



Knights Down Under: The Knights of Labour in New Zealand

Robert E. Weir

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In the United States, the Knights of Labour (KOL) is part of the wreckage of labor history, a nineteenth-century organization of great promise that flamed out quickly and completely. Many scholars (wrongly) see it as little more than a failed experiment that stumbled due to misplaced idealism and antiquated notions of fraternalism. In New Zealand, the KOL's story was strikingly different, achieving tremendous success in a remarkably short time. "Knights Down Under" takes an in-depth look at the organization in New Zealand, and is the first thorough comparative study of the KOL in global context. It calls into question assumptions about the newness of globalism, national exceptionalism, the uniqueness of socialist movements, how social movements develop, the nature of leadership, and the possibilities and challenges of transnational organizing. The KOL was the first labour federation to envision itself as an international body that could and should expand beyond its North American birthplace. "Knights Down Under" sheds light on how the KOL evolved from the remnant of a failed Philadelphia tailors' union to an international force that helped rewrite the social agenda in far-off New Zealand. Knights immersed themselves in workplace issues, but also delved into politics, got elected to Parliament, and promoted a comprehensive program of social and labour reform. They were the envy of workers in Western industrial societies, most of which would not enact similarly sweeping changes for another four decades. Among the reforms the KOL helped enact were women's suffrage, mandatory arbitration of labour disputes, old-age pensions, early-closing hours for retail shops, land redistribution, an equitable tax code, and the creation of a department of labour. By aiding in the development of New Zealand's first political system, the KOL also laid the groundwork for the future birth of an independent labour party.

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