

Introduction

This book examines the International Workers Order (IWO), a consortium of ethnic mutual self-insurance societies that conceived of its mission as far broader than writing disability checks. Members were mainly attracted to this left-wing society because of the accident and death policies, and the IWO offered dental and medical clinics and sanitariums, too. But from its birth in 1930, the IWO advocated for unemployment insurance, Social Security, and vibrant industrial unions as the only true means of guaranteeing the health of its working-class members. While many early leaders of the IWO were indeed Communists, the Order drew its members from a broad ethnic, racial—and *political*—spectrum. The IWO was an insurance fraternal like no other in the nation. It must have been doing something right, for by 1948 it enrolled more than 180,000 white, black, Hispanic, and Arabic members across the country.¹ What accounted for the popularity, then notoriety, of this left-wing insurance consortium?

Imagine a mutual benefit society that offers low-cost life insurance as well as accident and sickness benefits to help tide its members over in times of need. This fraternal society offers the same low rates to all workers, even those in hazardous industries such as coal mines or steel mills, and requires no physical examination to enroll. This organization also recognizes the benefits of low-cost, preventive care and establishes a series of medical, dental, and optical clinics as well as sanitariums for members who need a longer, therapeutic rest. For working people these clinics offer some of the only affordable health care around.

Imagine, too, it is the height of the Great Depression, and Hoovervilles dot the streets and parks of most American cities. In Detroit, Michigan,

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official unemployment hovers near 40 percent (not reflected in the figures are those “lucky” enough to work one or two days a month; they are counted as employed). Every other household in many cities faces foreclosure and eviction, swelling Hoovervilles to bursting, but the response from the White House, state house, and city hall is that prosperity lurks just around the corner, and any government “handout” would kill one’s work initiative. Therefore, no federal or state programs cushion the disaster, although in Toledo, Ohio, private charities dole out three cents’ worth of soup a day, sending the unemployed into the streets to search for that elusive prosperity, or even a job. A little starvation, evidently, is a small price to pay to ensure that “free market” principles and government austerity are enforced.²

But alongside President Herbert Hoover’s bromides, what if your fraternal society recognizes that sending a member to an affiliated dentist or sanitarium, writing a check when he develops black lung, or paying a “death benefit” to his survivors is not enough to ensure the health of its members? Just think, your insurance company actively lobbies for federal unemployment insurance, old age pensions, effective workers’ compensation laws, and jobs programs to ensure your health and that of your lodge brothers. You are proud of your insurance company, which for twenty-five years has carried on the fight to lobby for universal health care, printing booklets calling for full medical coverage for all Americans. Imagine.³

This insurance company is more than fantasy; since its inception in 1930, the IWO was an active lobbyist on behalf of its members for its entire existence. It pressed the government to move forward with what it termed “social security,” and after some of the society’s program was enacted, the IWO continued prodding the government in progressive directions, calling for an expansion of Social Security to cover federally funded medical care. The IWO also recognized that the health of its working-class members was bound to the right to a living wage, safe and reasonable working conditions, and fair treatment on the job. Consequently, it forcefully advocated for industrial unions, and with the advent of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), IWO members became some of the most effective organizers for the CIO. In 1937 Philip Murray, president of the Steel Workers Organizing Committee (SWOC), wrote praising the Order’s work for the CIO.⁴ Following World War II, the IWO continued to champion union rights, pushing for repeal of the Taft-Hartley Act, which required union officers to swear they were not Communists and placed other restrictions on labor’s rights.⁵

The IWO was also committed to multiracialism during an era when segregation governed most of American society, either in its terroristic Jim Crow manifestation below the Mason-Dixon Line, or in the urban North with its informal apartness in residence, job site, and schoolroom. White-instigated terror erupted whenever whites perceived blacks had trespassed beyond their “place,” whether in spectacle lynchings from Marion, Indiana,

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to Sherman, Texas, and beyond, or urban race riots in cities such as Chicago and Detroit when black people bought houses or enjoyed parks deemed off-limits.⁶ In the IWO, however, white ethnics were enrolled alongside African American and “Spanish” members (Puerto Ricans in New York and other eastern cities, Mexicans in California)—in the 1940s Detroit even had an Arabic lodge. In 1951 Black Muslims testified that the IWO was one of the only places they found racial brotherhood, and surely the IWO was one of the few organizations of any kind in America with Jewish, Polish and Hispanic Catholic, and black and Arabic Muslim members on its rolls.⁷

Black members in particular appreciated the Order’s low-cost insurance since most for-profit insurance companies of the era refused to write policies for black people, or if they did, they charged inordinately higher rates than for European Americans, and for inferior coverage. Vice President Louise Thompson organized black and white sharecroppers into IWO locals in the South and recalled that her fellow African Americans appreciated the nondiscriminatory insurance coverage—and dignity as humans—they were afforded in the IWO. She proudly recalled, too, that in Chicago and elsewhere Ukrainian and African American women cooperated as mainstays in interracial lodges in the heart of a de facto segregated city. Black newspapers such as the *Baltimore Afro-American* approved of the IWO’s groundbreaking ways.⁸

But the IWO, which conceived of itself as a militant lobbying organization and not simply an insurance concern, went further in championing racial equality. IWO-sponsored rallies, pamphlets, and petitions called for antilynching legislation, abolition of the poll tax, a permanent Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC), the abolition of Jim Crow segregation, and complete racial social equality. Members of the Order targeted segregated baseball almost a decade before Jackie Robinson joined the Dodgers, and IWO lodges lobbied in cities such as Detroit for open-housing laws at a time when other white ethnics fire-bombed the houses of blacks who sought to dwell in “whites only” neighborhoods. The IWO orchestrated campaigns that targeted discriminatory practices by banks and insurance corporations, and during campaigns to integrate housing noted that corporate as well as federal funds were used to bolster segregation in places such as New York’s Stuyvesant Town. To be sure, the Order wrestled with the white chauvinism of some of its members, but its overall commitment to integrated membership and advocacy of racial justice were enlightened policies far ahead of their time.⁹

Order members also lobbied on foreign policy, demanding the United States stand up to fascist provocation from Spain to Czechoslovakia to Ethiopia. Thompson made a well-publicized tour of the Spanish Republic in support of the defenders against fascism, and IWO rallies raised money for medical supplies and ambulances for Francisco Franco’s foes and Ethiopians

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battling to remain free.¹⁰ With the U.S. entry into World War II, the IWO did everything it could to aid the Allied war effort, establishing an IWO Front Line Fighters Fund (FLFF) to send care packages to American GIs and orchestrating campaigns by their Slavic members to deliver war relief to Poland, Czechoslovakia, and the Soviet Union. As part of the broad Popular Front coalition of liberal and left-wing Americans of various affiliations, the IWO supported President Franklin Roosevelt's war policies, especially the call by his vice president for a postwar "Century of the Common Man" securing the Four Freedoms to all peoples. Many IWO members were instrumental in the creation of the American Slav Congress (ASC), "an organization of organizations" that united various Slavic groups in support of the war effort. The Slav Congress, like the IWO, pushed for the opening of a second front to take some of the heat off the Soviets, had plenty of praise for Red Army victories such as Stalingrad, and advocated an enduring Soviet-U.S. friendship.¹¹

Following the war the IWO argued for continued Soviet-American friendship and opposed remilitarization and the bellicose turn in America's foreign policy. Within months Moscow went from valued ally to pariah, a shift that the Order saw as needlessly aggressive and lamentable. While the organization sought to steer foreign policy in a more idealistic direction, it extended its demand for racial equality abroad, too, calling for the extension of self-determination and democracy to colonized parts of Asia and Africa. Warnings were published on the folly of supporting French efforts to hold onto its colony in an obscure place called Vietnam.¹² The wartime Atlantic Charter, outlining the Allies' commitment to postwar national self-determination, had to apply to Asia and Africa, too, or the Cold War would continue to heat up. While this may seem far afield from its mandate to write life insurance policies, the Order argued that a peaceful, saner foreign policy without nuclear mushroom clouds eternally looming over policyholders' heads could only improve citizens' health.

For all its militant lobbying for racial equality, social programs, and union rights, the IWO was unusual in other, pleasurable ways. Imagine that your insurance carrier also offered members a chance to join choral groups; orchestras; mandolin clubs; theater troupes; and baseball, basketball, gymnastics, and bowling teams. Imagine a life insurance society with lending libraries and ethnic dance performances, and you might be ready to join the IWO.

And the government would label you a subversive. For despite all its good works, the IWO was led by Communists, and by 1947 such a label was anathema. Whatever the merits of strong industrial unions, universal health care, workers' economic security, and racial equality (and many conservatives were not that sympathetic to these causes in any case), the taint of communism led to the IWO's extirpation through the combined efforts of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Justice Department, House Un-American

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Activities Committee (HUAC), and New York State Insurance Department. Some of the strongest advocates for black civil rights, anticolonialism, and economic justice had their voices stifled, and these causes were set back for years as the limits of the politically possible were narrowed after “red” perspectives were stilled.

Although the IWO contained Communists, among both grassroots members and national leadership, the organization embraced members from a wide political spectrum. To be sure, with the opening of the Communist Party USA (CPUSA) archives in Moscow, scholars have convincingly demonstrated that there was more contact and coordination of policy between officials of the CPUSA and Moscow than was previously acknowledged by American Party members, and the top echelon of the IWO was in contact with the national Party as well as at times the Communist International, or Comintern. Certainly, the Kremlin endeavored to stay apprised and, aspirationally, in control of all facets of Party work. In May 1926, for example, the secretary of the Comintern wrote to the U.S. Party asking for twice monthly reports on its activities, noting that “exhaustive reports on such questions as . . . work among the Negroes will be particularly valuable.”¹³ Such letters from the Kremlin may be the smoking gun for those inclined to see the American Communist movement as a tightly controlled project directed by the Comintern, and such documents certainly suggest that the Party was cooperating with the USSR to a far greater extent than left-wing activists between the 1930s and 1950s publicly allowed. The scholarship of John Earl Haynes and Harvey Klehr has, as Maurice Isserman has noted, done a service by affording a fuller picture of the degree to which American Communists looked to Moscow for guidance.¹⁴

Yet scholars of the African American freedom struggle such as Erik Gellman, Erik McDuffie, William Maxwell, Jacqueline Castledine, Dayo Gore, and others have countered with strong evidence that when it came to civil rights, activists within the Communist Party (CP) and its allies often acted out of deep commitment, and did so with a great deal of local initiative, not cynical manipulation by or subordination to Moscow.¹⁵ Recently, organizations such as the National Negro Congress (NNC) and the Civil Rights Congress (CRC) have received sympathetic treatments demonstrating the praiseworthy nature of these groups, which in the late 1940s were targeted as un-American for containing or associating with Communists. Likewise, the American Committee for Protection of Foreign Born (ACPFB), another organization, like the IWO, on the Attorney General’s List of Subversive Organizations, has been rehabilitated by Rachel Buff as a progressive defender of immigrants’ rights.¹⁶ Communists were only one element of these organizations, which were pursuing laudable goals.

Similarly, within the IWO, there is no evidence of espionage, nor was control by the CP, to say nothing of the Kremlin, ironclad. Party control of

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the Order was aspirational, not actual. And from the Order's earliest years, many officials argued that it was necessary to adapt revolutionary or Marxist rhetoric and aspirations to suit more closely the actual needs of the workers they sought to enroll. The Order grew organically to meet the goals of the members. Likewise, white ethnics in the Party's language branches exhibited a great deal of initiative, independence, even vituperation, in arguing with Party superiors when they felt they knew what would best serve the working class. The robotic servants of the Party or Kremlin are absent straw men when it comes to the language branches and the IWO lodges that succeeded them.

Indeed, a multivocal conversation on what shape the Order would take and how revolutionary it could or should be seems to always have taken place between Party leaders, Order officials, and lodges' ordinary members. The members of many lodges made of their Order the kind of grassroots organization that would serve their needs, not Moscow's or CPUSA General Secretary Earl Browder's. Rather than deride CP-affiliated organizations as "Communist transmission belts," as many conservatives did between the 1940s and 1950s, and as some recent scholars continue to argue, this book demonstrates how the IWO was attractive to members because it effectively advocated programs that benefited working-class people.¹⁷

Focusing solely on Communist connections, strong as they sometimes were, fails to address what the IWO was doing on the American ground, and what about its activities made this organization so attractive to tens of thousands of members. What was found lacking in 1930s–1950s America to cause tens of thousands of immigrants and ethnic Americans to embrace this organization?

To date the IWO has received scant attention from historians. Arthur Sabin's *Red Scare in Court: New York versus the International Workers Order* largely focuses on the Order's unsuccessful legal battle to remain afloat after running afoul of the New York Insurance Department.¹⁸ Sabin, a professor of law, focuses on the legal fight involving the novel application of insurance law to the IWO, which the state dubbed a "moral hazard" for advocating subversive ideas. While this story is important, and certainly a sobering tale of the restriction of free speech rights, Sabin devotes only twenty-five pages (less than one-tenth of his book) to the leisure, political, and civil rights activities of the Order in the twenty years before its legal troubles developed. *Pluralistic Fraternity: The History of the International Workers Order* by Thomas Walker is a brief institutional history that offers little if any analysis of the Order's interracial composition and civil rights, labor, and peace activism.¹⁹ Then, too, Walker seems to take at face value the deleterious nature of an Order ostensibly "dominated" by Communists, an assumption with which I take strong issue.

Roger Keeran has more usefully provided article-length studies of IWO members' vital role in organizing autoworkers during the rise of the CIO,

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and Tony Michels notes the vitality of the cultural activities of the Jewish Peoples Fraternal Order (JPFO), which launched the IWO by breaking away from the “right-wing” Socialists in the Workmen’s Circle.²⁰

In a similar vein, Timothy Johnson and Robin Kelley have demonstrated that the CP proved attractive to many black sharecroppers because of organizers’ “hard, day-to-day organizing of people around their concrete needs, while agitating on the eventual need and right for majority rule.” IWO organizer Thompson Patterson (Louise married William Patterson in 1940), too, found black and white croppers, as well as industrial workers, receptive to her message because the Order offered tangible relief in times of crisis. In this formulation rigid ideological adherence to Marxism of some organizers was immaterial, as sharecroppers embraced one of the few groups willing to better their lot.²¹ It was the group’s satisfaction of day-to-day, lived imperative needs for Depression-bound members that attracted most recruits. Espousal of social, economic, and racial reforms by the Order resonated with members; this group embodied a progressive spirit of Americanism, not a subversive cabal. To dismiss members as the latter is to ignore what the IWO, and other left-wing organizations, meant to members themselves, who found the Order’s message attractive and believed it was advancing their own life goals.

By 1947 the IWO drew 180,000 working-class members from across the political spectrum.²² To be sure, Order members were prone to be sympathetic to progressive causes, but rather than serving as dupes of the Kremlin, members avidly embraced these organizations’ goals because they found the promise to further working-class desires such as strong unions, Social Security, and racial equality appealing.

While this left-wing organization served the needs of working-class white, black, and Hispanic members, the program it proposed—workplace democracy, universal health care, and most especially full racial equality—was anathema to conservatives such as FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, HUAC chairmen Martin Dies and John Rankin, and Attorney General Tom Clark. The IWO was labeled subversive not because it posed a threat to the United States vis-à-vis Moscow, but in some measure because it advocated multiracial democracy and fuller labor participation in the democratic process. The very policies that proved attractive to many members to a large degree alarmed the solons of the segregated, corporate-friendly status quo, and this, rather than any impending security threat, doomed the IWO.

The liquidation of militant organizations such as the IWO was not just a calamity for these groups’ members; the clampdown restricted the limits of “permissible” dissent for all Americans. Political dialogue on racism, segregation, and corporate dominance of America’s economy shrank considerably after the left-most outliers were so visibly punished. Members lost jobs, while others faced prison; foreign-born members were deported, while prominent

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native-born members of the IWO such as singer-actor-activist Paul Robeson and artist Rockwell Kent were refused passports by the State Department for more than eight years for their vocal advocacy of civil rights.²³ Landon Storrs argues that the imposition of loyalty oaths, HUAC hearings, and Smith Act restrictions on left-wingers had a chilling effect on all government employees, and from the late 1930s into the 1960s progressives of all kinds, even those with no Marxist affiliations, tacked to the right out of fear of firings or worse.²⁴ How vocal would exponents of reform have been after watching friends and relatives in the Order labeled pariahs and punished? The Bill of Rights became a thinner reed for all Americans under such conditions, with this evisceration excused as necessary for national security. In our own age of Homeland Security, these questions still have relevance, even if the targets of federal surveillance, discipline, and punishment are by and large no longer Italian, Jewish, Polish, and African American “reds” but new official pariahs.

From 1947 until its demise, as the IWO was fighting for its life, it downplayed connections to the CP. While this may have been the only plausible defense strategy available, in concealing its red heritage the IWO was too coy by half. The IWO was indeed the brainchild of the CP, and many of its national officers such as General Secretary Max Bedacht were top-ranking officials of the CP (in the late 1920s, Bedacht had served as acting chairman of the Party and then led its Agitational Propaganda—“Agitprop”—Committee and also openly ran on the Communist line for U.S. senator from New York). Many Communists in the IWO made no bones about their CP membership, although their commitment to revolutionary socioeconomic change was largely dedicated to what could be achieved through persuasion, not coercion or violence.

The larger question, however, is whether the well-publicized Communist affiliation of some (and certainly not all) officials negated all the group’s activism and turned this group automatically into a “transmission belt” for Kremlin purposes as alleged. Was every member of the Order engaged in union-building or civil rights activism tainted because of the beliefs of some IWO executives? From 1947 to 1954, when the Order was liquidated by action of the New York State Insurance Department, anti-Communist activists argued that this was the case. This book argues that a thorough examination of the writings, actions, and words of IWO members as contained in the Order’s records deposited at New York University, Cornell, and other repositories tells a different story. My mining of extensive primary sources on the IWO reveals that the organization’s thousands of members displayed commitment to racial and social justice, legitimate, worthy causes for which they fought, not slavish loyalty to foreign spymasters.

The “red” heritage of the IWO does not negate the validity of the causes it espoused. Moreover, even militant advocacy of worthy causes with which

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well-connected conservatives disagreed was not subversive behavior. An examination of the IWO's own primary sources in the archives reveals left-wing advocacy, not espionage, but during the red scare, roots in the CP invalidated members' free-association and political lobbying rights.

The idea for a multiethnic, interracial fraternal order was indeed hatched within the language division of the CP. Communist sympathizers split with the Jewish Workmen's Circle in 1930 and allied with the Hungarian Workers' Sick Benefit and Educational Federation and Slovak Workers Society (SWS) and other groups to form the IWO. But already in the 1920s within the CP's language branches, members exhibited a stridently independent militancy regarding industrial unionism, black civil rights, and other matters that often put them at odds with the CP's national leadership. These strains of independence continued after the IWO's creation. While it was the aspiration of the Party's leadership to direct all aspects of the language branches' activities, the independence they exhibited suggests that, as Michels and Paul Buhle argue, ethnic agendas were more salient to Jewish, Slavic, and other immigrant Communists than the dictates of the central leadership.²⁵

African Americans and Hispanics, too, knew of the discriminatory depredations of bosses, commercial insurance brokers, and others to keep them in subordination and joined the interracial IWO for reasons that had little to do with Moscow. The pursuit of unionization and racial brotherhood of these fraternalists was based on their own experiences in America, firsthand brushes with brutal anti-immigrant xenophobia, bosses' divide-and-conquer racism, and violent strikebreaking in mines and mills. Many of the people who after 1930 flocked to the IWO fashioned their own agendas, based on their own lived experiences in America. Just as Rosemary Feurer argues Communists often won a following in the United Electrical Workers (UE) because they were effective advocates for members, many working people found the Order addressed their needs, so red labels were overlooked.²⁶

To be sure, the members of language fraternal societies who later joined the IWO often agreed that the CP's plans and directives could benefit them. But when they disagreed, they expressed views and acted independently of higher-ups' decrees. James Green has argued that the grassroots militant workers of the CIO prodded John L. Lewis to become a more militant labor leader than he might otherwise have been and that their insurgency from below was the real motivator for the CIO's organizing success.²⁷ The same could be said about the Communists who created the IWO. They had to adjust their aspirations and hopes for complete control of the IWO to the agendas of members, some of whom argued that an overemphasis on hardcore Bolshevik rhetoric would repel potential IWO members, others of whom prodded leaders to be more confrontational on racial equality, industrial union organizing, and other matters dear to their hearts. I hope to demonstrate that the archival records reveal a grassroots membership capable of

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expressing far more independence than the narrators of robotic Communist control allowed. Tight control of the IWO may have been the goal but aspirations did not match up with reality.

Unaddressed, too, by the courts, which upheld the IWO's liquidation, was whether members' free-association rights could be trampled because of the political affiliations of some Order officers. Was the liquidation, with the loss of an organization and its lobbying activities and insurance coverage, permissible because of the beliefs of some of its officers? The crimes of some Republicans or Democrats have not forced the dismantling of organizations they have headed.

This book integrates the labor and socializing aspects of the IWO with its strongly articulated racial egalitarianism, for the organization was a pioneer in linking labor, foreign-policy, and civil rights agendas in one progressive vision for America. This work, then, also returns multiracialism to our examination of the Left. The IWO was one of the few organizations in which Jewish, Slavic and Italian Catholic, Hispanic, African American (including Black Muslim), and Arabic leftists worked side by side in pursuit of racial and workplace justice.²⁸ Again, this commitment to what we might today call multiculturalism was one of the main markers of the IWO's so-called subversive un-Americanism in 1947, at least for conservatives. This work enhances our understanding of the early, radical roots of multiculturalism.

In this regard, *"A Road to Peace and Freedom"* seeks to fill a gap in the urban history and birth of the Right literature. Thomas Sugrue, Thomas Philpott, Arnold Hirsch, Andrew Diamond, Karen Miller, Robert Self, and Kevin Kruse have accurately charted the depths of white ethnic resistance to black integration and equality, but these authors by and large omit the significant "prophetic minority" of white ethnics in groups such as the IWO who were committed to working with black and Hispanic activists in pursuit of racial and working-class justice. The work of such leftists building interracial solidarity has largely gone unremarked in the historiography, which has focused on the white-defended neighborhoods, those violently resisting integration through Sugrue's "crabgrass-roots politics."²⁹

Unquestionably, most white ethnics bitterly resisted cooperation with African Americans in neighborhoods or on job sites. There was, however, an interracial coalition possible, built by left-wing immigrant and second-generation Slavic, Greek, Italian, and Jewish Americans working alongside African American and Hispanic comrades on social legislation and battles for racial equality. Enrollees in left-wing groups such as the Slav Congress and IWO not only resisted the psychic (and financial) "wages of whiteness," aptly identified by W.E.B. Du Bois and explored in the works of whiteness studies scholars such as David Roediger.³⁰ IWO members worked on interracial civil rights campaigns decades before the enactment of the Voting Rights and Civil Rights Acts. The activism of IWO members wed campaigns

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against anti-Semitism and other causes to an explicitly antiracist policy on behalf of African American civil rights; my work intervenes to suggest that it was possible for some of the white ethnics James Barrett and Roediger term “inbetween people” to incorporate progressive race thinking into their white consciousness.³¹

To be sure, even within the IWO racial egalitarianism was put to the test. White chauvinism was a recurring problem, but unlike in more mainstream organizations of the 1930s to 1950s, it was one that the Order endeavored to address, even if many members often fell short of enlightened goals. There were failings on this count, and others; missteps and arrogance were not unknown in the Order and other left-wing organizations, and by mid-century even militant white ethnics were beginning to take for granted the racial privilege from which they, but not other Americans, benefited. Some IWO members exhibited not so much racism as unthinking white privilege, which has proven more tenacious in the nation at large. Still, IWO members’ activism indicates another, interracial world was possible between the 1930s and 1950s. While many white Detroiters, for example, violently resisted black incursions into segregated neighborhoods, black and white leftists assisted black families with their moves into unfriendly terrain through interracial house-painting parties.³² Indeed, the government’s destruction of the IWO and other interracial, leftist organizations arguably forestalled enactment of black voting and civil rights for a full twenty years. This book fills this omission in the scholarship.

Largely because of its commitment to interracial organizing and union activism, the IWO was branded subversive in 1947. The IWO asserted its right to free speech and association and pursued remedies through the courts as it unfurled the Bill of Rights in its defense—to no avail. The Order was deemed a “moral hazard” and liquidated by New York’s Insurance Department. Members lost their jobs, some were imprisoned, and many foreign-born members were deported. The suppression of left-lying dissent spelled out just how narrow were the parameters for critiques of racism, class inequities, or America’s militarized foreign policy. This narrowing of the politically possible has had enduring effects, and this exploration of the IWO has sobering lessons for today on the limits to dissent in times of permanent national emergency.³³

This book, then, is designed to uncover what activities the IWO pursued, why these activities landed it in trouble, whether these activities really were a threat to U.S. security, and how the Order defended itself against being labeled subversive.

“*A Road to Peace and Freedom*” begins with an analysis of the birth of the IWO in the language division of the CP. Chapter 1 looks at these language-group fraternal societies among Jewish, Italian, Hungarian, and Slavic left-wingers. Already in the 1920s members of these ethnic fraternal societies

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were militant advocates of industrial unionism, programs such as Social Security, and multiracial equality, agendas that would find full flowering in following decades. Moreover, as Michels, Buhle, Al Gedicks, and others have pointed out, these ethnic leftists were quite independent from centralized Party control. They balked at calls from the CP for “Americanization” or “Bolshevization” (strict top-down centralized control and obedience to Party superiors’ directives).³⁴ Leftist immigrants exhibited a great deal of assertive independence in pursuing agendas that suited their own needs.

Chapter 1 continues to trace the chronological history of the IWO, its birth and growth. The IWO was born in the CP’s desire to amalgamate pre-existing left-wing mutual societies such as the Independent Workmen’s Circle and the SWS. Accident and death policies were the main draw of this insurance consortium, but from its onset the IWO envisioned itself as a militant lobbying group preparing the proletariat for a coming workers’ state.

The nature of U.S. communism changed over the course of the IWO’s lifetime. There were less calls for revolution and more faith in a social-democratic Popular Front from around 1935. By World War II, and into the 1940s and early 1950s, the IWO was openly lobbying, rallying, and petitioning for or against legislation that members believed was beneficial or pernicious. Never was this organization engaged in espionage, for if these were spies, they were the most inept spies on the planet. The Order openly publicized meetings and rallies and signed public calls for them in widely circulated newspapers. Agents of the Office of Strategic Services’ (OSS) Foreign Nationalities Branch (FNB) admitted in 1944 that while the IWO’s national leadership might desire to see Soviet-style socialism established in America, there was little evidence they were engaged in illicit or revolutionary activities to bring this goal about. They were working through the expanded parameters of the Popular Front coalition, where it was possible to believe Roosevelt’s commitment to enacting the Four Freedoms would be carried forward following the war.³⁵

In the depths of the Great Depression, with no relief from capitalist parties anywhere in sight, the Order did little to disguise its militancy. With the enactment of New Deal reforms, however, and recognizing that many members were unsympathetic to hard-core Bolshevik rhetoric, the IWO deemphasized class conflict by the late 1930s. As the New Deal progressed, and just as important, the Comintern shifted to a Popular Front strategy of cooperation with the most progressive bourgeois elements, the Order shifted from a more militant call for a workers’ state and hostility to U.S. capitalism. The earlier conviction of a need for a revolution was, by the late 1930s and early 1940s, tempered by calls to win the greatest social and political goals for members via vigorous lobbying. While some scholars argue that such a switch masked continued Communist ideology, I argue that the Order’s members embraced a Popular Front coalition with Roosevelt’s Democrats.

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During World War II, the Order avidly supported the Soviet-U.S. alliance, only to discover following the war that the rapidly freezing Cold War rendered their continued commitment to left-wing domestic policies and Soviet-U.S. cooperation “subversive.” An examination of the internal records of the IWO demonstrates that the group had a sincere faith that it would have an enduring place in the United States following World War II.

Chapters 2 through 5 depart from the chronological format to take up, thematically, the activism of the IWO, for it was the substance of the Order’s activism, not any actual subversive threat, that was unpalatable to conservative politicians. It makes more sense, therefore, to consider this activism thematically and not strictly chronologically.

Chapter 2 examines the IWO’s economic goals, for aside from writing insurance policies for members the Order also lobbied for Social Security, enacted in 1935, and universal health care, still pending, among other programs. IWO members were instrumental in building the unions of the CIO. Order members were some of the most determined activists for workplace justice.³⁶

Asserting that the crises of capitalism could not be overcome through immigrants’ self-financed accident and sickness policies, the Order’s leaders argued, “The workers must meet [the crises] by fighting for a full measure of Social Insurance. . . . They must meet it by fighting against unsanitary and unsafe working conditions in the mills, mines and factories. They must meet it by fighting for a condition in which the life and the welfare of the worker will be the guiding principles of government policies and not the profits of the capitalists as are now.”³⁷ While early pamphlets spoke of a coming workers’ state and looked with favor on a Soviet model, even such campaigns laid out legislative strategies, not violent subversion of the government.

For class reasons, too, the IWO proved attractive to many enrollees. Those workers who had been beaten down as late as 1941 at the Ford Motor Company’s River Rouge plant when they sought a union contract or a living wage did not spurn IWO organizers who offered them assistance. IWO activists played an instrumental role in turning CIO unions into effective deliverers of material improvements to industrial workers.

By the 1940s they were advocating legislative ameliorations to working people’s plight, a reflection of the greater possibilities for social change born of the New Deal. Shortly after World War II, the IWO lobbied for the Wagner-Murray-Dingell Bill, which would have enacted universal health insurance. The IWO continued to call for such measures as a guaranteed annual income and recognized that inadequate housing and lack of affordable health care severely affected African Americans and other minorities, and thus vocally advocated full racial equality.³⁸

Commitment to racial justice was always part of the IWO’s mission, and Chapter 3 examines the Order’s civil rights activism. From its onset the IWO

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condemned segregation “as a vicious anti-working class policy of the bourgeoisie.” The IWO enrolled black and white members in English-language lodges, and even Hungarian and other ethnic lodges sometimes enrolled black members. The Order engaged in campaigns to end segregation and participated in the American Crusade against Lynching as well as other interracial lobbying campaigns to dismantle Jim Crow. Early IWO meetings took up collections and launched letter-writing campaigns on behalf of the Scottsboro Boys and Angelo Herndon and continued to agitate on behalf of victims of racialized justice until the Order’s liquidation.³⁹ The IWO opened its doors to African Americans, including Muslims who defended the Order as a true seat of brotherhood; Arabs in the Detroit area; Puerto Ricans enrolled in Cervantes Fraternal Society lodges, alongside Jewish, Italian, and Slavic members. Thompson served as IWO vice president at a time when other fraternal organizations excluded African Americans entirely. The IWO was one of the only organizations open to all races and faiths in 1930s–1950s America.

To be sure, lobbying to end segregation and lynching, and for the enactment of a permanent FEPC, sometimes ran up against the racial prejudice of some members. During World War II, IWO headquarters had to defuse a row between Detroit Italian members who opposed open-housing laws, angering black lodge brothers. As in other areas of its activism, the Order’s members made miscues, but compared to the violent anti-integrationist vigilantism of many conservative white ethnics, IWO members exhibited a commitment to multiracialism far ahead of their time.⁴⁰

Important causes such as workplace justice or ending Jim Crow preoccupied Order members, but lodge meetings were never dull or prosaic affairs. IWO member Robeson frequently serenaded the Order’s anti-Jim Crow rallies, but even for ordinary members, meetings were lively events.⁴¹ Chapter 4 focuses on the social aspect of the IWO, for the Order offered a panoply of entertainment, sports, and educational activities to cultivate the mind and body. “Greetings to Comrade Basketball!” the IWO Youth Section magazine *The New Order* enthused, and integrated baseball, basketball, and gymnastics teams were on offer “to build up a healthy body and a healthy mind, a strong conscious fighter for the working class.” Years before big league baseball’s integration the IWO circulated petitions urging this course.⁴²

The Order sponsored a national orchestra and choir, and local lodges ran their own theaters, bands, and choruses, too. Entertainment often had a didactic, class-conscious purpose. The IWO’s Workers’ Schools ran classes on ending “Negro oppression” but also sessions on organizing workers. In one of these the teacher advised, lodges “should look for interesting and colorful techniques. A chorus or mandolin orchestra in national costume on a sound truck could attract a lot of attention.”⁴³

Plays, too, carried militant messages. Solidarity Lodge sponsored the Harlem Suitcase Theater, which featured works by Langston Hughes dramatizing

rent strikes and antilynching campaigns and gave actors such as Robert Earl Jones their first professional break. The IWO Freedom Theatre presented *Let's Get Together*, which an FBI agent said contained "vehement attacks against private business" and a musical number, "Willie and the Bomb" (about the A bomb)." A Ukrainian Society play, *All Our Yesterdays*, included vignettes of a "Negro being killed by a police officer without provocation . . . interspersed with audience participation bits." During World War II, other Ukrainian lodges presented plays glorifying pro-Soviet partisans. Social and entertainment venues carried class-conscious messages.⁴⁴

As Ukrainian actors recognized, the wartime alliance with Russia afforded radicals an opportunity to make a case for a more social-democratic America, but also an enduring Moscow-Washington friendship. Chapter 5 examines the foreign-policy goals of the IWO. Here the Order's fealty to CP lines and Soviet interests did at times have costs. Although the IWO and its members sounded early warnings of the dangers of fascism and avidly participated in campaigns to assist Ethiopia and Spanish Loyalists in their fight against it, in August 1939 the Order supported the Soviet switch to neutrality with the signing of the Soviet-German Nonaggression Pact. This embrace of a message that "the Yanks are not coming" to aid Great Britain and France in World War II had costs and revealed some of the blind spots that the Order's leaders retained vis-à-vis Moscow. Still, a sizable number of IWO members immediately condemned the new neutrality, as well as the IWO leaders who embraced it, suggesting that the Order's 188,000 members did not move in lockstep on foreign policy or other matters. The IWO's foreign-policy zig-zags sometimes were abrupt, though, and suggest an overcredulous embrace of the Soviet Union.

Once the United States and the USSR became tenuous allies, the IWO found itself on surer footing. During World War II, thousands of IWO members joined the ASC, a new "organization of organizations" hoping to cement Slavic American support for the war. Like the Order, the Slav Congress was capacious enough to include Communists and people of many other political stripes. Both groups avidly participated in blood drives, Russian War Relief campaigns, and the IWO Front Line Fighters Fund, which raised money and sent care packages to members of the armed forces. In apt Popular Front iconography, the IWO's Polonia Society featured homages to "our ancestors, the pilgrims," urging members to send Thanksgiving dinners to soldiers overseas.⁴⁵

Both the IWO and Slav Congress were forceful advocates of opening a second front in Western Europe to aid the Red Army, but they also continued their calls for racial justice in America. Commitment to racial equality was internationalized, too, for both organizations advocated independence for colonized nations in Africa and Asia. The Order asserted that the Atlantic Charter had to apply to India, no matter what Winston Churchill thought,

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while Slovenian American journalist Louis Adamic prophetically warned the Slav Congress that Indochina would not stand for attempts to maintain French colonialism.⁴⁶

Following the war the IWO continued to lionize America's recent ally, the Soviet Union, and called for a continuing partnership. The credulity of many IWO officers regarding Joseph Stalin's commitment to the spirit of Teheran, espousing freedom for all areas liberated from the Nazis, can certainly be deplored. But members believed in the wartime coalition and regarded red-baiting as a far graver sin. During World War II, members of the IWO were dedicated to the Popular Front "win-the-war coalition" and presumed their position in progressive American life was secure. Confident of its place in the wartime coalition, the IWO urged the FBI to prosecute conservative "Fifth Columnists" such as William Randolph Hearst for the treasonous poison they spread, an ironic call, for the FBI was surveilling the Order throughout the war. With congratulatory telegrams from Roosevelt in hand, left-wingers felt assured of their place in the Popular Front. The Order advocated postwar cooperation with Moscow but was quickly at odds with Washington's stigmatization of the Soviets.⁴⁷

When they found themselves targeted for red-baiting, Order members seemed genuinely shocked, couching their defenses in the Bill of Rights, believing free speech included even views anathema to the rapidly expanding national security state. Although heartfelt, this defense strikes one as a bit naïve, for the IWO knew it was being targeted by conservative politicians. Then, too, the invocation of free speech rights was somewhat one-sided, as during World War II the Order had called for prosecution of right-wing opponents such as Hearst for expressing "treasonous" critiques of U.S. policy. Nor did the IWO have much sympathy for Trotskyists' civil liberties.⁴⁸

As an officer of the OSS observed regarding the IWO, its members were vituperative in labeling those with whom they disagreed "fascists" and treasonous, and noted such heated rhetoric only inflamed and distorted the political dialogue in Polish and other ethnic communities.⁴⁹ The Order forcefully advocated wartime unity and loyalty to the nation-state and tarred as traitors or fascists those who did not adhere to what it perceived as properly progressive Americanism. During the Cold War, this loyalty cudgel was turned on members' heads.

Leftists were soon to learn how narrow the options were for critiques of U.S. policies. Chapter 6 documents the sporadic efforts the Order faced to suppress it. In 1940 HUAC illegally raided the IWO's Philadelphia offices, while throughout World War II, the FBI and OSS continued writing reports on the group, sending informants to lodge meetings and rallies throughout the country.⁵⁰ Real trouble came for the Order in 1947 when it was placed, along with the Slav Congress and hundreds of other organizations, on the

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Attorney General's List of Subversive Organizations. "Red" members of both the Order and Slav Congress were barred from government employment, up to and including work in the Hammond, Indiana, post office. Private employers fired members, and others, cowed into silence, quit their IWO fraternities in droves.

Other members begged the Order not to send them copies of its magazine, fearing authorities were keeping an eye on all suspicious "foreigners." Members were right to worry. The government sought multiple times to deport Stanley Nowak, an official in both the IWO and Slav Congress who was also a Michigan state senator. The Supreme Court finally put a halt to that effort in 1957, although other IWO and ASC members were deported.⁵¹

More ominously, elected officials in the IWO were placed on the FBI's "Internal Security" list. Congressman Vito Marcantonio, Nowak, and Slav Congress president Leo Krzycki were to be herded into concentration camps in the event that the president decided there was a "national emergency." IWO leaflets aptly wondered just who was "un-American" in Cold War America.⁵²

By 1951 the IWO faced liquidation by the New York State Insurance Department after it was deemed subversive, a death warrant the Order unsuccessfully fought through the courts. The Insurance Department offered a novel interpretation of the actuarial term "hazard" (as in a financially unstable society) in now labeling the IWO a moral and political hazard. Even though the Order demonstrated that its finances were impeccable, a *New York World-Telegram and Sun* headline scoffed, "Their Books Balanced, But Politics Were in Red." The Order was mocked in other print media as well.⁵³

Chapter 6 also examines the strategies that the IWO employed as it sought to defend its rights of free speech and association. Parades on newly created Bill of Rights Day in 1947 heard speakers ask, "What do men know of loyalty who make a mockery of the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights?" Rhetoric accompanied by images of Thomas Jefferson, a bound and gagged Statue of Liberty, and cries of "when did dissent become un-American?" were deployed, and members were urged to write to elected officials demanding relief.⁵⁴

The IWO orchestrated defense campaigns to protect members facing deportation, decrying the injustice of expelling activists with American-born wives and children for expressing their political beliefs. "Family values" were deployed to attempt to protect the foreign born. The Cold War's stigmatization of left-wingers had traumatic effects for families facing firings, deportations, and jail. Conversely, the IWO was quick to point out that some of the "Displaced Persons" entering the United States had unsavory records of collaboration with Adolf Hitler's Third Reich, "some of the worst fascist and pro-fascist scum of Europe," while some of the leftists targeted by the government were decorated U.S. Army veterans.⁵⁵

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The Order continued to fight liquidation through the courts until the Supreme Court declined to review the case. Legal strategies were deployed in tandem with rallies, letter-writing campaigns, and appeals from the IWO Policyholders Protective Committee, and voices of grassroots members demonstrate the depth of commitment to working-class militancy and the IWO. A Black Muslim member wrote, “I have found true fraternalism and racial equality in the organization, which I am proud to support and belong to.”⁵⁶ All appeals were unsuccessful, and an insurance society—and much more—expired because of the political beliefs of its officers.

The Conclusion to “*A Road to Peace and Freedom*” briefly notes the continuities between the Old Left and the New Left, for while the IWO was dismantled, some former members continued their progressive activities. Former IWO members hosted an annual Workers’ Bazaar in Detroit through the 1960s. At one 1966 event, Order veterans and others heard activist-historian Herbert Aptheker explain the folly of America’s move toward active involvement in Vietnam.⁵⁷

In summarizing the book, the Conclusion stresses that the IWO pursued legitimate political and social goals. While the group contained Communists, it also contained, as members argued to no avail, people of all political stripes who genuinely believed a capacious Popular Front coalition could continue after World War II. The suppression of left-wing dissenting views on economic egalitarianism and racial equality had deleterious effects for the entire country, and Bill of Rights protections were brushed aside by a government entering a Cold War security state mentality from which it has yet to emerge.

As the IWO faced government-ordered execution, an African American woman from Los Angeles joined many other members in defending the organization she believed had protected her interests so well: “What I liked best about the Order was the fact that it really practices brotherhood and democracy,” she wrote. “All persons of all creeds and races are together in perfect unity. . . . I would like to ask the court to please let us have the one organization which is helping all people regardless of race, creed, or color to live and grow through mutual assistance which is Universal Brotherhood.”⁵⁸ Such effective, militant, and democratic interracialism as exhibited in the IWO was another casualty of Cold War red-hunting. We are still waiting for an effective advocate for the causes this letter writer and her IWO brothers and sisters held so dear.