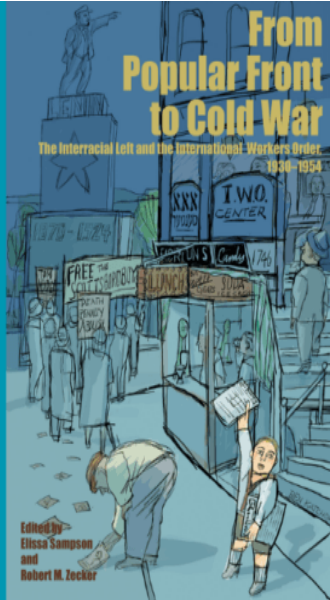
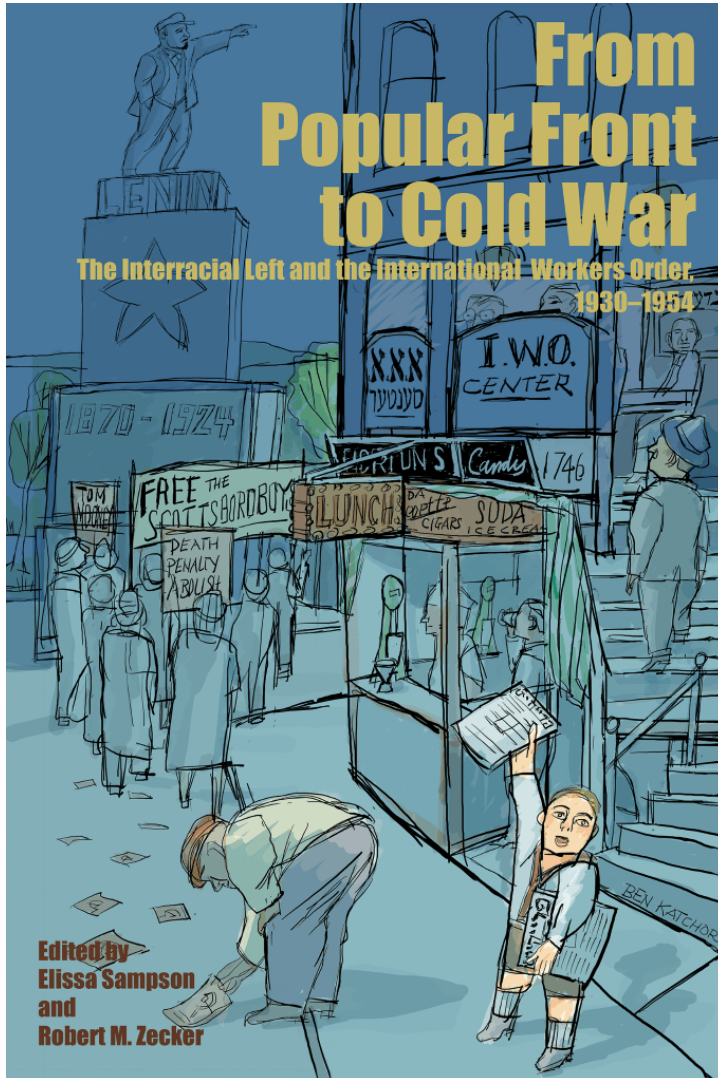




Elissa Sampson and Robert M. Zecker on their new book, *From Popular Front to Cold War*

Posted on July 23, 2026 by Ian Rocksborough-Smith



From Popular Front to Cold War (2026).

Ian Rocksborough-Smith interviewed Elissa Sampson and Robert M. Zecker about their recent edited volume, ***From Popular Front to Cold War: The Interracial Left and the International Workers Order, 1930-1945***, published by Cornell University Press earlier this year.

This 13 chapter book, with a coda by Paul Buhle, tells the history of the International Workers Order (IWO), founded during the Great Depression to provide life, burial and health insurance to its members (who numbered 200,000) at its height. As the chapters in this collection make clear, the organization had a very wide agenda that also directly combated racism and antisemitism, championed progressive causes (from labor movements to anti-colonialism, civil rights, and

peace initiatives) as well as many forms of interracial and interethnic solidarity in cultural and social spheres that extended across national boundaries into the post-WWII era. The IWO and the sorts of mutual aid, organizational supports, and cultural programs it provided for its members tell us much about what happened to the interracial left through the mid-20th Century, but also contain lessons for the divided world we live in today. As noted in the introduction to this fascinating collection, “The Order’s framework of diversity within unity and its insistence on tying the fight against Jim Crow to the fight against antisemitism and anti-immigrant sentiment encouraged solidarity among racial and racialized groups, offering a vital ideological ancestor to today’s progressive movement” (p.4).

Video segments (viewable once you press play)

0:00: Introductions

4:13: How we came to study the International Workers Order (IWO)

10:50: The IWO and the Left

18:00: Functions of the IWO; how it attracted working class members during the Great Depression through mutual aid and needed safety net benefits

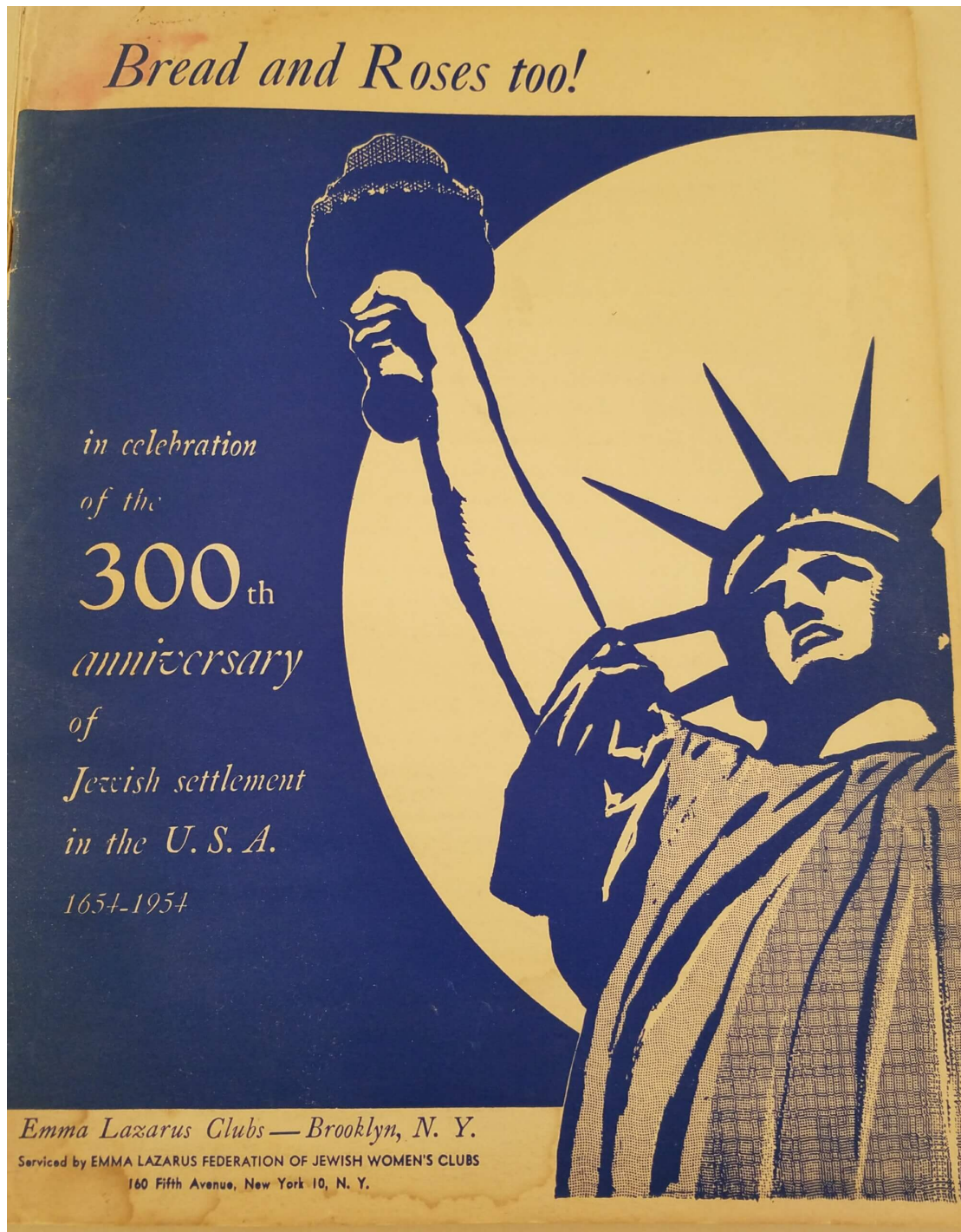
28:12: Cultural Work and Activism through WWII

51:10: Tensions and Impacts of the early Cold War

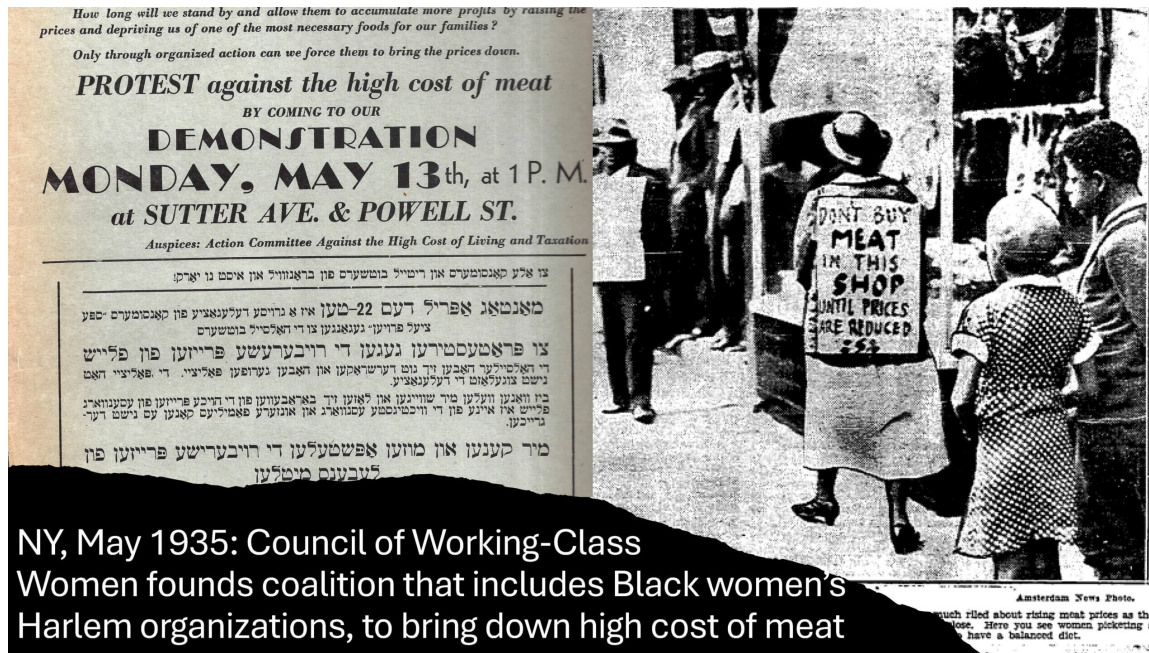
104:09: IWO as an Outlier

111:30: Future Studies

Here is a selection of sources from the IWO collection at the Kheel Center at Cornell University:



Emma Lazarus Federation of Jewish Women's Clubs, Manuscript Collection No. 583, SERIES B. CULTURAL COMMITTEE, Sub-series 4. Plays and Entertainment, 16. Plays and related correspondence re: American Jewish Tercentenary; "Bread and Roses, Too", 1955, American Jewish Archives.



NY, May 1935: Council of Working-Class Women finds coalition that includes Black women's Harlem organizations, to bring down high cost of meat

1935 Harlem Meat Boycott Poster in English and Yiddish; 1935 Article from the Amsterdam News. The interracial boycott was modeled on the Great Meat Boycott of 1902, Lower East Side. Used with permission.

**THE UNION
UNITES
ALL WORKERS**

REGARDLESS OF RACE, CREED, COLOR, national origin, political label or other distinguishing marks you are welcome in the IWO. The International Workers Order fights discrimination tooth and nail. It is one of the few fraternal organizations that welcomes Negro workers on the same terms as it does white.

It is the only fraternal organization that unites so many national groups in one common purpose and in one fraternal family – protection. Whether your origin or your parents' origin be Polish, Italian, Slovak, Hungarian, Jewish, Croatian, Serbian, Russian, Ukrainian, Carpatho-Russian, Finnish, Roumanian, or Greek there is a special section in the IWO

a special lodge in your city which concentrates on the particular needs and problems of your kin-folk, which strives to preserve and enrich the cultural traditions and heritage of your homeland.

THE IWO
Unites
**ALL RACES
AND CREEDS**

REGARDLESS OF RACE, CREED, COLOR or other distinguishing marks your union welcomes you as a member and provides its welcome benefits.

Photo sources: Acme, Ewing Galloway, Press Association, Pictures, Inc., Selling, Wide World, Scoop, M. Elen, Camera Guild, Inc.

138

IWO Collection, International Workers Order (IWO) Records #5276, Box

48, Folder 7. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation & Archives, Cornell University.

You too

NEED PROTECTION

Family Security

You never know when an emergency will arise. Sickness brings suffering and hardship. It makes a big hole in the family budget.

We have learned that one of the best ways to secure our family against emergencies or the passing of a loved one is to have insurance protection.

The International Workers Order offers you low cost insurance and sick benefits at rates well within your pocketbook.

We invite you to join

We have 1800 lodges and a membership of 185,000. As an interracial fraternal organization we practice equality and fight against all forms of segregation and discrimination.

In a warm fraternal atmosphere, our lodge members enjoy a varied program of social, recreational and educational activity.



Paul Robeson with Louise Thompson Patterson, General Vice-President of the IWO, and Dr. Luther Peck, Trustee, IWO.

PAUL ROBESON SAYS:

In the IWO peoples of many nationalities, Negro and white, live and work together in a true fraternal spirit in the kind of genuine democracy I would like to see practiced in ALL of America. I value my membership in the Order.

We do not only talk equality—we practice it. We not only fight for Fair Employment Practice Acts (FEPC) and against segregation and Jim-Crow, we practice equality in insurance rates, in our social, recreational, educational and fraternal program and in our employment policy.



IWO Collection, International Workers Order (IWO) Records #5276, Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation & Archives, Cornell University. [URL](#).



Attorney General Frank Murphy addressing the Civil Liberties Conference in New York. His encouragement of Dies has caused apprehension among labor.

**The Dies Committee—a threat to our democratic form of government
—A review of its proceedings.**

The Threat to Civil Liberties

BY PETER MORELL

WHENEVER anyone of our aspiring tin-horn fascists seeks to abridge the Bill of Rights for their own particular purpose, they always insinuate that they have a mandate from the people. And so it is with Congressman Martin Dies.

In his talk over a CBS national hook-up on Saturday, October 28, Mr. Dies seemed extremely put out by President Roosevelt's reference to his committee's work as "a rather sordid procedure." He whined, pleaded and did his utmost to make it appear that his motives were *simon pure* and that President Roosevelt's remark was interference that sought to keep the truth from the people.

However, it is very doubtful that Mr. Dies fooled very many of his listeners. In his talk he let the cat out of the bag. It was nothing more than an attack upon the New Deal government. In fact, the printing of that list of government employees who are members of the American League for Peace and Democracy was an attempt to mislead the American people into believing that the New Deal was communistic. It won't surprise anybody should the Garner-led reactionary Democrats, with their Republican henchmen, use this as 1940 election ammunition.

A sample of what we will get is the following extract from this same Dies' speech.

"Can it be true that anyone wants the American people kept in the dark with respect to the connections, innocent or otherwise, of high salaried executives with organizations which the Communist Party has set up for purposes that are utterly un-American?"

The whole "sordid procedure" of this committee's

assassination of character and smearing campaign is a sad commentary on the Congress which continues to permit it to exist.

Never in this writer's experience has he ever encountered such a vicious lot of red-baiters as has been gathered together by the Dies Committee.

Among these were some discredited individuals who were expelled from progressive organizations, and their fantastic falsehoods regarding these organizations were meat for the Dies Committee. Here was ammunition to hurl at the New Deal, to make these organizations appear Red, and by hook or by crook to connect them with something relating to the New Deal. And there you have it: the New Deal also was created in Moscow and is un-American.

The I.W.O. appeared before the Dies Committee voluntarily, and Brother Max Bedacht was questioned for about four hours. And lo and behold, it was found out that the I.W.O. was a progressive, fraternal organization which welcomes all people into its membership regardless of their race, political creed or color. No matter how Representative Dies and his cohorts strained to plaster the I.W.O. with the misinformation supplied them by the motley crew of stool pigeons, Brother Bedacht, in his replies, established conclusively that the committee was not interested in facts and truth, but was out to smear and destroy every progressive and liberal organization in America.

It requires only a cursory examination of the motives for creating the committee to conclude that its whole claim to baring un-American activities is a

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Center for Labor-Management Documentation & Archives, Cornell
University. [URL.](#)

*A New
Workers' Stronghold*

WHAT IS THE
INTERNATIONAL
WORKERS' ORDER,
AND WHY EVERY
WORKER SHOULD
JOIN IT



Issued by
NATIONAL EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE,
INTERNATIONAL WORKERS' ORDER

New York, 1930

IWO Collection, International Workers Order (IWO) Records #5276,
Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation & Archives,
Cornell University. [URL](#).

Web links to the IWO collection Cornell University and related virtual exhibits:

Document Archive: <https://digital.library.cornell.edu/collections/iwo-jpfo>

Virtual Library Exhibit: <https://exhibits.library.cornell.edu/fellow-travelers>

Timeline: <https://exhibits.library.cornell.edu/fellow-travelers/feature/timeline>

Authors



- [Ian Rocksborough-Smith](#)

Ian teaches primarily U.S. history at the University of the Fraser Valley in Stó:lō / S'ólh Téméxw / Abbotsford, B.C., Canada. His research interests include public and urban history, social movements, and histories of race, labor, religion, and empire in the Atlantic world. He has published academic articles and book reviews in a variety of journals like *The Black Scholar: Journal of Black Studies and Research*, *Reviews in American History*, and *The Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* and has a book entitled: *Black Public History in Chicago: Civil Rights Activism from World War II Into the Cold War* (April/May 2018). He has written op-eds in *Canadian Dimension* and *The Conversation (Canada)* and is on the editorial team for *Labor Online* (LAWCHA). He has served as an international solidarity and human rights officer for his faculty union, local 7 of the Federation of Post-Secondary Employees of British Columbia (2021-2023).



• [Elissa Sampson](#)

Dr. Elissa Sampson is an urban geographer who studies how the past is actively used to create new spaces of migration, memory, heritage, and activism. She has pursued a life-long interest in migration, diaspora, re-diasporization, and immigrant culture on New York's Lower East Side, Brooklyn and Paris, making visible dynamic interactions among diasporas in shared spaces/places. As a Research Associate in Cornell University's Jewish Studies Program, Dr. Sampson worked extensively with Cornell's Kheel Center confiscated Cold War archives on the International Workers Order (IWO), including their partial digitization. She co-organized a public, online academic conference, "Di Linke" (the Left), based largely on its archival Jewish Section holdings. Dr. Sampson has taught labor and gender history, including the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Fire, its memorialization, and relationship to current labor activism. She is the co-editor and contributor to a new book about the IWO.



• [Robert Zecker](#)

Robert Zecker is a professor of history at Saint Francis Xavier University, Nova Scotia, Canada, where he teaches courses in race, immigration, social movements, and U.S. history. His research includes immigration, radicalism, and the popular culture of immigrants on the left. He is the author of many articles in journals such as the Journal of American Ethnic History, The Journal of Transnational American Studies, and American Communist History. He is also author of five books, most recently "A Road to Peace and Freedom": The International Workers Order and the Struggle for Economic Justice and Civil Rights, 1930-1954 (Temple University Press) and has a chapter, "'Spotlight on Jim Crow': Radical Immigrant Papers Cover Race and Civil Rights," in Immigration and Exile: The Foreign-Language Press in the U.K. and U.S. (Bloomsbury). He is currently writing a history of the Communist Party's

Workers' Schools, "Training for the Class Struggle." Before entering the academic racket, Bob was an ink-stained wretch foisting journalism on an unsuspecting public in his native New Jersey.