

# Political Protest in Interwar Japan — 1

## Posters & Handbills from the Ohara Collection (1920s-1930s)

by Christopher Gerteis

Parties  
& Politics

Labor  
Activism

Farmers'  
Movements

Cultural  
Movements

Sources  
& Credits



*This unit introduces Japanese political graphics from the 1920s and 1930s selected from the remarkable collection of several thousand posters and handbills maintained by the Ohara Institute for Social Science Research at Hosei University in Tokyo. Focusing on leftwing political parties, labor-union and tenant-farmer organizations and protests, and proletarian social and cultural movements in general, the Ohara collection opens a window on the domestic conflict and turbulence that lay beneath the ultimate triumph of militarism and*

*authoritarianism in Imperial Japan.*

*It is well known that this leftwing protest eventually was suppressed by the state. More than purely textual accounts alone can convey, however, the Ohara graphics help us literally visualize how substantial the contradictions and tensions of the interwar years were. These images and their pithy accompanying verbiage are bold and aggressive in the mode of proletarian art globally in this period. And the range of organizations and activities represented suggests how broad and diversified political and social protest was—while also hinting at the curse of factionalism that helped undermine the left.*

*The chronological span of this selection, extending from the mid 1920s to mid 1930s, also illuminates how tenaciously leftwing activists carried on in the face of the notorious “peace preservation” legislation of the 1920s, and even after the introduction of militarist governments following the Manchurian Incident and invasion of northern China in 1931. Although these opposition voices were thoroughly co-opted or repressed by the latter half of the 1930s, they were not extinguished. On the contrary, they were the baseline out of which assertive left-of-center movements emerged in the immediate wake of Japan’s defeat in 1945.*

*This leftwing and proletarian artwork presents a counterpoint to the celebrations of interwar consumer culture and bourgeois developments addressed in Visualizing Cultures units such as “Selling Shiseido” and “Tokyo Modern.” All of these graphics reflect Western influences. More suggestive yet, they all also reflect—from their contrasting perspectives—the complex “modernity” that culminated so tragically in militarism, ultra-nationalism, and authoritarianism.*

*All images in this unit are from the Ohara Institute  
for Social Research, Hosei University*

Interwar Japan is not usually thought of as a bastion of participatory politics, but the 1920s and 1930s in fact were host to a surprising diversity of political parties. Passage of a General Election Law establishing universal manhood suffrage in 1925 seemed to harken the emergence of a representative democracy for men of all classes.

The turbulent campaign for manhood suffrage—led by coalitions of intellectuals, social reformers, labor unions, tenant-farmer movements, and political parties—compelled the national Diet (parliament) to take notice of the widespread desire for an expanded franchise. Enactment of the 1925 law invested millions of men with the ability to affect social change through electoral politics. On the one hand, this resulted in revitalization of the conservative mainstream parties, the Seiyūkai and Minseitō. At the same time, it also paved the way for formation of many progressive and leftist parties—ranging from the moderate Social Democratic Party (Shakai Minshūtō) to the centrist Japan Labor-Farmer Party (Nihon Rōnōtō) to the rurally based Japan Farmers' Party (Nihon Nōmintō) to the decidedly communist Labor-Farmer Party (Rōdō Nōmintō).

Although women's organizations also participated vigorously in the grassroots demands for universal suffrage, women were not given the right to vote until after Japan's defeat in World War II. Their exclusion from the formal political process led to their being almost literally painted out of the leftwing political posters and handbills of the interwar period, but this was misleading. Women continued to remain significant actors in social movements that supported political parties on both the political left and right.



*Masculine imagery was a common visual signifier of political strength. This 1928 poster portrays five male workers stridently expressing their support for five leftist parties running in prefectural assembly elections, and extols workers to “Come under the banner of the United Front.”*

(1928) [PA0646]

Despite the 1925 election law, and despite the support they received from labor and farmer organizations, the position of the leftist parties was always precarious. Various factors figured into this. Even as suffrage was being expanded, the Diet was losing power to the constitutionally independent state bureaucracy. More significant still, the 1925 law was enacted in tandem with a Peace Preservation Law that placed various legal constraints on public political activity. The latter law was specifically intended to mute the effect of extending the vote to workingclass men.

The leftist parties and their affiliated organizations also were plagued by internal schisms. The minutia of internal ideological differences often led to bitter fratricidal division. Solidarity also was undermined by mounting economic disparities between rural and urban areas—to the point that the urban-centric parties and labor unions often seemed blind to the plight of rural farmers plagued by low crop prices, high rents, disproportionate tax burdens, and desperate poverty.

Such fractional strife, coupled with government repression, caused the dissolution of many radical parties even before the first general election to be held under universal male suffrage took place in 1928. Still, several restructured parties on the left—notably, the Labor-Farmer Party, the Japan Labor-Farmer Party, the Socialist Party, and the Social Democratic Party (Shakai Minshūtō)—survived to take part in that widely heralded election.

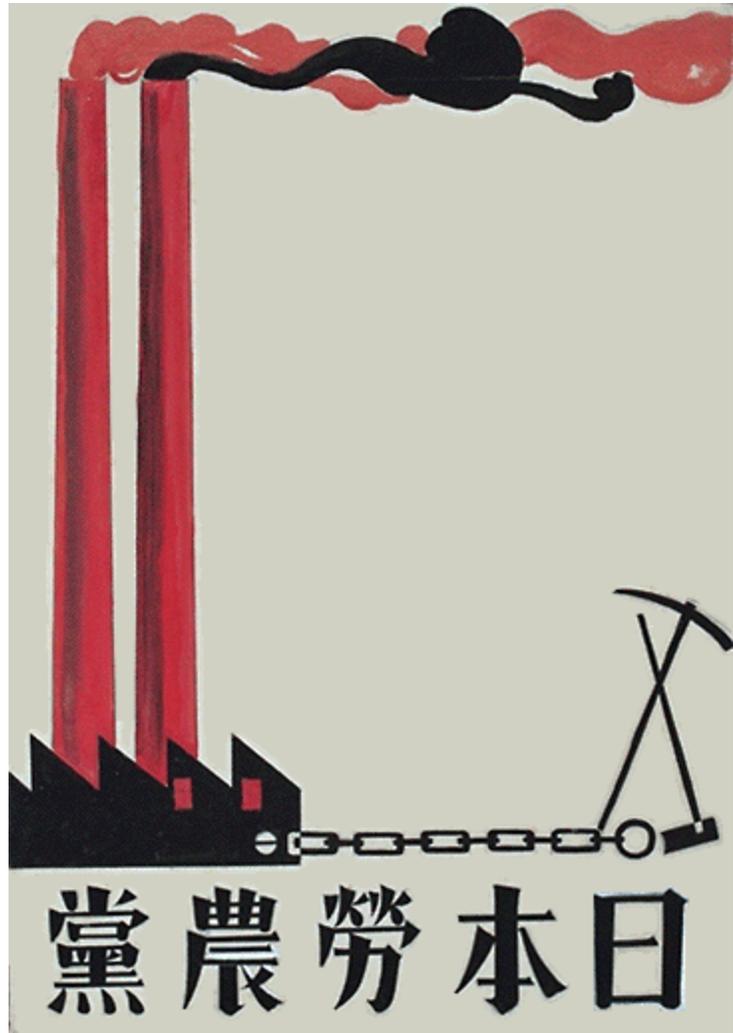
In 1926 rural labor activist Asanuma Inejirō attempted to create a basis for a leftist intervention in rural Japan by founding the Rōnōtō (Japan Labor-Farmer Party), which he envisioned as a means to bridge the growing economic and cultural chasm between rural farmers and urban workers. His effort to create a formal alliance between the labor movement and leftist political parties backfired when the labor federation Sōdōmei ordered the Japan Labor-Farmer Party leadership to resign their membership in the federation and respect the federation's status as a non-political organization. This further inflamed the fratricidal vitriol in the leftist press that characterized the lead-up to the 1928 general elections.



*Portraying a split image of a rising sun (symbol of the Japanese empire), one side light and one dark, this large (95 cm. x 64 cm.) Home Ministry poster issued in 1928 celebrates the establishment of universal male suffrage and calls on voters to go to their polling stations so that “public opinion politics for a Shōwa Restoration will become a reality.” “Vote,” the poster extols, “and the future will be bright. Abstain, and darkness will fall.” The “Shōwa Restoration” rhetoric captured popular sentiment that Japan needed to undergo political revitalization comparable to that associated with the Meiji Restoration six decades earlier.*

*This avant-garde poster, produced by the Japan Labor-Farmer Party during the lead-up to the 1928 election, portrays a double-stacked factory chained to a pick and hoe—obvious symbols of the worker-farmer alliance envisioned by party organizers. Red stacks and smoke convey the leftist origins of the movement; the crossed hoe and shovel resemble the communist hammer and sickle. The chains seem symbolic of the idea that farmers and workers had reason to vote as a bloc—despite facing different social and economic problems—and suggest the leftist call for workers and peasants to throw off political, economic, and societal chains.*

1928  
[PA0623]





Ōhashi Harufusa  
 Official candidate for the Labor-  
 Farmer Party

Principles of the  
 Labor-Farmer Party:  
 Give the workers food and work!  
 Guarantee land for the cultivators!  
 Liberty for all the people!

1928  
 [PA0322]

*This poster lays out the three pillars of the Japan Labor-Farmer Party platform: "Bread, Justice, and Liberty." It was produced for Asō Hisashi, party chairman and candidate for parliament in the constituency that included the Ashio Copper Mine, where worker unrest had precipitated many of the government's labor and policing policies.*

1928  
[PA0002]





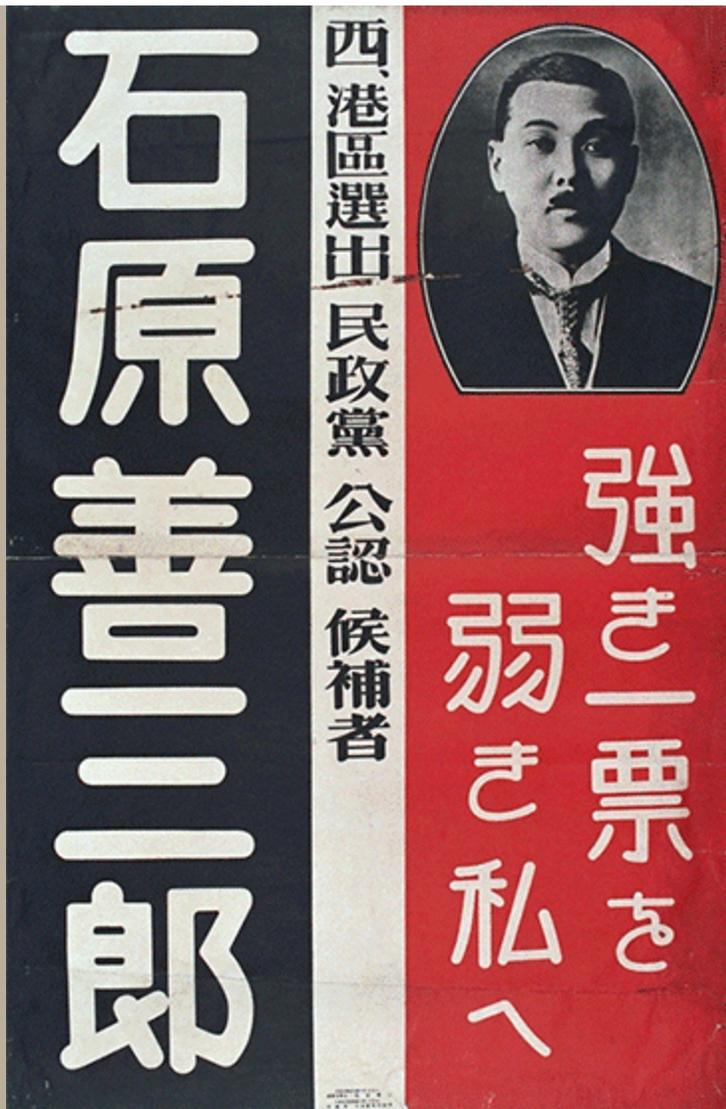
*In this 1928 poster, candidate Taman Kiyomi of the Social Democratic Party bluntly declares that “In order to secure the livelihood of the working masses I need your vote.”*

1928  
[PA0623]

*Although produced by one of the leftwing parties, this 1928 poster does not feature the party's name, but rather concentrates on promoting candidate Imai Kakō as "the 'number one' [first] vote under universal suffrage." A masculine figure is posed holding a placard with Imai's name up to the sun (labeled "general election"). To the left, Imai's name is printed in large, formal Chinese characters (kanji); the name on the placard contains simplified script (katakana), used to assist the less-literate. This was important—the official ballots used kanji, and it was uncertain whether the newly-enfranchised men could read them.*

1928 [PA0084]





*The 1928 campaign poster for Ishihara Zensaburō, candidate of the mainstream Minseitō Party, modestly appeals for a strong vote for a humble (literally, “weak”) man*

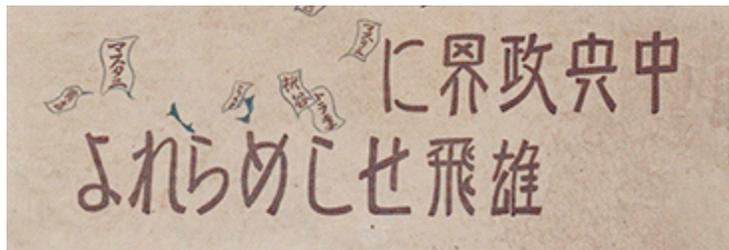
1928 [PA0003]

*This Minseitō poster calls on voters to support candidate Masutani Torakichi with a request attributed to his voice:*

*“Let me embark upon central politics.” The poster depicts a dirigible, the technological marvel of the era, flying through clouds and dropping leaflets featuring the candidate’s name in simplified characters. A formal photograph of the candidate floats just below.*

1928  
[PA0021]





Despite a fresh field of new political parties in the nationwide 1928 election, the established parties lost little ground in the popular vote. Only eight of the 88 non-mainstream candidates fielded—from seven different parties (the four main leftist parties and three local independents)—won a seat in the House of Representatives, where the total number of seats was 466. Although leftist candidates did slightly better than they had done in the 1927 prefectural assembly elections (winning 5 percent as compared to 1927's 3.9 percent of total votes cast), they lacked the name recognition and established local constituencies of the mainstream parties.

Unsurprisingly, the radical positions of the leftwing parties also cut them off from the largest source of campaign funding: the corporate conglomerates known as *zaibatsu*. The established conservative parties—the Seiyūkai backed by the Mitsui *zaibatsu* and the Minseitō backed by Mitsubishi—held a monopoly on campaign finance. These handicaps were compounded by repressive state interventions in the form of disruption of meetings and arbitrary arrests. Although the proletarian parties attempted to regroup in the wake of overwhelming defeat in 1928, the government banned the communist influenced Labor-Farmer Party before the end of the year, and the remaining leftist parties remained divided over ideological issues.

Another factor contributing to the poor showing of the political left in 1928 was the inability, or unwillingness, of the leftist parties to cooperate, which resulted in their often being unable to strategically place candidates in a national field. Many districts saw leftist candidates run against each other, which usually enabled an established candidate to win. As if to add insult to injury, it is also doubtful that the voters themselves were fully aware of the differences between the various parties, a problem the Minseitō in particular exploited by presenting itself as the only viable party to improve the lot of the common people.

Political weakness helped to precipitate even worse electoral results in the 1930 general election. The worldwide depression of the early 1930s prompted the labor federation Sōdōmei to withdraw official support for political parties and adopt a policy of “non-political unionism”. Sōdōmei retained informal ties with a few leftist parties, but also with the Minseitō, and thus leftist parties were not even assured of dependable backing from labor unions

The late 1920s and early 1930s thus saw a cacophony of leftist parties with bewilderingly similar names. Some newly named parties represented short-lived mergers, and almost none survived past 1932. Their campaign posters featured agendas and images ranging from stridently radical to moderate, although usually with a consistent critique of capitalism and explicit appeal to workers and tenant farmers. The only nominally leftist party that was allowed to continue operating through the 1930s was the Social Masses Party (Shakai Taishūtō), which emerged out of a 1932 merger and promoted an essentially centrist agenda calling for agrarian reform

alongside close ties with the urban middle class, especially small shopkeepers who felt squeezed out by the economic dominance of the *zaibatsu* conglomerates. Although this party initially called for cuts in military spending to help pay for agrarian reform, it also cultivated ties with the so-called Control Faction (Tōseiha) in the imperial army and supported Japan's expansion into Manchuria and eventually all of China—collusion that helps account for its survival when more radical parties on the left disappeared from the scene.



*This clarion call to “Gather at the Worker-Farmer Assembly!” in November 1930 was issued by the newly established and short-lived National Masses Party (Zenkoku Taishūtō). The vertical exhortation on the left reads: “Defend the livelihood of the working masses!” Writing on the right-hand side declares: “No starving our struggle! November 2—To Tokyo! To Osaka!” The battle-flag spells out: “To the worker-farmer assembly!” The new party’s demands are as follows:*

- Provide immediate unemployment benefits!
- Enact tenant laws and laws allowing independent unions!
- Lower tenant fees by 50 percent!
- Lower the price of salt, tobacco, electricity, gas, and train fares!
- Do away with the violent, oppressive bureaucracy!



*This July 1932 poster announces a general meeting for the merger of the Social Democratic Party (Shakai Minshūtō) and National Labor-Farmer Mass Party (Zenkoku Rōnō Taishūtō) that resulted in the moderate Social Masses Party. This was the only nominally leftist party that survived to the end of the 1930s. It did so by watering down its agenda and eventually curbing its criticism of Japanese military expansion. The three slogans read:*

Overthrow the failing capitalism!  
 Crush fascist reactionaries!  
 Celebrate the formation of a strong proletarian party!



*Drawing on the avant-garde style characteristic of the MAVO art movement, this 1932 poster calls on “those of the reading class to vote for Kikuchi Kan, official candidate of the Social Masses Party.” Kikuchi was a prize-winning popular writer, and the poster further implores voters to “Give a seat in parliament to a man of letters.” While the artwork is anonymous, MAVO artists produced visual propaganda for leftist organizations well into the early 1930s.*

1932 [PA0124]

*On viewing images of a potentially disturbing nature: [click here](#).*

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### LABOR ACTIVISM

The spontaneity and decentered nature of the explosive 1905 Hibiya Park riots in Tokyo demonstrated the political diversity of public protest in modern Japan, as well as the impact of such protest upon policymakers and the popular media. While the state used the Hibiya riots as an excuse to further crack down on political activists, the founding of the Yūaikai (Friendly Society) by Christian convert Suzuki Bunji in 1912 helped to precipitate a period of union activism. Ostensibly apolitical, Suzuki's organization was well timed: lower-class neighborhoods in Osaka and Tokyo were beginning to take on the characteristics of an industrial working class, and when World War I (1914 to 1918) opened new markets for Japanese industries the booming economy combined with a more liberal political moment to allow for an interlude of sustained union activism in the heavy industrial sectors.

Wealth from the war boom, however, did not spread evenly. Nationwide rice riots followed the end of the boom in 1918 and drew attention to the material concerns of the urban working class. This helped precipitate vigorous reform movements aimed at quelling what corporate managers and government officials increasingly feared to be a proletariat ripe to give birth to leftist movements.

Yūaikai organizers benefited from the development of new patterns of traditional forms of lower-class collective action (nonunion disputes), as well as from company initiatives to replace traditional labor bosses with systems of direct managerial control. The success of the Yūaikai between 1912 and 1918 was also due in part to the emergence of what historian Andrew Gordon has called an "ideology of imperial democracy," which enabled male and female workers to conceive of themselves as possessing full political rights within a political system that still excluded them.

The Yūaikai also established the first union-affiliated women's organization, which sought to encourage more women to support the labor movement by creating an organization dedicated to their interests. Although the 1916 Factory Law had established minimum employment standards protecting women and children, the law had limited provisions for enforcement. Managers seeking greater control over their workforce continued to have the most success in asserting authority over their female employees.

Women's activists affiliated with the Yūaikai sought to help wage-earning women by advising on policy decisions, developing organizing literature, and participating in key strikes and walkouts throughout the 1920s. While the Yūaikai women's department established important precedents for women's union activism, they succeeded in

persuading no more than a few thousand wage-earning women to join unions.

By the mid 1920s, the Yūaikai—renamed the Japan Federation of Labor (Nihon Rōdō Sōdōmei, or Sōdōmei for short) in 1921—had grown to represent nearly a half million industrial workers in the Osaka and Tokyo metropolitan areas. Organized strike actions spiked in 1921 when organizers coordinated a successful strike by 30,000 dockworkers at the Kawasaki-Mitsubishi shipyards in Kobe. In the mid and late 1920s, labor leaders staged a number of strikes in the heavy industrial and transportation sectors that drew national attention and led to a series of unprecedented coordinated campaigns for political change.

*Photo Postcards of the Yūaikai & Sōdōmei, 1917-1922*



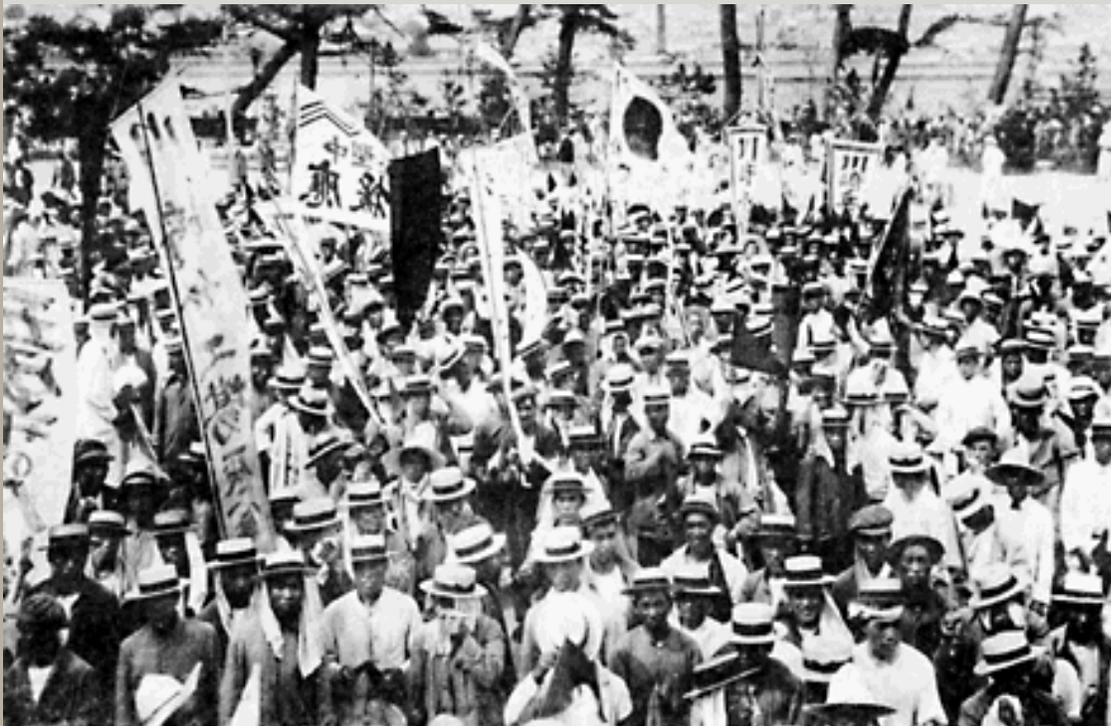
*Charismatic Christian socialist Suzuki Bunji speaking to the fifth annual convention of the Yūaikai (Friendly Society) in 1917. Photos like this were disseminated as postcards throughout the country, helping to establish—for the cost of a stamp—a visual record emphasizing the legitimacy of organized labor.*

[S1-01-003]



*The leadership of Yūaikai's women's department posed for this photo at the 1917 convention wearing traditional attire and coiffure.*

[S1-01-00]



*The 1921 strike at the Kawasaki-Mitsubishi shipyards was the largest labor dispute of the interwar period, and Sōdōmei celebrated with a commemorative postcard series. Here, strikers display their union affiliation on banners and straw hats, and affirm their patriotism with the Japanese national flag (top, center).*

[S1-02-017]



*Suzuki Bunji speaking to strikers at the Kawasaki-Mitsubishi shipyards strike.*

[S1-02-017b]



*Sōdōmei leaders including Suzuki Bunji (center) at the Kawasaki-Mitsubishi shipyards strike.*

[S1-02-017c]



*This postcard commemorates the 1922 national convention of the Sōdōmei federation, established the previous year.*

[S1-01-006]

Despite conservative opposition to the emerging alliance between leftwing parties and organized labor, unions were a significant force behind the successful campaign for universal manhood suffrage that culminated in 1925 and extended the vote to every male over the age of twenty.

Whereas the Yūaikai advocated cooperation between labor and management and promoted a moderate policy of mutual assistance and worker education, Sōdōmei soon adopted a more radical and militant agenda emphasizing class struggle. This radicalization reflected the dramatic industrial expansion that took place in Japan in the early 20th century, especially during and after the war boom stimulated by World War I. The factory labor force of male workers in heavy industry grew rapidly. Militant workers challenged the Yūaikai's policy of conciliation. And the influence of Marxism, Leninism, and Communism following the 1917 Bolshevik revolution in Russia contributed immeasurably to the enhanced attraction of leftwing ideologies (and imagery).

By the mid 1920s, the nationwide labor movement claimed nearly a half million members. In addition to organizing strikes and other protest activities, unions joined other leftists in promoting outreach activities such as youth organizations and cooperative schools. Partly in response to this agitation—and partly spurred by changing production technologies and new theories of labor-management practices—the state and private sector intensified their imposition of hierarchical systems of control. Combined with outright repression, especially after adoption of the Peace Preservation Law in 1925, this turned the late 1920s and early 1930s into a period of intense but increasingly futile labor protest. This confrontation was compounded, of course, by the

inexorable march to all-out war that followed Japan's invasion of Manchuria in 1931.

Sōdōmei carried on until 1940, making it the longest surviving of Japan's prewar unions. Its durability, however, was facilitated by the increasing takeover of leadership by rightwing elements. Beginning in the mid 1920s, the federation experienced splits and the hiving off of leftist and then moderate member unions. In the 1930s, it was again advocating collaboration with the state and managerial class, which now presided over an economy that was increasingly directed to production for war. In 1940, Sōdōmei and other still existing unions were dissolved and replaced by the ultranationalistic Industrial Association for Serving the Nation (Sangyō Hōkokukai, popularly known as Sampō), which stressed the importance of harmony in labor-capital relations, with particular emphasis on the "family" nature of every enterprise.

Even during the years of intensified government repression that took place after the passage of "peace preservation" legislation in the mid 1920s, however—and even after the invasion of Manchuria—the visual record of the proletarian movement that has been collected in the Ohara archives makes clear that the radical rhetoric and imagery of labor organization and agitation continued to find expression until it was finally snuffed out in the later half of the 1930s.

### *Labor Movement Posters, 1925-1935*



1927

Three strident workers promote the All-Japan Proletarian Young Men's Federation's second national congress in November. One waves the red flag, another raises his hammer. The poster also advertises the Worker-Farmer Diary (*Rōnō Nikki*), as well as inexpensive translations of Karl Marx and Rosa Luxemburg.

[PA1085]

**基金五千五百円募集**  
**みんなのポケットを**  
**はたいて基金を**  
**こさへろ!!**  
**俺達の機関紙**  
**労働新聞**  
**をまもれ!!**  
**月二回発行にせよ**  
**機関紙部を**  
**充實せよ!!**

發行所  
 東京市芝区三田四丁目  
 二五  
**労働新聞社**  
 日本労働組合評議会機関紙部

再版出来  
 著者ニール  
 西雅雄渡部義通共譯  
**組織問題**  
 定價一円五十錢  
 送料四十錢  
 三三九八番  
 振替東京  
 房書スルマ  
 一五ノ一町台向日小區川石小京東

1927

This poster advertising a “Fund campaign for 1,500 Yen” urges workers to “donate your change” and defend the Labor Press (Rōdō Shimbun). Other exhortations include “Expand our Bulletin Department!” and “Let’s publish twice a month!” The bottom of the poster advertises a new printing of a book by Lenin.

[PA0793]



1927

*Sponsored by the Japan Labor Union League (Nihon Rōdō Kumiai Dōmei), this graphic urges workers to organize nationwide and forge a worker-farmer alliance under the flag of the Japan Labor-Farmer Party.*

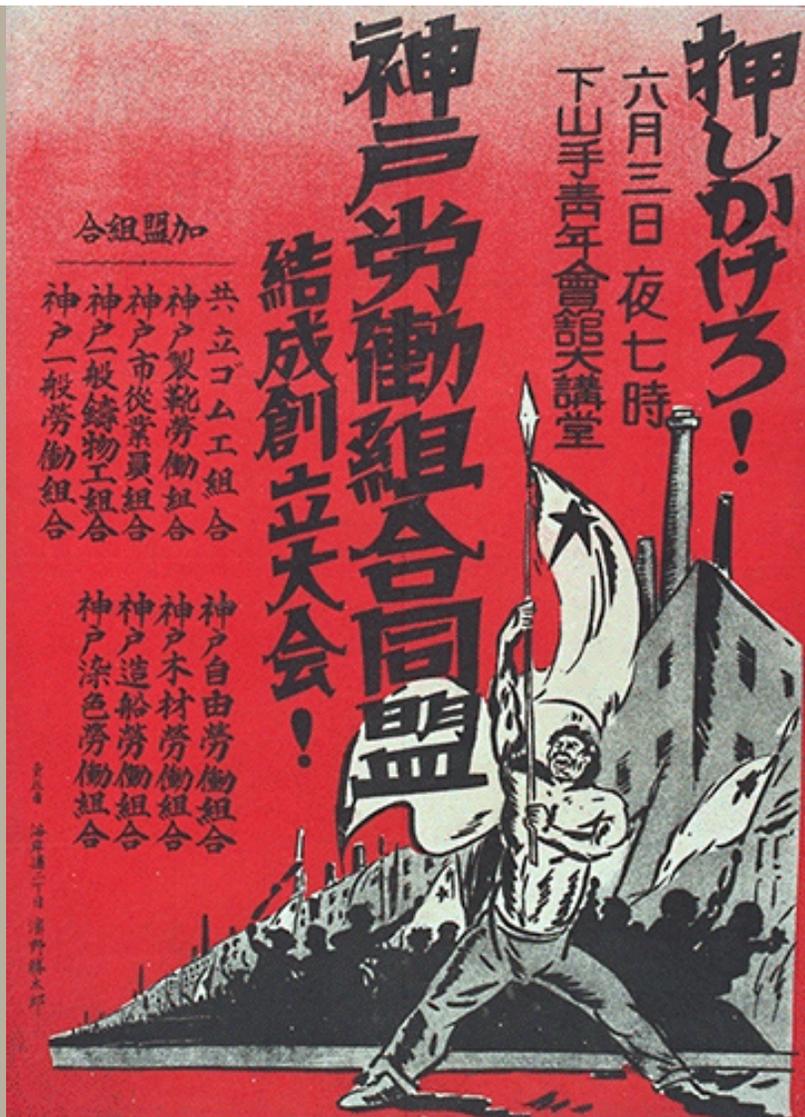
[PA1493]



1929

*This bold poster employs typical leftwing iconography: red coloring, industrial gear wheel, and mighty fist of the proletariat breaking the chains of oppression. The text names unions supporting a split from the Sōdōmei federation, and urges “workers from all prefectures to let the surging tide flow.”*

[PA0800]



1932

*Under a rallying cry that translates roughly as Come en masse, this poster summons workers to an evening meeting for the formation of the Kobe Labor Union Confederation. The small lettering on the left lists nine sponsoring unions in the Kobe area.*

[PA0825]



1935

*Worker education was a primary plank in union and leftwing party campaign platforms throughout the interwar era. This poster promotes a Tokyo cooperative school run by Christian pacifists and social reformers Abe Isō and Kagawa Toyohiko. “Young workers from village and city” are urged to come study under the banner of “cooperation and construction.”*

[PA0997]

Other labor-related graphics from the 1920s and 1930s—both formal and informal in nature—also call attention to the tenacity of radical labor expression well into the 1930s. Japanese workers began celebrating May Day (also known as International Workers’ Day) on May 1, 1920, for example, and continued to do so annually until 1936, when the practice was prohibited.



1926

[PA2113]



1927

[PA0785]



1929

[PA2115]



1930

[PA2124]

**総評試会の旗の下に**

**参加せよ**

**ら山田**

**に威天**

**メ**

首切賃下絶対反対！  
 失業者の生活国庫負擔！  
 帝国主義戦争絶対反対！  
 ワアツシヨとタラ幹をケ飛はせ！

**参加申込所**  
 神田区金沢町五, 中村高一 方  
 神田区表猿樂町十九, 龜山誠一 方  
 神田区今川本町二八, 關東出版本部

**総評試会の旗の下に**

**参加せよ**

**ら山田**

**に威天**

**メ**

首切賃下絶対反対！  
 失業者の生活国庫負擔！  
 帝国主義戦争絶対反対！  
 ワアツシヨとタラ幹をケ飛はせ！

日本労働組合総評試会  
**東京金属労働者組合**  
 本所区横川橋四丁目八一

1931

[PA2136]

押かけろ! 4月23日夜 7時

大会演説

中和本校

本所林町

又次郎 稲直二 生田 福本 浅瀬 鶴福

山森早池 花橋尾田 秀文七政 雄治郎七

純労働者組合同盟

深川區御船藏前町

1932

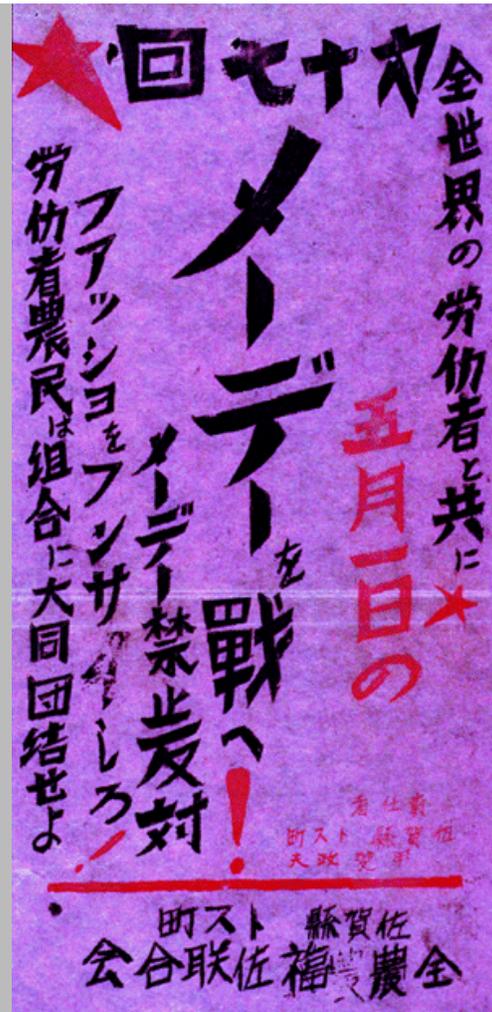
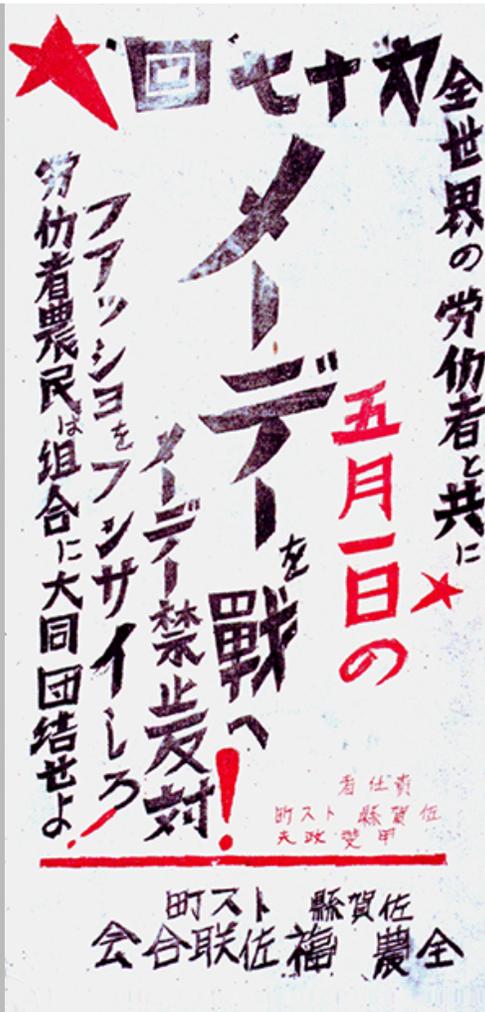
[PA2144]



1937

[PA2117]

*Some union activists attempted to defy the government and continue this annual demonstration in support of global worker solidarity even after the ban imposed in 1936. The Ohara collection includes the following white and purple leaflets calling for celebrating the “seventeenth” May Day in 1937.*



1937

[PA2158] [PA2159]

As the 1937 May Day leaflets indicate, the more formal poster-style graphics of the labor movement were complemented by a less polished category of exhortatory agitation disseminated in the form of handbills and flyers. Many of these called for participating in or supporting localized protests or disputes. Some were clarion calls for a general strike. These throwaway leaflets reflected handiwork by both fairly sophisticated artists and crude amateurs. The verbiage ranged from terse to wordy, and the visuals—where there were any—were usually harsh and sometimes vicious.

As with the proletarian posters, dissemination of these more informal graphics extended into the mid 1930s. In this respect, they too call attention to the tenacity and diversity of the labor movement even after the heavy hand of the state intruded and organizations like Sōdōmei moved in collaborationist directions. This is not, in fact, entirely surprising when one keeps in mind the persistence of poverty in Depression-era Japan and the considerable variety of labor protests that accompanied this misery. In 1937, for example—the year Japan launched all-out aggression against China—it is estimated that some 2,126 “incidents” of labor protest took place, involving over 213,000 participants.

This is the milieu in which, even as workers were being drafted for war, protest continued to be expressed. Labor unions may have been crumbling, or caving in to pressure, or being won over by patriotic appeals. More than a few protests may have been relatively restrained, or even brief and largely symbolic in nature. In the eyes of the watchdogs of the state, however, these numbers were still alarming. In the dossiers of the thought police, after all, 2,126 disputes in a single year averaged out to almost six a day. Indeed, it was domestic unrest such as this that led the militaristic ideologues to pump up the mythical rhetoric of “one hundred million hearts beating as one.”

### *“Informal” Leaflets & Handbills*



1927

*“Don't be deceived by the labor survey!” This graphic asserts that the 1927 national labor survey was a loosely disguised tool for the imperial state to determine the minimum wage. In fact, it was that and more: labor surveys were used worldwide to determine the readiness of men for military service.*



1928

*A giant Japanese soldier stares down at a “fat capitalist” holding a leashed bull dog and dangling a medal from his hand. Behind him a police officer looks on. Censorship laws made opposition to Japanese expansionism a dicey proposition, so the artist obscured the issue; the capitalist could be read as John Bull, a symbol of Great Britain, and taken by censors to indicate opposition to British imperialism.*



ca. 1930

*This roughly produced flyer, distinctive for both in its use of the Spanish for militarism and its bold anti-military stance, was issued by the Kansai General Workers Union. The Japanese text reads: "Fight against the crisis of this [the pointing arrow] atrocity. Absolute opposition to an imperialist war for the benefit of capitalists and landlords."*

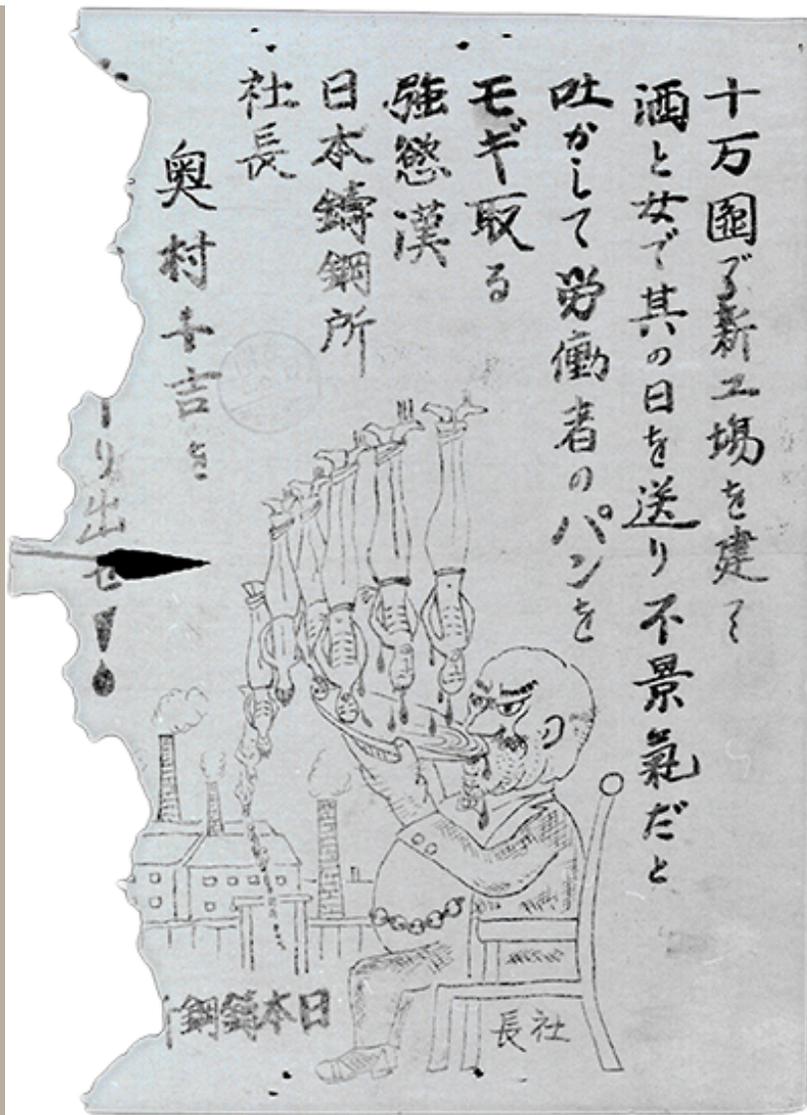
[PA1570]



ca. 1930

*This cartoonish flyer portrays a government bureaucrat announcing that industrial rationalization was imperative. But “if this causes unemployment, the government will solve this through suitable action.” The central figure depicts an oversized manager sitting atop a factory with the bloodied bodies of workers lying at his feet.*

[PA1528]



1930

*This grisly flyer depicting a fat capitalist drinking the blood of his emaciated workers is a personal attack on the president of a steel company, both of which are named. The president is described as a greedy, avaricious man who has built an expensive new factory and then snatches bread (pan) from the workers under the name of recession, all the while indulging daily in sake and women.*

[PA2007]



1931

*This broadside attacks the two-faced management of the Jiji Shimpō (Jiji Newspaper), which is accused of firing 100 workers and leaving their families facing starvation. Workers are urged to “bury” the newspaper, which has fired loyal longtime workers with but “a single telegram,” and called in gangsters to intimidate their comrades. The concluding lines of the indictment read: “Stop purchasing and reading the reactionary Jiji Shimpō, the enemy of the proletarian class.”*

[PA0854]



1931

1931 This appeal to “brothers” in a local struggle calls for “Victory!” in disputes against four different companies. It is provocative to keep in mind that such militant labor activism was taking place in the same year that the Japanese militarists took over Manchuria.

[PA2082]



1932

*The terse heading of this militant graphic supporting a strike against a local entrepreneur in the Kanto region declares that “Blood will rain down upon Nakamonmae.” The muscular sledge-hammer-wielding worker has broken his chains, but the meaning of the rifle and sharpened bamboo staff seems ambiguous. Are these signifiers of state oppression? Of worker-farmer militancy? Of both?*

[PA1924]



1932

*Disseminated the year after the Manchurian Incident in which the Japanese military seized control of China's three northern provinces, this crude, cartoon-like, and now opaque graphic is primarily of interest in retrospect for its depiction of a corrupt "traitor and enemy of the working class" (whose name is given) in cahoots with an unsavory sword-bearing police or military officer. The dialogue refers to strike-breaking as well as political factionalism.*

[PA1780]

The economic dominance of the four largest *zaibatsu* (Mitsui, Mitsubishi, Sumitomo, and Yasuda) along with the rise of militarist governments in the 1930s closed Japan's brief moment of "imperial democracy," and pressed labor unions further to the periphery of the political landscape. This trend was compounded by militarist planning for economic self-sufficiency from the late 1920s, which renewed the state's emphasis on development of heavy industry. By the late 1930s the government was well into the

process of shutting down independent political parties, unions, farmer cooperatives, and even business associations, replacing them with state-controlled organizations created to mobilize the masses in support of military expansion into China. As one consequence, employment patterns began to shift toward an industrial workforce dominated by males. The militarist governments that took Japan into war in the late 1930s provided significant economic stimulus for crucial industrial sectors and created a large cadre of planners, managers, and skilled blue-collar workers that would contribute greatly to postwar reconstruction and recovery. Before that could happen, however, the war came home and destroyed far more industrial capacity than it created.

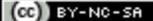
Japan's full-scale invasion of China in 1937 launched the nation onto a path that eventually led to its attack on Pearl Harbor and America's entrance into World War II. Japan's long march to war seems in retrospect to have been inevitable; yet, the decade was nevertheless witness to union activism at odds with the interests of the emerging militarist state. While the aggregate percentage of workers who belonged to unions did not grow significantly after 1931, the number of workers willing to launch and maintain workplace disputes exploded between 1930 and 1932, and remained steady until 1938. While not a clear indicator of a strong labor movement per se, the number of workplace disputes indicates a persistence of collective action at the social base even in the face of an increasingly repressive state. While the number of long strike actions also indicates employer ability to resist worker activism, it is nonetheless evidence of stronger local unions able to hold out longer in the face of employers who, in law and material resources, held all the cards.

By 1938 political strife and worker unrest had reached the point that militarist factions led by the General Staff of the Imperial Army and Navy who had seized control of the government felt they could no longer tolerate. In 1940 the state outlawed labor unions and political parties, and replaced them with a network of state-sponsored patriotic service organizations. Independent political parties were abolished and all remaining labor unions were folded into the patriotic "*sanpō*" foundations. Although *sanpō* was little more than an excuse for the state to legitimize the dissolution of the labor movement while ameliorating very little of the dangerous working conditions, low wages, and managerial abuse faced by Japan's wartime industrial workforce, some worker representatives nevertheless were able to use traditional styles of nonunion activism—intense negotiation tactics and even strikes—to temporarily buttress what otherwise were rapidly eroding wages and working conditions. The prewar political experiences of Japanese workers prepared them to take advantage of the legal protections granted to them by the Allied Occupation in 1946.

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# Political Protest in Interwar Japan — 1

## Posters & Handbills from the Ohara Collection (1920s-1930s)

by Christopher Gerteis

Parties  
& Politics

Labor  
Activism

Farmers'  
Movements

Cultural  
Movements

Sources  
& Credits

### **FARMERS' MOVEMENTS**

As indicated in the post-World War I proliferation of “labor-farmer” political parties, opposition movements by an emerging urban working class were complemented by leftwing protests aimed at mobilizing impoverished farmers in the countryside.

Following the Meiji Restoration of 1868, which overthrew the samurai-dominated feudal system that had governed the country for eight centuries, Japan’s leaders embarked on a path of Westernization and industrialization that privileged the urban sector over the more backward agrarian economy. The new modernizing state was heavily dependent on taxes disproportionately extracted from the rural sector, and many farmers were hard pressed to make ends meet. As time passed, the plight of many of them became worse rather than better.

Whereas World War I stimulated a war boom in Japan’s industrial sector, it simultaneously brought greater setbacks to much of the rural political economy. Land rents as well as the costs of tools and fertilizer accelerated the descent of many small land holders into foreclosure and tenancy. Higher rents exacted in kind by an emerging cadre of new landlords forced the swelling class of tenant farmers into the position of having to buy rice to feed their families.

Hunger followed mounting poverty closely, and was among the major reasons behind the rural unrest that culminated in the nationwide rice riots of 1918. Although the government interceded by cutting the price of rice in half, price controls evaporated when economic recession hit Japan in the early 1920s. The recession exacerbated rural hardship, and one conspicuous result of this was a mounting exodus of poor farmers who migrated to the cities to seek factory work. With the onset of the Great Depression in 1929, rural Japanese suffered a further blow from the collapse of the export market for silk, which was one of the major by-employments that farm families had relied on for supplemental income.

Many political activists devoted themselves to organizing grassroots associations of poor farmers; and more than a few espoused the necessity of forging strong labor-farmer alliances. Beginning in 1921 and continuing into the early 1940s, the number of outright tenancy disputes numbered over 1,500 annually—reaching an annual peak of around 6,000 in the mid 1930s. However one might break down these numbers, they were certainly sufficient to alarm the ruling elites—especially when paired with tandem incidents of protest by urban workers.

Beginning in the 1920s, activists and organizers spanning a broad ideological spectrum

devoted attention to rural problems and the desirability of building bridges between poor farmers and blue-collar workers. By the early 1930s, their factionalism mirrored the fratricidal rifts that plagued the urban labor movement and precipitated the splintering of the movement into eleven "proletarian" parties, several of which included "farmer" in their names. Centrist and rightwing socialists vied with hard-line communists; parties changed their names with bewildering speed; and by the mid 1930s, as everywhere on the left, many erstwhile socialists found it expedient to change their colors to "national socialist" and throw their support behind the militarists and their expansionist agenda.

Still, the longer-term legacy of rural unrest was substantial. To a very considerable degree, sweeping land-reform legislation introduced by U.S. occupation reformers following Japan's defeat in 1945 was motivated by fear that, absent such reform, the countryside might well erupt in "Red" revolution.

Posters in the Ohara collection that focus on interwar discontent in the countryside give a fair sense of why such fears arose.



1927

The shirt of this axe-wielding farmer reads “Japan Farmers’ Party” (Nihon Nōmintō), and the ball chained to the bicycle is labeled “Unfair taxes.” The explanatory text reads as follows:

Heavy taxes amounting to 40 million yen are attached to the legs of farmers, laborers, government functionaries, and petty merchants. More than four million riders all over the country are suffering from this unfair tax.

Let’s push to abolish the bicycle tax.

The tax on bicycles was but one of many onerous burdens imposed on the lower classes.

[PA0635]



1928

A militant farmer holding a scythe in one hand and red flag in the other urges landless farmers to attend an August meeting of the National Farmers' Union (Zenkoku Nōmin Kumiai) in Niigata prefecture. This union emerged out of factional squabbles in 1928 and survived until 1938. The heading at the top addresses "Proletarian farmers of the entire prefecture!!" Text elsewhere urges them to "Unite" and "Fill the entire prefecture with the flag of the union." Like the scythe, the red flag, and the militant male activist, the silhouette of protestors marching over an uneven terrain is another example of the formulaic imagery that distinguishes many of these radical graphics.

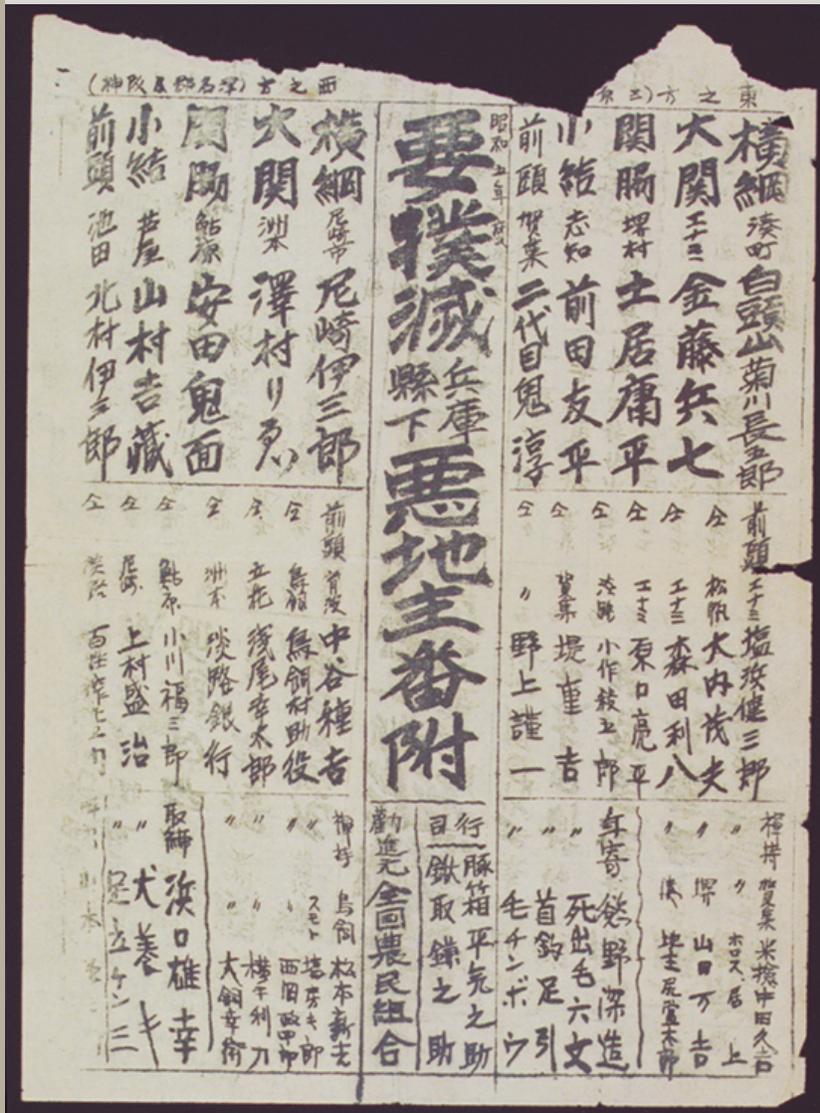
[PA0913]



1929

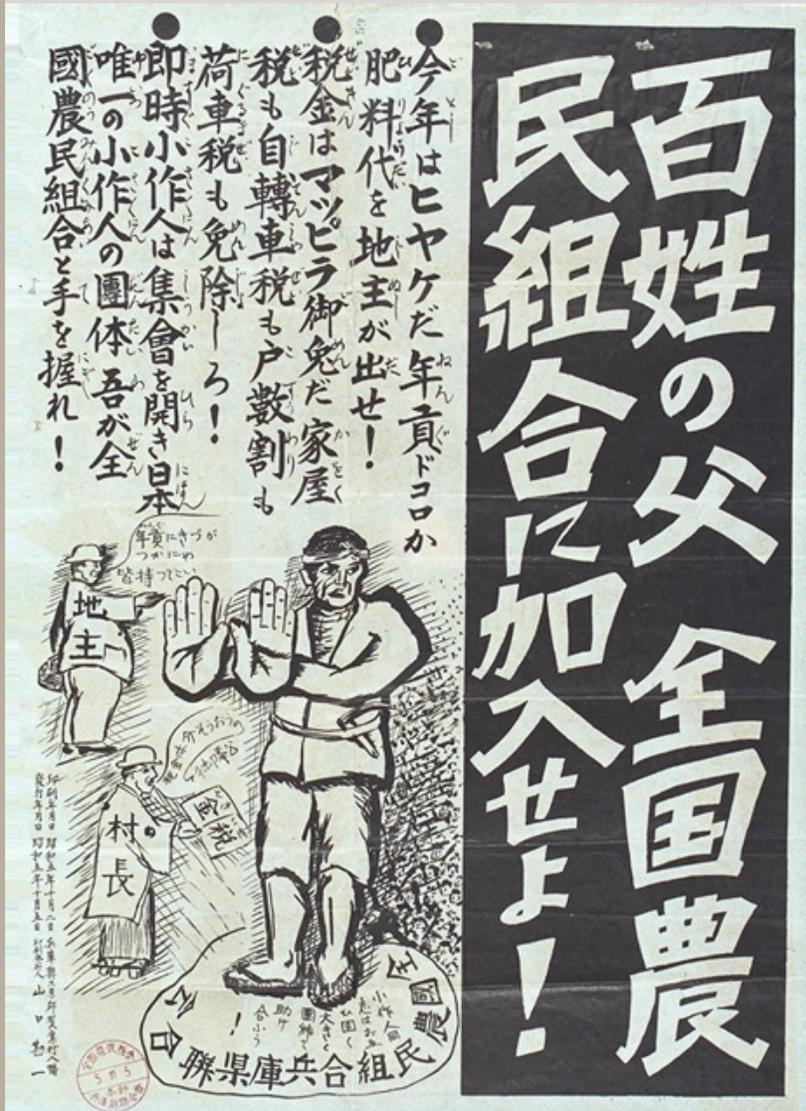
This muscular scythe-wielding farmer is announcing the second annual meeting of the National Farmers' Union.

[PA2337]



1930

This witty graphic mimics the lineup of a sumo tournament, with a heading that reads “ranked list of bad landlords in Hyōgo prefecture who should be defeated.” The list assigns the top four ranks in the sumo hierarchy to the “bad” landlords; the “promoter” of the confrontation is identified as the National Farmers’ Union; and most of the names of officials listed at the bottom are satirical (such as “Stingy Fellow”).



1929

The bold text reads: “Join the National Farmers’ Union, the father of the farmers!” The small figures being repulsed by a union-affiliated farmer represent landlords (top) and village heads (bottom), and the bill being presented by the latter reads: “tax.” The union’s demands:

This is a drought year. Contrary to collecting rent, landlords should pay for our fertilizer.

Down with these taxes! We want exemptions from the property tax, bicycle tax, frontage tax, and wagon tax!

Tenant farmers should immediately hold an assembly and join hands with the National Farmers’ Union, Japan’s only tenants’ association!

[PA0930]



1931

*Between 1931 and 1934, the rural population in the northern prefecture of Tōhoku was ravaged by a famine that was disastrously compounded by a devastating earthquake and tsunami in March 1933. This 1931 poster exhorts urban laborers to “Extend the workers’ hands to the starving farmers” by immediately donating money and supplies. The campaign is sponsored by an ad hoc Tokyo Proletarian Groups Coalition.*

[PA0895]



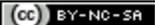
1935

*This banner announces the “fourteenth” congress of the National Farmers’ Union, scheduled for April 6 to 8. By this date, most such organizations had thrown their support behind Japan’s military expansion and looked to the government to alleviate their socio-economic difficulties through some form of national socialism.*

[PA0048]

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### CULTURAL MOVEMENTS

In retrospect, one of the striking features of 1920s and 1930s Japan is the extent to which the rise of militarism took place in the midst of developments we now associate with an efflorescence of “modernity” worldwide in the early decades of the twentieth century, especially following World War I. Much of Japan, especially the economically less developed countryside, was indeed relatively backward—even, as Marxists then and later put it, “semi-feudal.” The counterpoint to this, however, was the conspicuous emergence of a consumer culture and popular mass culture that in many instances reflected cosmopolitan influences.

Although Tokyo and Osaka, Japan’s most vibrant metropolitan hubs, led the way in these developments, the allure of modernity penetrated provincial cities and seeped down to remote rural villages. One reason this happened so quickly was the revolution in mass communications. Public radio was introduced in the mid 1920s, and soon reached every corner of the country. The print media, stimulated by new production technologies, began addressing a mass audience through newspapers, magazines, and books aimed at carefully targeted readers. Cinema entered the scene, in the form of both imported foreign films and development of an indigenous industry. Popular theater flourished in the cities, including many adaptations of foreign playwrights.

Many of these developments moved in flashy and largely bourgeois directions—like the flourishing of “café culture” and the vogue of the “modern girl” and “modern boy,” all of which were transparently influenced by 1920s popular culture in the United States and Europe. From another direction, the devastating Kanto earthquake of 1923, which leveled most of Yokohama and a good part of Tokyo, had the ironically salutary effect of stimulating the reconstruction of a “new Tokyo” that was more Westernized and up-to-date than the ruined old city had been. Before the militarists took over, many observers regarded Japan as being embarked on a promising “modern” trajectory.

At the same time, this modernity obviously was riddled with contradictions. Inequalities in the distribution of wealth became more conspicuous, and large numbers of rural and working-class families could only look upon the material benefits of so-called progress with envy. Even here, however, the organizers of protest movements tapped into international trends for instruction and inspiration.

Unsurprisingly, they drew on ideas associated with the broad range of leftwing thought that had developed in the West—including Christian reformism; rightwing, moderate, and leftwing socialism; Marxism and hard-line Leninist communism; and eventually (and perversely) state-centered national socialism.

As the graphics in the Ohara collection remind us, these political and intellectual influences usually came wrapped in a distinctively cosmopolitan aesthetic sensibility that revealed, in this case, the influences of avant-garde and proletarian art.



*The bold text on this 1930 poster urges enrollment in the “proletarian” (red type) “Art Academy!!” (white on blue), where the new school year begins in October. Directions for the closest stations on two railway lines are given.*

1930 [PA1048]

### Leftwing Publications

The relatively sophisticated textual content on interwar political graphics is a reminder of the fact that by this date the Japanese populace as a whole was impressively literate. This literacy traced back to educational reforms introduced in the latter half of the 19th century, and it extended to both blue-collar workers and farmers. As a consequence, leftist parties and labor-farmer associations generally churned out a variety of newsletters, newspapers, and magazines to keep their supporters up-to-date.

At the same time, the rise of a new urban intelligentsia was yet another familiar phenomenon of modernity. And a substantial portion of this intellectual production involved not only publishing original articles and books of a leftwing nature, but also translating many of the basic Marxist, socialist, and communist texts that defined radical thought in the Western tradition. Marx, Lenin, and a great many other radical theorists and polemicists all became accessible.

For the usual reasons, most periodicals associated with leftwing parties and unions were short-lived: government censorship and outright repression coupled with organizational infighting generally did them in. Nonetheless, some survived long enough to have an impact. Additionally, they were complemented and buttressed by another new genre of radical protest that emerged out of the social and economic turmoil of these years—namely, proletarian literature.

Proletarian literature made up almost half of the pages of the two largest magazines of the interwar period, *Chūō Kōron* (*Central Review*) and *Kaizō* (*Reconstruction*), while the two most successful leftist periodicals—*Bungei Sensen* (*Literary Front*) and *Senki* (*Battleflag*)—focused exclusively on proletarian literature and amassed a combined circulation of over 50,000 by 1930. Writers as diverse as Yumeno Kyūsaku, Umehara Hokumei, Hayashi Fumiko, and Ryūtanji Yū all published literary works that reflected concern for the “details of daily life under capitalism” and explored problems associated with industrialization, modernization, and urbanization.

The consolidation of three affiliated organizations—the Japan Proletarian Artists Alliance (Nihon Proletaria Geijutsu Renmei), the Labor-Farmer Artists Alliance (Rōnō Geijutsuka Renmei), and the Vanguard Artists Union (Zenei Geijutsuka Dōmei)—into the All-Japan Proletarian Art Federation (Zen Nihon Musansha Geijutsu Renmei) in 1928 enhanced the publication success of the movement’s most famous writers, Kobayashi Takiji and Tokunaga Sunao. In 1928 and 1929, the new federation’s journal *Senki* serialized two of Kobayashi’s most famous works. The first, titled *March 15, 1928* and published in the November and December issues of that year, dealt with police torture following a draconian roundup of socialists and communists by the Home Ministry’s Special Higher Police (Tokubetsu Kōtō Keisatsu, commonly abbreviated as Tokkō and referred to as the thought police). In May and June of the following year, *Senki* published Kobayashi’s *Crab-Cannery Ship* (*Kanikōsen*), which focused on workers attempting to form a union in the fishing industry; this provocative novella was adapted as a theatrical performance that same year. In 1929, *Senki* also serialized Tokunaga’s most famous novel, *Street Without Sun* (*Taiyō no nai Machi*), which focused on workers struggling for their rights and was quickly adapted as a stage presentation.





Both of these posters from 1930 advertise theatrical adaptations by the Tokyo-based Leftwing Theater (Sayoku Gekijō) of Tokunaga Sunao's 1929 proletarian novel Street Without Sun. The militant presentation on the left was directed by the protean artist/writer/director Murayama Tomoyoshi. (The two squares at the bottom advertise books, including on the left a collection of plays authored by Murayama.) The poster on the right advertises a Leftwing Theater performance in the southernmost island of Kyushu.

1930 [PA0946] [PA1014]

Although Kobayashi himself escaped the notorious "March 15 Incident" he excoriated in his 1928 rendering, this was a great turning point for political activists. Faced with the prospect of imprisonment and torture, many leftists then or soon afterwards publicly announced the recantation (*tenkō*) of their beliefs—a largely collective act that has haunted the political left in Japan ever since. Tokunaga more or less recanted in 1933. Kobayashi did not, and in that same year, at the age of 29, he paid the price for commitment to his ideals. He was arrested for being affiliated with the outlawed Japan Communist Party and died after being tortured by the same "thought police" he had criticized five years earlier.

In perusing the Ohara collection of protest graphics, it is helpful to keep such intimate vignettes in mind.



Sponsored by several leftist organizations, this November 1927 poster announces a “Labor-Farmer Russia Exhibition” commemorating the “power and hope” of the tenth anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution. Small type in the lower left corner advertises the Iwanami publishing house’s translation of Karl Marx’s *Das Kapital*.

1930 [PA1053]



The red banner headline on this 1927 advertisement reads “Join hands with 50,000 readers. Read the Proletarian Newspaper (Musansha Shimbun), the ally of the people!!” Smaller red text notes that the newspaper is published six times a month and costs five sen. The ad also publicizes “Marx’s Das Kapital, translated by Kawakami Hajime and Miyagawa Minoru. Sold separately. Price: 20 sen.” Kawakami, who was strongly influenced by Tolstoy and Christian socialism in his youth, emerged as one of Japan’s most influential Marxist intellectuals in the 1920s and was imprisoned between 1933 and 1937 for his pro-communist activities.

1927 [PA0577]



弊閣全集は名ばかりで読者制限、拘束、搾取、最近出版界の悪傾向を排撃す!!!

全三十三冊

第一期刊行分

- 1 リヤザノフ 波辺義通 記 **カール・マルクス**
- 2 スレハノフ 木村春樹 記 **マルクス主義の根本問題**
- 3 カウツキー 倫理と唯物史観
- 4 由利英一 記 **神聖家族**
- 5 スレハノフ 社会主義と政治闘争
- 6 マルクス 記 **アルエーメル十八日**
- 7 マルクス 記 **フランスに於ける政治闘争**
- 8 マルクス 記 **フランスに於ける内乱**
- 9 由利英一 記 **革命及び反革命**
- 10 マルクス 記 **スペイン革命**
- 11 マルクス 記 **露土戦争**
- 12 マルクス 記 **プロ細領批判**

マルクス主義選集

定價 50美分  
1.00  
分冊自由

共生閣

東京・山崎町八丁目  
東京・豊原五七二九  
京都・下町西三条  
京都・大八四一五三

This 1928 advertisement for a 30-volume collection of Marxist writings offers individual volumes priced between 50 sen and one yen.

1928 [PA0966]

錢五十部一 行發日一每刊月

# 無産者新聞



シロア革命記念  
日本共産党事件

割刊号十一月十五日發賣

東京芝区島倉五丁目  
新報ビルヂョウ  
無産者新聞社  
（東京六二五番地）

労働者農民の國ロシアを守れ！  
無産者新聞日刊實現！  
無産者グラフィックを無産者の家族へ！  
無産者新聞防衛万才！

Issued by the publisher of the Proletarian Newspaper, this ad for the November 1928 issue of the monthly Proletarian Graphic (Musansha Gurafu) features a portrait of Lenin and these exclamations:

“Protect Russia, land of workers and farmers!”

“Make a daily proletarian newspaper a reality!”

“Distribute the *Proletarian Graphic* to a proletarian family!”

“Long Live the Defense of the Proletarian Newspaper!”

1928 [PA0583]

300 001 30E  
聞新產無! 讀

我等  
①  
政治新聞



全  
民  
衆  
①  
味  
方

社聞新產無

八一二町聞及徑南区芝市京東

錢五部一

*Beneath the familiar broken chain of worker servitude, the heading of this 1927 advertisement reads: "Read the Proletarian Newspaper!" Text to the right and left of the militant worker steering the ship of revolution translates as "Ally of the people" (right) and "Our political newspaper" (left).*

1927 [PA0521]



*A worker with a smoke-belching factory behind him solicits readers for the monthly Zenei (Vanguard), which was produced by the outlawed Japan Communist Party. "Look!" this 1928 advertisement exclaims, "we are the only combative proletarian arts magazine." Smaller type in black spells out "Read the best guide to new art!"*

1928 [PA1075]



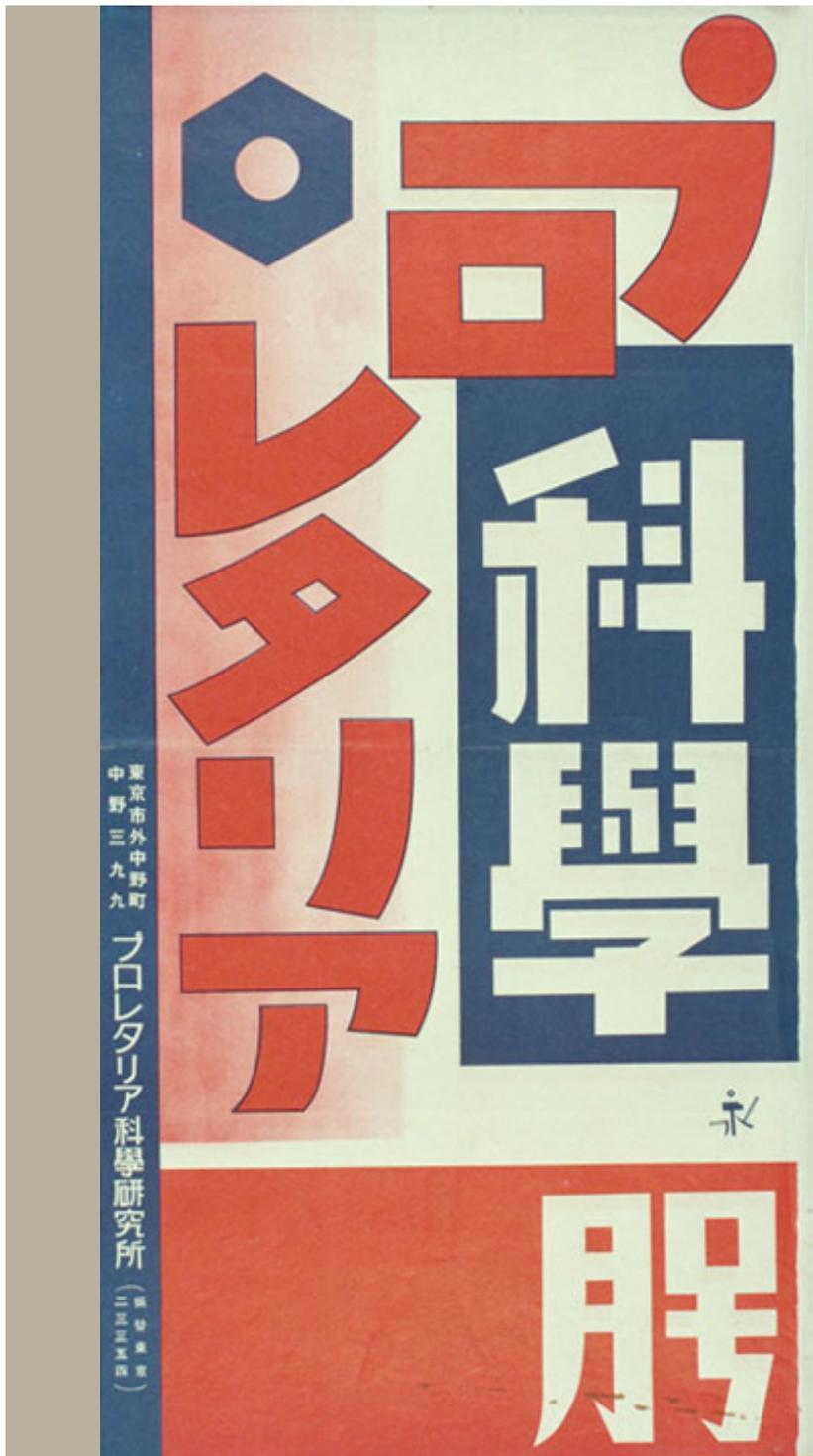
無產階級評論雜誌

大眾

每月一回日發行★定價三十錢

*This 1929 advertisement for the monthly Taishū (The Masses) declares this to be “The critical discussion magazine of the proletarian class.”*

1929 [PA1073]



*Stylish modernistic typography distinguishes this late 1920s cover of the journal Proletarian Science (Puroretaria Kagaku). The journal was published by the Proletarian Science Research Institute (Puroretaria Kagaku Kenkyūjo), which rendered “proletarian” in phonetic script rather than the three-ideograph compound (musansha) used in other radical publications like the Proletarian Newspaper.*

late 1920s [PA0964]



The exhortation on this assertively red-colored advertisement translates as “Read the workers’ and farmers’ magazine Battleflag (Senki),” while the vertical writing on the left declares “Absolutely opposed to suppression!” The white box at bottom left advertises a companion youth-oriented journal, Youth Battleflag (Shōnen Senki). Senki was a major vehicle for writers affiliated with the proletarian literature movement, and the 1930 date of this graphic is revealing. It follows by two years the Home Ministry crackdown on leftwing activists and writers—the “March 15 Incident”—critically novelized (on Senki’s pages) by the courageous writer Kobayashi Takiji, who was beaten to death by the thought police in 1933.

1930 [PA1043]

*This advertisement invites people to a public assembly on March 13, 1933 at Tenōji Meeting Hall in Osaka to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Marx's death. (Marx died on March 14, 1883 London time.) Sixteen speakers are listed, and the entrance fee is 20 sen, but half that price for workers.*

*The fine print on the right itemizes publications aimed at the progressive audience to whom the advertisement is directed, and gives a fair impression of the struggle of leftwing publishers to survive even after the intensification of censorship and the military takeover of Manchuria in 1931.*

*The various titles (with prices given for each) translate as “Theater News,” “Literature News,” “Art News,” “Music News,” “Film Club,” “Comrade,” “Friend of the Masses,” “Working Women,” and “Proletarian Culture.”*

1933 [PA1043]

## Political Theater

The introduction of European-style theatrical modernism in Japan can be dated quite precisely to the immediate wake of the Russo-Japanese War in the early years of the 20th century. An Ibsen Society was founded in 1907, for example, and a 1911 production of Ibsen's *A Doll's House* galvanized formation of the Blue Stocking Society (Seitō), a pioneer voice in the Japanese woman's movement, that same year.

The modern theater movement took the generic name *Shingeki* (New Theater), and the infusion of Western influences increased exponentially following World War I and the

Bolshevik Revolution. Expressionism, dadaism, and constructivism all impacted the Japanese theater world. So also, predictably, did proletarian literature and stagecraft. In 1924, the year following the Kanto earthquake, the Tsukiji Little Theater (Tsukiji Shōgekijō) was founded in Tokyo with an original commitment to produce only plays by foreign authors. Their impressive offerings included works by Anton Chekhov, Maurice Maeterlinck, Maxim Gorky, Upton Sinclair, George Bernard Shaw, August Strindberg, Roman Rolland, and Luigi Pirandello.



*This 1929 advertisement for Prince Hagen, “a melodrama in five acts” by Upton Sinclair, conveys some of the confrontational élan of the leftwing theatrical world. Presented by the Vanguard Theater Group (Zeneiza) at the Tsukiji Little Theater in Tokyo in the year following the government’s notorious “March 15” crackdown on leftists, the mildly surreal rendering of Sinclair’s protagonist is flanked by phrases reading “Alchemist?” “Socialist?” The emergence of a great king of finance!” “The terror of Wall Street!” The bottom line is an advertisement for the periodical Literary Front (Bungei Sensen).*

Typically, factionalism coupled with mounting repression fractured the modern theater movement and culminated in its dissolution by the end of the 1930s. In 1928, the Tsukiji Little Theater split into “political” and “literary” factions, for example, and in 1940 government oppression culminated in a mass arrest of around 100 individuals associated with leftwing theater. As elsewhere on the left, many beleaguered theatrical activists ultimately recanted and redirected their activities to support of the “holy war.” At the same time, however, and also typically, this brief but intense interwar engagement in critically addressing contemporary problems had a profound influence on the reemergence of politically and socially concerned theater in the years following Japan’s defeat in 1945.

The prewar career of Murayama Tomoyoshi provides a vivid impression of the complex and interactive dynamics of the proletarian art, literature, and theater movements. A Christian convert who studied art and drama in Berlin in the early 1920s, Murayama quickly made a name for himself as a leader of the avant-garde MAVO art movement while also extending his vision and energy to theater writing, directing, set design, and even occasional acting. His theatrical productions included Marxist renditions of “Robin Hood” and *Don Quixote*. In 1929, he acted in the Tokyo stage production of Tokunaga’s proletarian novella *Street Without Sun* and also designed the set for a Japanese adaptation of *Danton’s Death*, a 1835 play about the French Revolution by the precocious German playwright Georg Buchner. (Buchner was only 23 when he died of typhus in 1837.)

Murayama was arrested in May 1930 and charged with violating the Peace Preservation Law. Released in December, he immediately and provocatively joined the outlawed Japan Communist Party, which led to his rearrest and imprisonment in 1932. He was released from prison in 1934 after ostensibly recanting his leftist positions, but continued to produce dramatic work critical of the militarist state—leading to interludes of incarceration in 1940-42 and again in 1944-45. Unlike his contemporary Kobayashi Takiji, the proletarian writer who died in the hands of the police after being arrested, Murayama survived the war to participate actively in the turbulent—and, again, fractious—postwar scene. He died in 1977, at the age of 76. The following theater posters from the Ohara collection all involve Murayama in one way or another.

*Familiar red lettering dominates this late 1920s poster advertising a production of Robin Hood written and directed by Murayama Tomoyosh, and presented "in six acts and 40 scenes" by the Vanguard Theater Group at the Tsukiji Little Theater.*

[PA1043]

ロビンフッド  
 6幕40場  
 第3回公演  
 前衛座  
 見よ!!  
 更に前進  
 前衛座  
 11月18日(金) 19日(土) 20日(日) 21日(月)  
 村山知義作  
 並演出  
 毎夕六時開演  
 .99¥  
 築地小劇場ニテ

腸胃カタル特效薬  
 ヘルプ  
 K.N. 常に腸胃の健全を計られよ

*Presented by the Leftwing Theater group at the Tsukiji Little Theater in 1929, this production of Danton's Death by Aleksei Tolstoy was codirected by Murayama Tomoyoshi, who also did the staging.*

1929 [PA1008]



This presentation of several dramas jointly performed by Tokyo's Leftwing Theater and the Osaka Battleflag Group (Osaka Senkiza) features Maxim Gorky's four-act play The Mother. The staging is by Murayama Tomoyoshi.

1929 [PA1009]

(演出) 佐野祐碩・小野宮吉 \* (装置) 村山知義  
 マキシム・ゴルキー原作  
 左翼劇場編  
 東京 左翼劇場  
 戦旗座  
 合同公演  
 カスパール・ハウゼルの作  
 足のないマルチン 5場  
 四幕  
 八場  
 十月  
 16日 水曜 祭日  
 17日 木曜  
 午後6時半  
 A. 2円  
 B. 1円半  
 C. 1円  
 労働者券五十枚  
 申込所  
 大阪港区新町七丁目  
 一丁目 朝日会館  
 PP作  
 一日の養生本館・翌日の坂前本館

The Leftwing Theater group here advertises a two-week run of Murayama Tomoyoshi's drama Record of Victory (Shōri no Kiroku) at the Tsukiji Little Theater in May 1931. Tickets for workers are one-third the price of regular admission. This graphic depiction of militant workers carries particular resonance in retrospect, since it was only four months later, in mid September, that the so-called Manchurian Incident took place, signaling a disastrous new stage in Japanese aggression against China.

1930 [PA1013]



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# Political Protest in Interwar Japan — 1

## Posters & Handbills from the Ohara Collection (1920s-1930s)

by Christopher Gerteis

Parties  
& Politics

Labor  
Activism

Farmers'  
Movements

Cultural  
Movements

Sources  
& Credits

### SOURCES & CREDITS

#### Basic References

Those who wish to enlarge their knowledge of subjects mentioned in this unit will find the following two reference sources especially useful:

(1) [The database of the Ohara Institute for Social Research at Hosei University](#). In addition to thousands of posters and other graphics, extending into the early postwar years, this excellent website includes English captions as well as considerable English-language commentary.

(2) *Kodansha Encyclopedia of Japan*, 8 volumes plus a separate index volume (Kodansha, 1983). This is far and away the best single English-language encyclopedia on Japan, containing over 10,000 entries including long essays on major subjects. Kodansha published a compressed and lavishly illustrated two-volume version of this reference work in 1993 under the title *Japan: An Illustrated Encyclopedia*.

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