

## 17 *The Contest in the Workmen's Circle*

The Communist battles in predominately Jewish unions are but one part of the story of their penetration. Battles of no less magnitude, wrapped in an ideological package, were fought in the fraternal movement, in postwar relief, on the educational and cultural sectors. There was hardly an area which the Communists did not try to infiltrate, to gain a foothold in, or to dominate. This chapter deals with the major contest for control that nearly wrecked the largest and oldest fraternal body, the Workmen's Circle (*Arbeiter Ring*).

The WC was the first mass organization in which a Communist group made itself heard. Immediately after the split in 1919, the Communists began a concerted propaganda in many WC branches. In the absence of economic issues in the order, they could not gain mass attention. Still, they did cause friction in a small number of branches.

Two years later, 1921, after the Communists were unified, a committee of 15 was formed for work in the WC. But the committee could do little to widen its sphere of influence. The Communists were hampered by the friendly attitude of the WC to the Soviet government. Like the rest of Jewish labor, the WC participated actively in the relief campaigns for the Jewish population there and for the famine-stricken on the Volga. In a congratulatory message on the fifth anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution, the NEC of the WC wrote: "We are happy that our greetings and fraternal best wishes to the Russian Soviet government is accompanied by a mod-

est but proper contribution from our order—the building of a hospital in Gomel (Byelorussia)" \*134

No one could deny the democratic character of the WC or its value as the Red Cross of labor. Traditionally, the WC was a body of autonomous branches, each enjoying complete liberty in political affiliation and social and cultural activity. No one from above would or could prevent any branch from carry on activity or giving aid to any grouping, as long as it was not contrary to the constitution of the order. The WC had always retained its neutrality during the previous feuds in the movement. And its steady growth could be credited in a large measure to this non-interference.

The national board of directors, the highest policy-making body of the WC, tried, in the beginning, to steer a neutral course in the controversy with the Communists. As late as January 1922, it declared that in view of the fact that all Socialist tendencies were represented in the WC, "we cannot permit that the order as a whole should take this or any other position in tactical questions. . . . The WC is, was and remains neutral in all that concerns Socialist tactic. . . . We protest vigorously against the attempts of outsiders, non-members, . . . to intervene in our internal affairs and to dictate our policy." \*135

This neutral attitude lasted less than four months.

### TWO RESOLUTIONS THAT TOUCHED OFF THE STRUGGLE

The struggle in the WC became more serious after the merger of the Hardman-Olgin group with the Communists. As was noted previously, this group brought into the Workers Party men and women occupying important positions in Jewish labor. In the WC they were even more numerous than in the unions. Due to the nature of the order and the geographical distribution of its several hundred branches, WP people, non-workers, were active in the WC, and even leaders of their branches. This was especially true outside the industrial centers where the Left Wing had many adherents among small business people, former workers.

The opening gun in this stage was fired by the NEC of the WC. Two resolutions were brought in at the convention in Toronto, May 1922. One was a demand for the release of the Socialists imprisoned in Soviet Russia; the second condemned the Jewish Feder-

ation of the WP and the *Freiheit* as inimical to the interests of Jewish labor. Both were passed by a big majority after stormy debates. The Left delegates marched out of the convention in protest, and formed a Committee of Action to fight the Right Wing. From Toronto the Left-Right conflict quickly spread to many branches, gaining in intensity as time went on.

The two resolutions signaled the end of the honeyed period in the relations between the top of Jewish labor and Lenin's government. It was the first deliberate step to "straighten out the line," in the direction of Medem's warning a year earlier. At the same time, it furnished the Left with a clearcut issue.

That the WC was the first to fling this challenge to its Left members can be explained in part by the political alertness of its leaders, who felt more keenly than those in the unions the grave consequences of a Communist-Left in their midst. Another reason was their closeness to the *Forward*, which was eager to deliver a crushing blow to the newly published *Freiheit* before it could grow into a rival.

After the convention, the Left called a mass meeting in Clinton Hall. Similar meetings were called in other cities. A National Committee of Action was set up to coordinate all the Left groups in the order.

The Communist-Left used a double-barreled gun in its strategy: Those who, for one reason or another, had a warm feeling toward Soviet Russia were told that the WC had joined the camp of the Soviet enemies, and that their resolution was based on false information. Those who were not exactly admirers of the *Forward* were appealed to in the name of fairness against the attack of a daily that was as yet only a month old and was not Communist but only left of the center.

The NEC warned the branches against affiliation with the Left committee. And, in 1923, it dissolved several district committees dominated by the Left, accusing them of waging a struggle against the leadership of the order.

An incident occurring in the same year helped to provoke the national office against the Communists. The delegation of two, Joseph Weinberg and Reuben Guskin, sent by the order to conclude the agreement for building a hospital in Gomel, on reaching Berlin, were refused a Soviet visa, though one had been promised.

The refusal was clearly the result of the Communists' protests here against the delegation. And, although the Russian Red Cross later attempted to pacify the WC by saying that it was a misunderstanding, no other delegation was sent, and the \$15,000 from the WC was spent by the Russian Red Cross on a clinic, without asking the approval of the order. The WC people were further incensed by the insulting remarks in the Moscow *Emes*, that the two delegates were interventionists who had come to spy.

#### THE STRUGGLE IS INTERDEPENDENT

The conflict in the WC ran parallel to that in the unions and was greatly affected by it. The severity of measures and countermeasures applied by the WC against the opposition were, in a subtle way, related to and dependent on the fortunes of the Communist-Left in the unions.

As the contest in the unions grew more heated, the fight in the WC took a sharper turn. The clashes in many branches and in local conferences were getting worse. At the nomination conference, February 24, 1924, the vote was 446 for the administration against 186 for the opposition, a respectable show of strength for the latter. The majority staged a political demonstration with a collection for the arrested Socialists in Russia. A Communist who protested a collection in behalf of "dogs" was chased off the platform amidst angry disorder. The conference was nearly broken up.<sup>138</sup>

The NEC resorted to further punitive measures. A number of Left branches were divided, and most of the leading members of the Left Committee of Action were made members-at-large, among them the former president of the WC and one of its builders, Ab. Epstein. (A member-at-large is separated from his branch.)

The Communist-Left, meanwhile, took steps to tighten its ranks. A second national Left conference was held in April 1924; and a third, in December 1925. At the latter conference a closely knit opposition was formed, the Farband of Progressive Branches of the WC—Melech Epstein, chairman; Rubin Salzman, secretary. The affiliated branches had to tax themselves for the Farband.

The national office of the WC issued a warning to all branches not to join the Farband, calling it a "government within a government." But 64 branches, with a membership of about 7,000, failed

to heed the warning. They were dissolved, their members made members-at-large. The Right, sensing that the Farband was preparing for a split, hoped by this drastic action of isolating the Left to minimize the scale of their defection.

They were not mistaken. The opposition did contemplate creating a new fraternal order. And the Farband was to be its nucleus. (In a conversation years later with Nathan Chanin, he frankly stated that they would rather have seen the WC go under than to turn it over to the Left.)

#### THE LEFT SEIZES THE SHULES AND THE CAMP

A step toward a split was the seizure, in the summer of 1926, of about 26 out of 30-odd WC parochial schools, the WC center in Harlem, and the large summer camp, Kinderland, on Sylvan Lake, New York. The plan was executed with almost military precision, placing the considerable number of *tuers* and teachers, arden Yiddishists, before a dilemma—either to desert their lifework or continue under Communist auspices. Only a part of them sympathized with the Left. A majority, headed by the pedagogue Jacob Levine stayed, hoping that neither the spirit nor the curriculum of the *shules* would be changed.

One must bear in mind that in the middle 20's Jewish Communism and its organ, the *Freiheit*, were riding high on their avowed concern for Jewish culture and education. It may be added that the Communist seizure of the *shules* spurred the order, previously lukewarm to them, to rebuild the school system in a short time. (That the Communists could, with only a minority of people in the school system, take it over, is evidence of their audacity.)

The only equity the *shules* possessed were debts. But the building in Harlem was property; and Kinderland, a going concern, a source of jobs, prestige and propaganda. Meyer London, counsel for the WC, advised the national office to sue for the recovery of the camp. But the latter, in the climate of that period, refused to go to court. The WC erected another big summer camp on the same lake.

Another preparatory step for the split was the instructions to the Left branches to hold back, as far as possible, the payment of dues and premiums and to make sure that the funds were in the names

of reliable people. This measure would bring to the proposed fraternal order a certain amount of the coveted financial assets.

#### OPPOSITION STOPPED IN ITS TRACKS BY THE PARTY

The Left was not its own master in the WC either. Though a fraternal body is not a trade union, and the livelihood of its members is in no way involved, the party frowned upon a final break. Foster insisted that a new fraternal body would be in sharp violation of the Comintern dictum against dual unions. And, again exactly as in the ILGWU, the Left in the WC was sacrificed to the raging factional strife in the party.

The Left in the WC was now faced by the same impasse as those in the unions. Their people of the dissolved branches saw no reason for remaining members-at-large, and were calling for decisive action. But the "comrades of the center," all of them Communists, unable to share with their followers the true reason for their stalling, had to invent a number of pretexts for their inaction. The chairman of the Farband was compelled to make a flying trip to the larger cities here and in Canada to try to calm down the growing impatience. In Canada, the local Communists, in the name of Canadian independence, insisted on forming a new fraternal body, which they did.

In a review of the situation in the *Hammer*, the Communist monthly, the chairman of the Farband tried to put a cheerful face on a bad situation. Calling the impasse a temporary retreat, he could offer no more solid reason for the abrupt change in plans for a split than the tenderly moving "We cannot leave the many thousands of the petty bourgeoisie under the sole influence of the Right Wing." \*137

The Communist-Left tried desperately to open the door back to the WC. A committee of three, Melech Epstein, Benjamin Lifshitz, secretary of the Bureau, and Joseph Sultan, of the Foster caucus, appeared before the 27th convention of the order, May 1927, in Cleveland, to ask for reinstatement.

Failing in this attempt, the Left induced a few well-meaning people to try to bring peace to the order. But the WC had seen the dire results of the sham peace in the trade unions. Moreover, the Communists in the unions were already on the retreat. And the

national office was encouraged to refuse any negotiations with the opposition.

To stave off complete disintegration, the Left hastily concluded an agreement with the small Independent Workmen's Circle of Boston, a fraternal body with strong anti-175 East Broadway sentiments. A conference of 108 branches and 24 minority groups, representing 15,000 members, approved this agreement (the official report was probably an exaggeration). The Left hoped eventually to dominate this order. But, when the opposition was ready with all the necessary formalities, it was blocked at the last moment by a secret understanding between the WC and the Boston people. The Left was again isolated.

In despair, the Left was prepared to go to court to compel the Boston order to carry out the terms of the agreement. Meanwhile, its ranks were dwindling. Months dragged by and prospects for survival were growing dimmer.