conscience got the better of him—"I am beginning to feel like a thief," he confessed to Hayes—and he dropped his intrigues with both the Republicans and the Democrats.⁴⁵ Yet neither party was through with him. Late in August, apparently, Delaney returned with a new proposition: the promise of the labor commissionership at Republican hands if Powderly would speak out for protection, or perhaps (as Powderly put it in one version) if he would "pull the Knights of Labor off Harrison's back in Indiana."⁴⁶ (In that pivotal state organized labor, with Knights officials prominent on the

⁴¹ J. C. Delaney to Powderly, July 14; telegram, Powderly to Delaney, July 16; telegram, Delaney to Powderly, July 17, 1888.

⁴² The inner and outer envelopes of at least one of Delaney's "Anon." letters are preserved in Powderly's files. Powderly's "Incog." letters are logged in his letter book as to Delaney.

⁴³ "Anon." to Powderly, undated but stamped "Received July 25."

⁴⁴ Powderly to John W. Hayes, July 25, 1888, Hayes Papers, Catholic University of America. Powderly's copy of this letter has been removed from his letter book.

⁴⁵ Powderly to Hayes, Aug. 6, 1888.

⁴⁶ A new offer is strongly implied in Annie A. Wright's reply of Sept. 5, 1888, to a letter from Powderly that is missing from his letter book; see also J. C. Delaney to Powderly, Mar. 23, 1889. The quote is from Powderly to John F. Doyle, Sept. 21, 1888.

stump, was campaigning against Harrison because of his supposed hostility toward labor, particularly during the railroad strikes of 1877.)⁴⁷ Early in October Powderly was called to the White House to confer with President Cleveland; he later claimed that Cleveland, too, offered him the Labor post.⁴⁸ By this time, however, Powderly—true to his best instincts, perhaps—had resolved to stay neutral. Neither Cleveland nor Harrison roused his enthusiasm, nor is it certain which one finally got his vote. At the end of September he wrote Hayes that he intended to cast his ballot for Cleveland. Yet the following spring he told an old friend: “My sympathies were with the damn small semblance of protection that the republican party offered.” Locally he split his ticket, voting for as many Republicans as Democrats.⁴⁹

Between 1888 and 1892, as the Knights of Labor lost much of its big-city membership, it became increasingly an organization of small-city and small-town workingmen, with more than a sprinkling of shopkeepers, professionals, and farmers. The remaining members were more oriented to political reform than to bread-and-butter trade unionism. Within the Knights, beginning in 1889, there was a rising demand for a new reform third party that would unite the combined “industrial” forces of labor and the organized farmers.⁵⁰ Powderly—always more follower than leader in his policies as head of the Knights—went along with the new groundswell. In keeping with a vote of the General Assembly in 1889, he led an official Knights of Labor delegation to the convention of the major farm organizations that met at St. Louis in December. There the Knights

⁴⁷ Reports by Frank Foster and others in Boston *Labor Leader*, Sept. 29, Oct. 6, 1888; *Boston Herald*, Aug. 3, 8, 1888; Powderly to Richard F. Jacks, Oct. 2, 1888. See also Harry J. Sievers, *Benjamin Harrison: Hoosier Statesman* (New York, 1959), 395–397.

⁴⁸ Daniel S. Lamont to Powderly, Sept. 27; Powderly to President Cleveland, Sept. 30, 1888; to J. D. Birmingham, Apr. 2, 1889. In *The Path I Trod* (p. 230) Powderly also claims that Cleveland offered him the commissionership, but in place of the letter from Lamont quotes an apparently fictitious invitation from Cleveland himself.

⁴⁹ Powderly to John W. Hayes, Sept. 27, 1888, Hayes Papers; to J. D. Birmingham, Apr. 2, 1889; to Charles H. Litchman, Mar. 21, 1889.

⁵⁰ The first call for such a party, voiced in the *Journal of United Labor* of May 9, 1889, by L. P. Wild, head of a District of Columbia musicians’ assembly, was warmly seconded (May 16) by Ralph Beaumont, chairman of the Knights of Labor lobbying committee in Washington and an inveterate reformer. So strong was the response that letters and further articles continued in each week’s issue through October.

signed a formal compact with the southern Farmers' Alliance to work for a common set of legislative demands.⁵¹

At each of the subsequent conferences or conventions which led up to the founding of the Populist Party, Powderly was a participant: at Ocala, Florida, in December, 1890; at Cincinnati in May, 1891; at St. Louis in February, 1892; and finally at the famous Omaha convention which nominated James B. Weaver as Populist candidate for President.⁵² In the ensuing campaign, Powderly publicly pledged his vote to Weaver and emphasized that all Knights owed him their support.⁵³

But, as usual, Powderly's basic political impulses were shaped by local issues. His dominant emotion, in the fall of 1892, was not enthusiasm for Populism but disgust with the Democrats. Two years before, when the Knights of Labor in several states had been working for the adoption of the Australian ballot, the Pennsylvania Knights had won a pledge from the Democratic candidate for governor, Robert E. Pattison, to support that reform. Powderly and the Knights campaigned actively for Pattison, who was elected but went back on his promise; and, though the Knights succeeded in getting the issue placed on the ballot in 1891, it was defeated.⁵⁴

Powderly's break with the Democrats was now all but complete. In the presidential campaign of 1892 he once more became involved in backstage negotiations, but this time only with the Republicans. Once again, there was some talk of that elusive political plum, the labor commissionership. Another proposal was to send a group of Knights of Labor, at Republican expense, into the Democratic

⁵¹ Knights of Labor General Assembly, *Proceedings*, 1889, 43, 53; *Journal of the Knights of Labor*, Dec. 12, 1889.

⁵² *Ibid.*, Dec. 11, 1890, May 21, 1891, Mar. 3, July 7, 14, 1892.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, June 30, Sept. 22, 29, 1892.

⁵⁴ The Pennsylvania campaign for the Australian ballot centered on a constitutional convention as a necessary preliminary. It was this issue which was put before the voters in a referendum in 1891; but the very lack of a standard official ballot insured the referendum's defeat, since printing and distribution of the tickets needed to vote on the question depended upon local political managers. Considerable material on the long campaign, in which Powderly was actively engaged, is found in his papers for 1890-1891. See also *Journal of the Knights of Labor*, Apr. 17, May 15, 1890, Aug. 27, Sept. 10, Oct. 29, Nov. 5, 1891, Sept. 22, 1892. Other states in which the Knights of Labor worked for the Australian ballot were New York, New Jersey, Illinois and Alabama (*ibid.*, Jan. 16, Mar. 13, Apr. 3, May 8, 15, 29, June 5, 12, July 31, and Oct. 9, 1890). None of this activity is mentioned in the most recent study of the movement by L. E. Fredman, *The Australian Ballot* (East Lansing, Mich., 1968).

South to organize Knights of Labor assemblies and at the same time campaign for the Populist ticket. Powderly, however, treated both proposals with characteristic irresolution, and there is no sign that anything came of either.⁵⁵ As the election drew near, he once more busied himself with local politics, throwing his influence on the side of the Republicans.⁵⁶

Powderly's labor career, however, was nearing its end. At the General Assembly of December, 1893, he was defeated for reelection as General Master Workman by an alliance of De Leon Socialists and western Populists, aided and abetted by General Secretary John Hayes. Faced with the need to find a new career, Powderly took up the study of law and was admitted to the bar in 1894.⁵⁷

He now formally joined the Republican Party. In 1894 he campaigned for the Republican candidate for governor of Pennsylvania, Daniel Hastings. When, two years later, Mark Hanna, the chairman of the Republican National Committee, asked him to take the stump for McKinley, Powderly readily accepted. His political odyssey had ended. Soon after McKinley was inaugurated, Powderly applied for, and received, the post of Commissioner-General of Immigration.⁵⁸ Moving away from Scranton at last, he spent most of the rest of his life in Washington as a federal officeholder.

What sort of man emerges from this political record? A comparison with Samuel Gompers is instructive. Superficially, they had a good deal in common. Gompers was just a year younger than Powderly. He too was of immigrant stock, and though Gompers was Jewish and Powderly Irish Catholic, both early moved beyond the confines of an ethnic culture. In political matters, Gompers, like Powderly, cast his first presidential ballot for Grant in 1872. Gompers, too, voted for Peter Cooper in 1876, and he remained loyal enough to the Greenback movement to vote for Weaver in

⁵⁵ Tim Lee to Powderly, July 20, Aug. 14, Oct. 3; John E. Milholland to Powderly, Sept. 21; Tom O'Reilly to Powderly, Sept. 30, Oct. 20, 28; Powderly to Tim Lee, Aug. 15, Oct. 30; to John O'Keefe, Sept. 18; to T. B. McGuire, Sept. 18, 28; to Tom O'Reilly, Oct. 30, 1892.

⁵⁶ Powderly to Tom O'Reilly, Nov. 6, 10; to A. W. Wright, Nov. 10, 1892. In the presidential race he admitted a preference for Harrison over Cleveland (letter to G. F. Washburn, Oct. 13, 1892).

⁵⁷ Powderly, *Path I Trod*, 367

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 294-299.

1880 and Butler in 1884. Like Powderly, he campaigned for Henry George in the New York election of 1886. In the tariff campaign of 1888, Gompers apparently did not vote for either Cleveland or Harrison, though he too was a believer in protectionism; the American cigar industry, he wrote in his autobiography, would have been wiped out by free trade. In the election year of 1892, though he publicly denied any real community of interest between labor and the farmers, Gompers nevertheless voted for the Populist candidate, Weaver. But in 1896, while Powderly was campaigning for McKinley, Gompers—though he knew and liked McKinley personally—gave his private support to Bryan.⁵⁹

Until the Bryan campaign, there is surprisingly little difference here in political orientation. Despite the conventional view that the Knights of Labor was the heir of an older reform tradition, as against the class-conscious business unionism of the A. F. of L., there is no evidence that Powderly's own political philosophy was any more deeply touched by Greenbackism and Populism than was that of Gompers. The differences between the two men are to be found elsewhere.

Partly it is a matter of temperament and emotional makeup. Gompers was gregarious. From boyhood on he got along well with others. As an adult he was a "regular fellow," capable, for example, of spending a convivial evening drinking with a group of friends. The give and take of working with others never came easily to Powderly. His relations with his fellow officers in the Knights of Labor repeatedly ended in feuds or personal alienation. Gompers' personal relations with his associates—even, on occasion, when they

⁵⁹ Samuel Gompers, *Seventy Years of Life and Labor* (New York, 1925), I, 523, and chapter 15; II, 75-76, 85-88; Gompers, "Organized Labor in the Campaign," *North American Review*, CLV (July, 1892), 91-96. In his drift to the Republican Party in the 1890s, Powderly was actually more typical of the working class than was Gompers, according to the findings of recent scholars. See, e.g., Carl N. Degler, "American Political Parties and the Rise of the City: An Interpretation," *Journal of American History*, LI (June, 1964), 41-49. Although Gompers in his autobiography recalls a Labor Day dinner in Chicago at which he "publicly announced" his support of Bryan (II, 88), the occasion actually does not seem to have been a public one (it received no newspaper notice), and other evidence, including Gompers' letter books (Library of Congress), indicates that he resisted throughout the campaign all pressure to come out publicly for Bryan, deeming it essential that he keep the A. F. of L. nonpartisan. See also Philip S. Foner, *History of the Labor Movement in the United States*, II (New York, 1955), 337-338.

were ideological enemies—were good. Gompers had none of Powderly's touchy vanity; confident of himself, he could fight a good fight and take criticism in his stride. Gompers was as good an administrator as Powderly was a poor one; he welcomed responsibility, while Powderly shunned it. For Powderly, the reward of office was not power but ego support.⁶⁰

Part of the difference between the two men stemmed from their respective backgrounds. In discussing "the city" and urbanization, historians have paid too little attention to the distinction between the truly large cities and the smaller cities of the hinterland.⁶¹ Gompers was a big-city man through and through, with his roots in Amsterdam, London, and New York; Powderly's Scranton was a modest 45,850 in 1880, a small and parochial city with quite a different ethos. There is more than momentary pique in Powderly's outburst in a letter of 1890: "I am sick of all large cities, they run to politics, rum holes, anarchy and the devil knows what but they wont do any good for humanity."⁶²

A more fundamental difference between the two men is their class orientation. Gompers followed his father into the trade of cigarmaker and into the cigarmakers' union. Although he joined a debating club (like Powderly), took classes at Cooper Union, and picked up a smattering of law, he early turned down an offer from a New York lawyer who wanted to teach him law and take him in as a partner, and he declined all opportunities for public office.⁶³ Gompers' exposure to Marxism in the 1870s further strengthened his class consciousness. Powderly, by contrast, had no strong identification with the working class. He was pulled toward middle-class values, as seen most strikingly, perhaps, in his support of the

⁶⁰ This judgment is based on Powderly's record as head of the Knights of Labor. He seems to have done better in the more manageable job of mayor of Scranton, administering the city efficiently and introducing significant municipal reforms. See Vincent J. Falzone, "Terence V. Powderly: Politician and Progressive Mayor of Scranton, 1878-1884," *Pennsylvania History*, XLI (July, 1974), 289-309.

⁶¹ For a perceptive discussion of the differing patterns of labor relations in large and small cities, see Herbert G. Gutman, "The Worker's Search for Power," in H. Wayne Morgan, ed., *The Gilded Age: A Reappraisal* (Syracuse, N. Y., 1963).

⁶² Powderly to Richard Griffiths, Feb. 9, 1890.

⁶³ Gompers, *Seventy Years*, I, 28-29, 32; II, 84-85.

temperance movement and his cordial relations with its leader, Frances Willard.⁶⁴

Powderly did have a genuine sympathy for the workingman; on occasion he depicted labor's injustices with eloquent voice. But his goals were vague, his remedies cloudy. One thing was clear to him: strikes were not the way. He accepted them only reluctantly and sought to end them as soon as possible. Here he never escaped from the psychology of the depressed '70s, when trade unions, in the Pennsylvania mine fields at least, proved too weak to stand up against the employer. At the same time, Powderly, as his correspondence makes clear, had little interest in cooperation—traditionally one of the basic goals of the Knights of Labor. Even political action stirred him only fitfully as a means of benefiting the working class. He encouraged, on occasion, the pressing of legislative demands at state capitals and before Congress, but did so, one suspects, not so much out of positive conviction as out of a desire to divert his followers away from strikes. What he really wanted the Knights of Labor to be was a sort of inspirational brotherhood, working to educate and uplift its members.⁶⁵ This inspirational role he could have performed, had events let him; but he had no gift for practical administration—least of all the kind of tough-minded realism needed by the head of a national labor organization.

Cambridge, Mass.

EDWARD T. JAMES

⁶⁴ Support of the temperance cause was not uncommon among reformist labor leaders of Powderly's generation. See David Montgomery, *Beyond Equality* (New York, 1967), 203-204. There is a qualitative difference, however, between the Father Mathew Society and the W.C.T.U.

⁶⁵ See Powderly's official circular calling for an educational fund to finance lecturers in lieu of supporting strikes, *Journal of United Labor*, Mar. 31, 1888.