

18 *The IWO, a New Communist Arm*

The former Left of the Workmen's Circle was saved from complete disintegration by the removal of the taboo on dual unions by the Comintern in the middle of 1929. This removal made it possible for the Left to gather together the remnants of its followers for a new fraternal body, the International Workers Order.

At its first convention, March 1930, in New York City, the new order reported somewhat less than 3,000 members, a far cry from the size of the Left in 1925-1926. But this unimpressive number did not exhaust the WC loss. At its peak in 1925, the WC reached 84,791 members. From there on, as the Left-Right hostility became more implacable, the membership showed a steady decline. In 1928, it was 76,228, and in 1929, 71,482; another way of saying that the WC lost four times more people than those who joined the Left order.

At the same time, not all of the Left broke with the WC. Some refused to follow instructions; others were left on purpose to "bore from within." However, the Left never attained any stature in the WC, and remained a small band whose function was to echo Communist policies through appeals or protests.

The declaration of principles of the International Workers Order was a faithful copy of a Communist document of that period. Only two lines out of about 140 touched on the aim of a fraternal body, mutual aid. Otherwise, it bristled with Communist terminology. That it was a Jewish group and that its area would be Jewish was not even intimated. The emphasis was placed on the multiple

language nature of the IWO, though the merger with the other language fraternal bodies was not effected until 1933. This stepping out of their own shoes went against the better judgment of those who led the Left struggle in the WC. But party dictates were supreme.

The declaration made it implicit that "The IWO is . . . an integral part of the proletarian class struggle against capitalism. . . . (It) will support all struggles of the organizations based on the class struggle viewpoint. . . . The CP and the TUUL occupy the foremost place among them. . . . The road to the liberation of the working class lies along the Soviet road."¹³⁸

Traditionally mutual aid groups engaged in cultural work, but the IWO was going in for proletarian culture. However, the branches of the IWO could not exist on this total denial of the reality of their environment. They had to respond in one way or another to all problems and issues of the community. And the Third Period over, the high command of the order was shouting at the top of their voices of their deep concern for Jewish life and culture, and vowing that the order was not a Communist auxiliary. But they never could explain why the order loyally echoed all the shifts in the party line. Still, the party made sure that the IWO would never slip out of its orbit. Max Bedacht, a member of the party's political committee, was made general secretary of the order, despite his inexperience in fraternal affairs. This was a kick upstairs. The presidency was held for many years by another officer of the party, Philip Weiner.

DEMOCRATIC FRONT FAVORS GROWTH OF IWO

Hard work led to the expansion of the order. At the close of the first year, Salzman could announce several thousand new applicants, the majority of them in New York City. At that time, the order numbered 163 branches, 50 of them in New York. The action of the California district committee, which apparently took the class struggle outlook seriously and refused to install a new branch because of its majority of small businessmen, was called silly by the national office.¹³⁹ As practical people, they considered new members above principles.

Similar to all auxiliaries, the rapid increase in the IWO began

with the advent of the Democratic Front. As the youngest fraternal body, it could apply a more advanced system of insurance and sick benefit; the younger members did not have to pay for the older ones. This facilitated its growth.¹⁴⁰ The IWO placed family doctors and specialists at the service of its members, and maintained a dental clinic in New York City.

The Jewish Section, occupying a second place numerically, was the most important unit of the order (Jews were a majority in the English-speaking branches, too). It had its own school system throughout the country, and operated summer camps in five or six large cities. It also published its own textbooks and a children's monthly. At its peak, the order claimed 6,000 children enrolled in its schools.

Size, financial resources and the nature of its functions made the IWO the most effective Communist bulwark in Jewish society. In many localities its branches were the only point of contact the Communists had, though the ordinary member was not aware of it. The branches carried the brunt of the fund-raising drives for the *Freiheit*. The IWO itself gave up its monthly organ, *Die Funk*, running instead two pages weekly in the *Freiheit* for its affairs. These two pages, called "Tribune," were of considerable financial aid to the deficit-laden *Freiheit*.

As a chartered fraternal body, the IWO had the edge over other Communist transmission belts in knocking at the doors of various movements asking for admission. Thus, it could spearhead the party's unity drives.

THE NEW "JEWISHNESS" AND THE REASON WHY

On the eve of World War II, the IWO had about 110,000 members, of which nearly 35,000, including members of the youth branches, belonged to the Jewish Section. In 1942, the jurisdiction of the Jewish Section was greatly widened. It was permitted—by the party, of course—to enter the native American field. This permission applied in principle to the entire IWO, but the actual purpose was to increase the effectiveness of the Jewish Section, and in practice that Section was the only beneficiary. The decision was a complete reversal of the old policy of confining the activities of the ethnical groups, in the party and outside, to those who spoke their tongue.

The reason behind this startling change was the party's and Moscow's growing belief in the weight of Jewish public opinion and their desire to make the Jewish Section a more effective instrument for influencing it.

The leaders of the Jewish Section were happy indeed. "The changeover from a multi-lingual into a multi-national" body was termed by them a "historic decision." They reported with great satisfaction, ". . . The Jewish Section then embarked upon organizing English-speaking lodges (branches were now called lodges—M.E.) in the best interests of the Jewish people. . . . In two years, membership in these lodges reached approximately 11,000. . . ." *140

Three years later, at the seventh convention of the Jewish IWO, June 1947, in Camp Kinderland, George Starr, director of the English-speaking division, without going into details, reported that the membership had doubled since the last convention. *141

It would be a miracle—and a calamity as well—if the Communist order could recruit 11,000 native-born Jews in two short years, and double them in the following three years. Fortunately, the gain was merely a transfer and therefore a deception. Starr himself let the cat out of the bag. The vast majority of the new members were not new at all. They were merely transferred from the English order. Entire branches were thus turned over to the Jewish Section. In his report, Starr welcomed the delegates of two big lodges in New York, which until then had resisted being transferred. One had a membership of 1,500; the other, 600. And while the published minutes purposely omitted the origin of the lodges, it is clear that they were formerly part of the English IWO. Such a mass transfer could be accomplished only under instructions and even pressure by the party. People indifferent to Jewish affairs were thus compelled to become active in a Jewish organization. *142

This transfer of entire branches was not the first step in the party's plans to greatly strengthen its Jewish order. Three years earlier, in 1944, the Jewish Section had made a bold move toward a fuller Jewish identification. It threw off "International Workers" as a useless ballast and took the innocuous name of Jewish Peoples Fraternal Order, remaining financially a part of the IWO.

In 1945, the Emma Lazarus Women's Division was formed, June Gordon, president. It began with 1,658 members and reached about 4,000 in 1947. *143

In 1944, the general membership rose to 140,998; and in 1948, to 163,802, of which the Jewish numbered about 50,000. From then on, the order began to shrink, due to the intensified hostility toward Communism in the country. *144

In 1951, the New York State Superintendent of Banking and Insurance asked the State Supreme Court to revoke the charter of the IWO on the ground that its Jewish Section had spent unwarranted sums on supporting Communist papers and institutions, singling out the *Freiheit*. Justice Steinberg granted the request of the superintendent. Rockwell Kent was then president of the order. The IWO appealed to higher courts, but lost. In the early 50's, the order was liquidated. Only a smaller group consisting of hardened Communists and Lefts were able to reform their ranks by organizing independent societies and cultural clubs, thus maintaining a modicum of existence in a few large cities.