

Opposition to the Knights of Labor

“The ‘Pauper Labor of the South,’” in *The Tobacco Plant*, Feb. 2, 1887, and Feb. 16, 1887.

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As you read...

This editorial in a Durham newspaper expressed concern about the Knights of Labor (see <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-newsouth/4703>). Read the excerpts printed here to understand the author’s concerns and how these concerns reflect common attitudes among some whites of the time.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. What does the writer mean by “social equality?”
2. What can you learn about how blacks and whites interacted in North Carolina in 1887? What forms of segregation in the state are implied by this editorial?
3. Think about the scenario described by the writer, in which workers at a cigar factory ask for a higher wage and presumably go on strike. Other people, whom the writer calls “scabs,” are willing to take the workers jobs at a lower rate of pay. (“Scab” was a common and critical term at the time to refer to someone who breaks a strike.) Why do you think some people would be willing to work for lower pay?
4. What would you do if you were a worker who had gone on strike and you could not convince the “scab” to join the strike?
5. What fears does the writer express about the possible actions of strikers when other workers break the strike?
6. What would you do if you were an employer and someone agreed to work at a lower pay than the strikers are demanding?
7. The writer says that if an owner can give a raise to his employees and still get a reasonable profit, he should do so. Can you see a problem with this statement? Who determines what is a reasonable profit?

Some of the Northern newspapers are devoting more space than brains to an alleged “discussion” of the “pauper labor of the South.” As a rule, the men who indite these editorials are as ignorant of Southern institutions, the people of this section and the relations existing in Dixie between employer and employed as a razor-back hog is of artillery practice; but, like the meddling abolitionists of a quarter century ago, these Northern pencil-pushers are very sure that we are not capable of regulating our own affairs,

and they are equally certain that we should accept the teachings and obey the instructions which proceed from the omniscience of their infinite minds and pens...

Now, the writer has seen a good deal of the North and its “institutions” of late years. It is a great country — a very great country, in many respects. There are a great many things, animate and inanimate, to be seen there which we do not have in North Carolina or in the South. Their cities are larger and their business buildings are bigger than ours. Their hotels are conducted on a more “extensive” scale — we stopped at one in Ohio where whites and blacks occupied adjoining rooms, sometimes the same room, and ate at the same table. At another hotel in the same State, the proprietor was found to be a very black man and his wife a very white woman, and the “guests” of both races were waited on by tolerably white servant girls. That is one of the “animate” things which we do not have here, to the chagrin of District Assembly 49¹, be it said. It is a matter of taste. But our “guardians” of the North are slow to concede that we have a right to taste as we do. Indeed, some of them tell us we have no business to taste at all unless taste as they taste. Social equality has a bitter taste to us, although it is a sweet morsel to some people of the North, and because it is not palatable to our social stomachs they want to force it down our throats...

We dispute the right of no man to join any labor organization, and it is clearly his privilege to say what he will and what and who he will not work for, and to exercise himself in any honorable and lawful way to obtain the maximum price for his labor. But we do say, and we say emphatically, that it is not his right to set a price on the labor of other men, and it is not his privilege to decree whether or no his neighbor — who does not happen to be a member of, and is unwilling to join his order — shall work for an employer for wages which and the members of his organization decline to accept. On the same principle we submit that no employer or other representative of capital has a right to say what wages his competitors in business shall pay or whom they shall employ.

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Notes

1. A local chapter of the Knights of Labor.