

NOTES ON THE HISTORY OF THE JEWISH AMERICAN SECTION OF THE INTERNATIONAL WORKERS ORDER

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MARCH 1944 marked the 14th anniversary of the International Workers Order, at the very time that the Workmen's Circle, from which it developed, celebrated its 44th year of existence. It is interesting and worth while to recall the events and developments which led to the founding of this comparatively young organization which has already played so important a role in the history of the American fraternal movement.

The Birth of the Workmen's Circle

The organization of the Workmen's Circle was a bright event in Jewish life. In its early days, the branches of the Workmen's Circle, scattered throughout the country wherever Jewish immigrants from Europe penetrated, brought a clear light to the gloom that characterized the lives of these people.

The objectives of the organization were predicated on the ideal of an emancipated world. One of the founders of the

Workmen's Circle, A. A. Gordon, thus formulated its aims:

"Our viewpoint was not merely to provide some money to a man who fell ill or to allot a few hundred dollars to his wife, in the event of his death. That was not our primary purpose.

"We have a much higher, deeper and broader objective: We strive for a better society and a more beautiful life, a society in which men may be secure in their needs, not only when they are dead, but when they are still among the living."

Not only were the theorists and formulators of the program workers from the shops and factories, but so were the founders and practical administrators of the movement. They were men of the people who were not content merely to discourse on a better and more beautiful world, but were actually ready to give their lives for their ideal. It was characteristic that one of the founders was a man who had fought in that world-shak-

ing event, the Paris Commune. A. S. Sacks states in his "History of the Workmen's Circle," that the first chairman of the organization was M. Goldreich. He was a cap-maker living in France at the time of the Franco-Prussian War. When the French army returned from the front, he joined the National Guard of the Paris Commune and fought on the barricades as a lieutenant in Louis Michel's army.

Equal Rights for All Trends in the Workmen's Circle

Our task here is not to review the entire history of the Workmen's Circle. We wish merely, in some measure, to account for some of the incidents which eventually led to the founding of the International Workers Order.

One of the main reasons for the success of the Workmen's Circle, for its prominent position in the ranks of Jewish labor, as well as for its immense growth, was that its founders had formulated a program, which had an appeal for the large mass of Jewish workers. The immigrants who flocked to the United States, at this time, were not primarily concerned with the benefits accruing to it from membership, as they were with the ideas incorporated in its program. The practical cultural activities of the organiza-

tion answered a definite social need in the lives of the immigrants. This was especially true for those who were imbued with the high ideals of the working-class and who in striving for a free world, were particularly pleased with the knowledge that all trends were welcome in the Workmen's Circle. There was special pride in the statement made by B. Feigenbaum, the first General-Secretary of the Workmen's Circle, concerning the causes for founding the organization:

"The labor movement was rent asunder. Rival unions were created over night. Rifts developed in the parties, wranglings were current in all the organizations, at the time. Many of the rank and file, who always worked in the movement, with honesty and true principle, were now left adrift. They had no haven of rest or comfort. Accordingly, among a small group of them, was born the idea that it was necessary to create something, wherein idealists of various camps and free-minded men could meet as one family and as genuine friends exchange the heartaches common to all of them, and so minister to one another."

In those years, this was to a great extent the practice. In 1913, for example, we find Dr. Zhitlowsky making a report for

the Educational Committee. Socialists, who were in agreement with the "Jewish Daily Forward" then, had important positions in the leadership. The spirit of the aforementioned program fully prevailed in the branches.

In 1920, however, almost a quarter of a century ago, the Workmen's Circle fell under the complete domination of the "Forward" machine, the most brutal force in the Jewish labor movement—a machine whose deadly hand was felt by every vital movement which disagreed with it and whose touch was withering and annihilating.

Actually, the "Forward" began to meddle in the Workmen's Circle as early as 1915, when the so-called "Youth" succeeded in gaining control of the National Executive Committee of the Workmen's Circle. The year in which the "Youth" element exercised control was one in which the "Forward" carried on a campaign of the basest type of vituperation. The "Youth" movement was wrecked in its struggle with the "Forward," because it represented a trend that only felt itself wronged by the organization. It had no program of its own. The constructive provisions it did propose found no support even in its own leadership or in the rank and file

of its own "Youth" followers. It was, therefore, possible for the "Forward" to annihilate each and every new trend from the very beginning, as soon as it entered the leadership of the Workmen's Circle.

In 1920, the Workmen's Circle leadership began to betray its former progressive policies. The Convention of the Workmen's Circle distributed thousands of dollars to every reactionary organization in the fold and to reactionary party-organs, both in America and in Europe. It did not lend support to the extent of even a single penny to any of the progressive movements then in the process of development in the United States. That brought to the fore a new movement in the Workmen's Circle, a movement, which was not an isolated and separatist trend, but which began to develop deep roots in all sections of the labor movement. This new trend which became known as "the left and progressive" trend, resisted the desires of the Workmen's Circle to betray its own principles of equal rights for all the trends within the organization. It, therefore, took over the best in the program of the "Youth" leadership, who during their period of leadership demanded more democracy within the Workmen's Circle and more

attention to the needs and demands of the rank and file membership.

It proposed that the Society devote more to cultural work; it sought to have all trends recognized with representation in the national and local executive bodies of the Workmen's Circle; that not merely one phase of the movement, the "rightist," be supported, but all the trends; that it take a position not with the enemies of the Soviet Union, but, on the contrary, that the Workmen's Circle assume a friendly attitude towards the Soviet Union; that finally it cease squandering thousands of dollars in behalf of the interests of the "rightist" leadership and employ its funds for the benefit of all its members.

The Birth of the Progressive Wing

The "rightist" leadership within the Workmen's Circle met the new opposition with a regular reign of persecution, with a series of misrepresentations and insults. The whole national apparatus was placed at the disposal of the most corrupt force in Jewish life—the "Forward" machine. Everything the leadership of that machine desired was executed for them by the leaders of the Workmen's Circle.

They did even more. Until then, an occasional newcomer, with an independent mind and personal convictions, had entered the National Executive Committee. Now the utmost caution was exercised to prevent the penetration of such a "mutinous" element. Prior to the election of the National Executive, the "Forward" machine was duly mobilized to make certain that a "misfortune" should not occur through the election of even one single progressive to the national administration. Conferences and elections were managed in the Tammany pattern. And, as if that was not enough, when despite all these precautions, a "misfortune" did occur, and a progressive was elected to representative bodies, such as the New York City Committee or to another position in the Workmen's Circle leadership, he was promptly excluded. There was no mincing of words. He was told very simply that he was not respectable enough to be a member of the body. Those great democrats who always had as their slogan "democracy above everything," now expelled legally-chosen representatives, and ravished democracy.

But when even such methods failed, and the progressive movement embraced an ever-

widening section of the Workmen's Circle membership, when the danger developed that the exclusion of a representative here and there would be an ineffective means of combatting the rising tide of opposition, "wholesale" expulsions were inaugurated. On one occasion, 64 branches of the Workmen's Circle were expelled for the crime of having organized themselves into a body whose only objective was to secure support in behalf of the aforementioned program. Despite the bitter persecution of the progressive wing, from 1922 until May, 1925, despite all the manipulations of the leadership of the Workmen's Circle, the progressive elements, nevertheless, were able to muster 250 delegates at the great Convention, called by the Workmen's Circle to celebrate its 25th anniversary. They represented more than 200 branches. The total number of delegates was about a thousand.

"The "rightist" leaders of the Convention proceeded in a manner never before seen at a workers' convention. The progressive wing, which had almost a quarter of the delegates, were not even given the opportunity of making a statement at any of the sessions. Such were the base methods employed by

the leadership of the Workmen's Circle.

The 250 delegates who represented the progressive wing came to the 1925 Convention with the following constructive program:

1. That the Workmen's Circle is a non-partisan fraternal organization, obligated to aid, materially and spiritually, all phases of the labor movement, irrespective of their political trend.

2. That the main task of the Workmen's Circle is to enlighten the Jewish masses as to their need for organization both economically and politically as well as the necessity for adequate cultural work to meet the main needs of the Jewish workers.

3. That a Jewish book-publishing house be established, to prepare literature for the large Jewish masses on all subjects of science and art, popular pamphlets as well as serious scholarly works.

4. That the activities of the existing labor-lyceums be widened in scope, so that they become real cultural centers both in spirit and leadership.

5. That there be the widest extension throughout the country of the Jewish children's schools, secondary schools, courses for adult workers, and well-established workers' universities, which could prepare

leaders for the labor movement.

6. That the "Freint" (The Friend), the official organ of the Workmen's Circle, be transformed into a social-literary monthly.

7. That choruses and orchestras be established, which would be workers' institutions, not only in their make-up, but also in their content and that an art theater be created.

8. That each and every important cultural undertaking in the labor movement be given support.

The progressives bit their lips but continued to speak in terms of "our common organization." They were hurt, that the betrayers of the Workmen's Circle had besmirched its name. The leaders of the progressive wing continued to dream that the Workmen's Circle could be returned to its splendid tradition, to the organizational ideal, which its founders envisaged, and which was the dream of the rank and file, as well. These hopes were in vain.

The four-year period from 1925 to 1929 were very difficult years for the progressive wing. They had to bear patiently the persecution of their members, were forced to observe how their organization, to which they had contributed their hard-earned money, and to which they had given some of their

best years in furthering its growth and development, was now trampling on their innermost feelings, slandering the Soviet Union and becoming more and more a pillar of the reactionary forces of the land. The Workmen's Circle leadership was not even restrained from wrecking the most glorious institution which the movement had built—its children's schools.

In 1925 the leaders of the Workmen's Circle observed that the children's school movement was growing and becoming an ever more important institution, due particularly to the efforts of the progressive elements. The leaders of the Workmen's Circle, therefore, decided to gain control over these schools, even if it became necessary to wreck this school movement in the process. They, therefore, presented an ultimatum whereby the administration of the schools was to be altered. They were no longer to be constituted from the ranks of the individual branches and neighborhoods where they functioned. They thought that by summoning a general city conference of Workmen's Circle branches, their machine-methods would aid them in taking over administrative control; that they would then be able to completely expel the progres-

sive elements. It became apparent to all who were active in the schools that a relentless machine strategy was being proposed to defeat those who had devoted their lives to the building of the school movement. The consequence was that the plan of the National Executive Committee was rejected. They did not hesitate, however, to exclude 18 out of the 24 schools then functioning in New York. This was in line with the whole program of terror politics being pursued by the Workmen's Circle leadership.

The Dilemma of the Progressive Wing

It was very apparent that the leaders of the Workmen's Circle very definitely sought to rid themselves of the progressive elements in its membership. The Progressive Action Committee soon heard the call that was being echoed from all sections of the country: How long must we suffer physically and spiritually? Why do we pay dues and large taxes, only to have the leaders of the Workmen's Circle distribute it to our bitterest foes? Why do we remain in an organization which is supposedly fraternal in character, whose objectives are comradeship and brotherhood, when its leaders actually have

introduced a shameful civil war into its ranks? Why not enter an organization that can satisfy our cultural and fraternal desires?

The National Committee of the progressive branches, therefore, submitted to the will of hundreds of active workers in the Workmen's Circle and called a conference for October 11, 12, 13 in 1929.

With bated breath, the progressive membership and branches read the call. At last, their dream was to be realized. The fraternal, brotherly organization, which represented their hopes and ideals, was now to become an actual fact. This mood was duly reflected in the deliberations at the conference when 193 delegates assembled, representing 108 branches and 22 minority groups. That historic conference unanimously decided to leave the Workmen's Circle.

Joining an Independent Workmen's Circle or Founding A New Organization?

This historic conference had an immediate problem to solve. Was it to found a new organization or join the Independent Workmen's Circle which had already been in existence for over a score of years, and had within the last several years

assumed a progressive attitude toward the problems of Jewish life? It had been this advanced attitude, as a matter of fact, which accounted for the phenomenal growth of the Independent Workmen's Circle during 1925-1929. It had increased its membership from four thousand to seven thousand during those years, at a time when the Workmen's Circle itself was losing ground. It so happened that in that very year a National Executive Committee had been selected which showed great sympathy for the progressive point of view. We, therefore, decided first to address ourselves to the Independent Workmen's Circle, to learn whether it was prepared to admit our progressive elements, since it knew both our program and platform. We sent a telegram to the National Executive of the "Independent" and received the following telegram in reply:

"We received with satisfaction your telegram, in which you register your decision and hearty willingness to join our organization, the Independent Workmen's Circle.

"We welcome your action and your attitude toward the painful problems which now so sharply divide the different classes. We welcome your earnest desire to bring together with

us a mass organization, which should serve the working class in all its struggles.

"We welcome the fact that the Independent Workmen's Circle has finally received the recognition of Jewish labor."

(Signed) National Executive Committee, "Independent Workmen's Circle."

When we received this telegraphic reply, we had two considerations before us, to build a new organization or join the Independent Workmen's Circle. We unanimously decided to leave the Workmen's Circle and to unite with the "Independent."

The decision of our Conference to leave the Workmen's Circle spread like wildfire over the land. The question was put on the agenda of more than 400 branches. The National Executive Committee which on various occasions had expressed satisfaction on being rid of the progressive wing, suddenly realized that thousands of other members would be leaving together with them. They were scared and began to weave a treacherous plot both against the progressive wing as well as against the Independent Workmen's Circle, which they had wished to wreck long before.

Workmen's Circle Leaders Plan Their Conspiracy

They sent agents to Boston, where they planned to take out an injunction against the admission of new members who had left the Workmen's Circle. The injunction was to check the activities of the Independent Workmen's Circle and would lead it to the brink of bankruptcy.

They were able to achieve in part this malicious plan. They wrecked the Independent Workmen's Circle. They could not, however, destroy the progressive wing. When we realized the nature of the plot, we decided to accept the compromise-motion of the court-appointed referee, who proposed that a special convention of the "Independent" be assembled. In accepting the compromise, we knew that under the circumstances the reactionary forces in the "Independent" might secure a majority. We were determined to build a new organization and if we could not achieve our aim by joining with the "Independent," we would establish our own organization instead.

We Are Forced to Build A New Organization

The Convention of the "Independent" took place on the 12th of January, 1930, and de-

spite all the maneuverings of the Workmen's Circle leaders, together with the reactionary leaders in the Independent Workmen's Circle, they had only three more votes than the progressive wing. The vote was 51 against 48, and even that was accomplished by way of a stratagem. Those who received the 51 votes had promised that they would admit the new thousands of members. The next day, however, when they had chosen their leaders, they refused to carry out the decision of the convention. We decided to build a new organization.

The very same month we dispatched a letter to all the branches and groups calling them to a national conference.

On the 30th of March, 1930, there were assembled the representatives of 157 branches of the Workmen's Circle and Independent Workmen's Circle and a number from minority groups as well. More than 200 delegates met the challenge with the decision to build a new national fraternal organization. When the report was read, these words were greeted with a long ovation, and a splendid demonstration, so that all felt that the founding of the International Workers' Order began a new chapter in the history of the American fraternal movement.

TOWARDS UNITY AND VICTORY

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R. Saltzman

Our report to the last, the 5th Convention of the International Workers Order,* opened with the following words which characterize its birth and development: "Ten years ago, Jewish workers began to paint a splendid picture on the broad American canvas, on the United States map. These were not artists, but plain toilers. They, however, put all their faith, all their idealism and enthusiasm into the effort, so that other national groups were imbued with their vision

* This article is from the report delivered by Mr. Saltzman to the 6th National Convention of the Jewish-American Section I.W.O. July, 1944.

and soon one after the other, joined in the common work. The canvas is not yet finished, but the grand plan is clearly in evidence.

"The picture shows *the gala-day of labor, a field-day for brotherhood, friendship, comradeship and selfaid*, the celebration of a variegated culture, which grew more fascinating and richer during the decade in which we worked to build up our organization."

By employing this analogy we can say, in 1944, that the picture has been considerably enhanced during the last four years by the weighty contribution our organization and especially the Jewish-American Section of it, made to both the general, as well as Jewish, life of the country. The last four years were such as are sure to leave a permanent mark in the history of the United States and in the history of the Jews in our country. The canvas we began painting 4 years ago, glows deeper and brighter today.

We are tempted to tell you much more about this remarkable canvas, of which plain folk, the people, are the master