

The Rise of Japanese Labor Consciousness

By FRANK GODWIN

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KOBE, with a population of something over 600,000 (third in population in Japan), is the greatest commercial port and one of the big industrial centers of the Empire. One of her chief industries is shipbuilding, the biggest shipyard being the Kawasaki, employing over 17,000 wage-earners at present, about 8,000 less than in the "boom" period two years ago. At the end of June this year some 11,000 of these workers were members of labor unions, the Electrical Department (880 workers) being the most solidly organized. The organization of the Kawasaki men dates back more than nine years, when a kind of "workmen's circle" was formed in their plant, this association being connected with the Yuai-Kai (Workers' Friendly Society), which in recent years, since the Government permitted labor unions to be formed, has changed its name to the Japanese General Confederation of Labor, and is the oldest and strongest of all national labor bodies in Japan.

With their long experience in associated action, the Kawasaki workers are among the most advanced in Japan in experience of an organized class struggle, understanding of the social position of the workers, and capacity for and possession of labor idealism—the conception of a truer freedom for the workers. In September, 1919, it was the Kawasaki workers who introduced a new tactic into labor's struggles in Japan—sabotage—and by its use introduced a new working system in Japan—the eight-hour day—both tactic and system being subsequently put into effect in many industrial enterprises throughout Japan, and favorably affecting the living and working conditions of over half a million Japanese wage-earners.

At the end of June this year most of these Kawasaki workers were connected with unions organized independently and unconnected with the Yuai-Kai Federation. A smaller number were members of unions affiliated with the latter body. All unions, whether Yuai-Kai or independent, sent delegates to the Kobe League of Labor Unions, which it will be more convenient to refer to as the Kobe Federation of Labor, which includes—besides the Kawasaki unions—other shipyard unions, steel workers, printers, rubber workers, and other organized groups.

Another big shipyard in Kobe is the Mitsubishi, employing some 11,000 workers, of whom less than 1,000 were organized at the end of June this year. Though the Kawasaki management has never been friendly to labor unions, they have not rooted them out with the persistent persecution which has existed in the Mitsubishi plant. With no labor organizations of importance, wages at the Mitsubishi plant were lower and hours longer than at Kawasaki, while the men themselves, when grievances became bitter, resorted to riots and destruction quite as much as strikes, having several times combined the two methods. Also, as may be expected, with the exception of the small minority of organized workers there has been little understanding and little social vision among the Mitsubishi wage-earners, though they are more and more coming to see the necessity of organized efforts through labor unionism—which in Japan today generally means industrial unionism.

In recent months the labor unions of Japan, with the

economic crisis handicapping them in every way, and with their backs to the wall, have been fighting for their existence, and have displayed a power and a courage if anything greater than they evinced in easier times. Two points have characterized the labor struggles of recent months, the first being the demand for the freedom of the workers to join any union they see fit, and the definite recognition of their unions as negotiating bodies. The second point, of immediate importance to every worker in such times, is that of "dismissal allowance," the unions demanding that in case of discharge of workers on account of slackness in trade, advance wages shall be paid for a period of some months ahead, the exact amount depending on the length of service, and in the case of old employees amounting to more than a year's wages. On both points the unions have actually won out in a number of places, and the second matter is now in greater or less degree in practice among Japanese employers. Tens of thousands of workers have been added to the ranks of organized labor, though the "closed shop" is not necessarily a part of their program, and the incomers have been voluntary ones.

On June 28 the Kobe Federation of Labor held a meeting to discuss the movement for the general recognition of unions as negotiating bodies, and to see what could be done to establish firmly the position of labor unions in the great industrial city of Kobe. The following day the Electrical Department of the Kawasaki Yard presented demands to the management including recognition of the unions as negotiating bodies in wage or other disputes, a high "discharge allowance" system, and the establishment of the "factory committee" system (works committees elected by the workers direct). About the same time, the workers at a branch of the Mitsubishi works presented demands for the freedom to organize unions, the recognition of such unions as negotiating bodies, a high "discharge allowance" system, the introduction of the eight-hour day (already in force at Kawasaki), and an increase in wages which would bring the scale close to that already paid at Kawasaki.

After a week's fruitless negotiations, the sixteen committeemen from the Electrical Department of the Kawasaki Yard were dismissed, the dismissals being accompanied by liberal "discharge allowances," but the committeemen declined to accept dismissal, and the following morning most of them came to the yard as usual, and though the gatekeepers declined to admit them, a number of their fellow-workers pushed the gate-keepers aside and swept their "dismissed" committeemen into the yard. Inside the yard meetings and discussions went on, and it was finally decided to quit work. A fight provoked by some armed hooligans apparently in company employ (a class which would be termed "sluggers" in America) resulted in a number of injuries on both sides, which aggravated the already strained relations. At the Mitsubishi Yard, at the same time, committeemen had also been dismissed, but did not attempt to force their way. Meetings and discussions took place, however, and after some conflicts with watchmen which involved some personal injuries and destruction of property, quitting work was decided upon here also.

This was on July 7. On the following day the workers from both shipyards formed a procession, 25,000 strong,

parading the principal streets of Kobe. This, however, was only a preliminary to the demonstrations of the 9th (Sunday), when under the auspices of the Kobe Federation of Labor probably the greatest labor demonstration so far seen in Japan took place. Some smaller unions engaged in disputes at the time joined in the demonstration, the mass of union men in Kobe—steel workers, printers, and others—turned out, and several hundred came down from Osaka—in all about 30,000 workers participating.

The procession stretched for miles and miles through the streets of Kobe, a long line of red flags, red union banners, and white banners inscribed with strike slogans. Under the broiling hot sun the men made a pace of about five miles an hour. The khaki overalls and jumpers of the shipyard men—though some of them had discarded this for their cooler “palm beach” suits—were soaked through with perspiration, but they never checked either their swift pace nor the words of the labor songs which they repeated again and again throughout the long march they had mapped out for themselves. Regular order, wonderful spirit—men marching on with all the courage and determination possible to humankind, under their great red banners, singing their songs of inspiration and joy—

Awake, workers of Japan,
Have done with old traditions . . .

or

Proud to be workers,
And demanding the reward of labor . . .
Labor is sacred . . .

and a dense crowd, high-strung, tense, packed the many miles of streets along which the marchers went, and offered encouragement and cheer, or themselves tried to join in the songs, or repeated the strike slogans inscribed on the banners, “Union,” “Justice,” “Solidarity.” It was not a mournful appeal for sympathy, not a maudlin whine “from the depths,” but a triumphal procession of men rising to a truer manhood and beginning to acquire a sense of their real strength, of their true mission in society, and marching onward to a future of which they could but dimly see the brilliance.

Perfect order prevailed in the Kawasaki plant next day. All the workers reported at the yard at their usual time, but no work whatever was performed, the eight hours being devoted to discussions and meetings, except for a part of the afternoon when several thousand decided on a public demonstration and went out in procession. Gradually their ideas were becoming clearer, and their immediate program more plainly defined. Stimulating also were some vague visions they had gained of “lands beyond the sea,” of Italian and other workers who had for a time at least succeeded in taking things into their own hands. Certainly the men couldn’t leave the plant—anyone who did so without special arrangements was a “scab.” Loafing around the hot yard was certainly tiresome, but to start work in the usual manner was unthinkable—they had something to fight for. But what was to prevent their resuming work in their own way, for their own benefit?

The directors, in the meantime, had steadily persisted in their statement that they could not discuss matters with the workers—or, rather, saboteurs—owing to the absence of the president of the company, Matsukata, in Europe. While he was away, they said, they could not take upon themselves the responsibility of making such changes as the men suggested, being really helpless under the circum-

stances. And from some of the strikers came the response: “Well, if they’re such helpless creatures, at least we are not. If they can’t run the works, we can. If they won’t take the responsibility of any changes till Matsukata gets back, we will.” And about this time Mr. Kagawa came into the game in earnest.

Mr. Toyohiko Kagawa is a Christian and a Socialist. Not the strangely ineffective creature we usually think of as a Christian Socialist, but a man who combines the spiritual beliefs of Christ and Tolstoy with the practical convictions of present-day guild socialism. He was educated in America—in Princeton University, I believe—but somehow retained his soul. Ten years ago, after his return to Japan, he settled down in the slum quarters in Kobe, one of those eccentric people who follow Christ to the uttermost disreputable degree. If a man wanted his cloak, he gave it to him. If a prostitute or a beggar-child was ill, he would watch over them night and day with the tenderness of a mother. If a poor half-demented product of slum degeneracy threatened him with violence for no reason whatever, he would argue with the man, or flee from him if necessary, but protect him if wanted by the police. When a genuine labor movement began to develop a few years ago he was one of the foremost organizers. He was becoming famous as a writer, both of social studies and of novels (touched with the inspiration of socialist idealism and Christian ethics), and now took up the costly work of editing a labor paper, the *Laborers’ News*, which reached thousands of workers in Kobe and vicinity. Though a non-resistant by conviction, he has no hesitation about advocating the most radical methods that can possibly be carried out without violence; at the same time he speaks to the general public in terms they understand, terms which sweep away every capitalist justification with its own defensive phrases. His own writings and personality are to a considerable extent responsible for the fact that the mass of middle-class people in Kobe are thoroughly sympathetic with labor, even when labor steps out toward things which are so far beyond middle-class vision that they cannot grasp the full revolutionary significance of them. And this was the position in the middle of July in Kobe.

The “supreme council” of the Kawasaki men consisted of delegates elected not by unions, but by departments, by the mass of the workers, whether affiliated with unions or not. Mr. Kagawa, though himself not a wage-earner strictly speaking, is fairly worshiped by many union men in Kobe, where the combination of high education and intelligence, practical sense and real vision is not very common, and labor meetings are open to him when they may be closed to everyone else not immediately involved in their business. It is stated that Mr. Kagawa was the man who appeared before the few-score men who made up the “supreme council” of the Kawasaki men, and submitted to them a definite plan for taking over control of the workshops. This is said to have been received with tremendous enthusiasm and unanimous approval. However that may be, on July 12 (Tuesday) there was a declaration in the hands of every worker actively participating in the Kawasaki struggle, which appears to show the literary finesse of Mr. Kagawa. His hand also seems to be evident in the intelligent and diplomatic manner in which the taking over of control is explained to the public, “that he who runs may read.” But let this document, a most remarkable one in its combination of respectable phraseology and revolutionary signifi-

cance, and perhaps indicating that militant labor is not compelled to use the language either of predaciousness or of metaphysics, speak for itself:

The Kawasaki Industrial Committee assumes control of the operations of the various workshops from (blank for date). We, as representatives of over 17,000 workers at the head and branch factories of the Kawasaki Shipbuilding Yard, presented to the management of the company demands consisting of seven counts, including the introduction of the factory committee system. To these demands Messrs. Nagatome and Yamamoto, directors of the company, refused to give a satisfactory answer, on the plea of the absence of the president.

We have never been prompted by a desire to put the industry of Japan in jeopardy. What we desire is that the company should recognize our personality and help in rendering our lives less difficult. If, however, we continue to strike as a counter-measure against the arrogant and insincere attitude which has been hitherto assumed by the company, it will only end in paralyzing the industry of Japan and in causing social unrest, and therefore we propose to do our work at our respective workshops, ourselves assuming control of all operations, until our demands are accepted.

THE METHODS OF CONTROL

1. The Industrial Committee shall control all the business.
2. All the clerks and other employees must attend to their respective duties as hitherto, under the direction of the Industrial Committee.
3. The company shall be made to pay wages to the workers at the same rates as hitherto.
4. The working hours shall be reduced from the present eight hours to six, but efforts will be made to do the same amount of work during this reduced working period. When, however, the Industrial Committee considers it expedient, this time will either be extended or further reduced.
5. Those who act in a manner disturbing the general peace of the various workshops and impairing the efficiency shall be referred to the Disciplinary Committee.

On the same day (July 12), admission tickets to the yard were issued by strike headquarters, committeemen were posted at the entrances to the yard, and none but ticket-holders were admitted. There were, however, a large number of uniformed policemen already in the grounds, as well as gendarmes, and a guard of marines was on the warships and submarines under construction. More gendarmes arrived in the course of the day from outside the city, while reserve police had already been called out to the number of several thousand.

The workers came to work at the usual time both on the 12th and 13th, but no work was begun, for detailed plans of operation and a method for overcoming the opposition of the armed forces had not yet been decided. The management made no attempt to parley further, but on the 14th a battalion of troops arrived, and the management felt that the armed forces were sufficient to cope with any ordinary contingencies. A ten-day lockout was now declared, and the works were closed. At the same time some rather remarkable notices were put up by naval officers, appealing to the workers "not to injure the battleships." Public demonstrations were prohibited by the authorities, as well as the singing of labor songs on the streets. Though the prohibition of demonstrations prevented the workers from massing their forces for a general march to the yard, a few hundred managed to get together near certain gates and attempted to make their way in, but the hundreds of police and gendarmes prevented this, and after a struggle the men were driven back and many arrested.

A public statement by the authorities, to the effect that the fact of 30,000 unemployed workmen on the streets necessitated the presence of large numbers of military and police to keep order, was immediately taken up by the locked-out men, and all ex-conscripts in their ranks—more than 4,000 in number—were called upon to wear their military uniform and undertake the duty of maintaining peace and order and help relieve the authorities of this onerous task. The latter, however, instead of welcoming this offer, displayed both apprehension and opposition. The organizers were officially requested to see to it that this plan was not carried out, but to this request no attention was paid, and 4,000 workers daily donned their old uniforms and took part in the activities of their fellow-workers. However, this was a tentative thing, and the workers were too well aware of their comparative weakness to provoke an armed conflict with the military forces of the Empire.

The Kawasaki management, partly in an endeavor to improve relations somewhat and partly to avoid the likelihood of violent reprisals later, had agreed to give half-pay for the period of lockout. So the men were free for a vacation, and even as they had quit work together, so they "vacationed" together. Demonstrations being prohibited, great athletic meetings, baseball matches, swimming matches, mountain hikes were arranged. At the same time preparations were made for the financing of the strike which appeared inevitable. Thousands of men went out on the streets daily as peddlers, taking in tens of thousands of yen, of which a part went to the sellers direct and a part to the general strike fund. One hundred and twenty-five more committeemen were dismissed by the Kawasaki management, with liberal discharge allowances, which they accepted.

The Mitsubishi yard, where there had been some rioting and destruction of property by the almost unorganized workers, had declared a lockout on July 12, two days before the Kawasaki plant. In the demonstrations and other meetings 10,000 Mitsubishi men swelled the workers' ranks, which were augmented from time to time by locked-out men from the Kobe Steel Foundry (some 3,000 workers) and the Formosan Sugar Company (less than 1,000 workers), where also the principles of the right to organize and the establishment of workers' shop committees were being sought, and "ca' canny" on the part of the men had been met with lockouts. In the meantime, a week's negotiations and a couple of days of "going slow" at the Kobe branch of the Dunlop Rubber Company had ended in the granting of the points mentioned to some 1,500 workers employed there.

Bertrand Russell arrived in Japan July 17, on his way to England via Canada, and was met in Kobe by a reception committee of about fifty shipyard workers with their great red banners, headed by Mr. Kagawa. Mr. Russell addressed a strike meeting the following evening (his speech being of course translated by another) and received a remarkable ovation. A great labor meeting was held in Osaka on the 19th, under the auspices of the General Federation of Labor (Yuai-Kai), and over 2,000 voices, husky with emotion, roared out the Japanese Socialist "Song of Revolution"—a song under the official ban, for the singing of which many men have in the past been imprisoned:

Ah, the revolution is approaching,

Ah, the revolution is approaching,—

Awake, ye children of poverty,

Awake, ye ragged children of the dirty streets. . . .

But all this enthusiasm, all this spirit, all this outburst of idealist fervor was powerless to gain the day for the shipyard workers. The lockout ended after ten days, but strict military control of the shipyards made it impossible for the Kawasaki workers to put their plan of industrial democracy into operation, and nothing was left for them but either strike or utter defeat. They chose the former alternative, as did also the Mitsubishi men at the expiration of their lockout. A few days later the foremen (who had participated in the struggle on the side of the workers) were by certain inducements brought over to the side of the management and succeeded in drawing a part of the workers back to the yards (from 15 to 30 per cent), although the almost total absence of certain important classes of labor prevented any real resumption of work.

Regular demonstrations being under the official ban, the idea was hit upon by the strikers of visiting shrines *en masse*, such "religious processions" being expressly free from police interference. On July 29, the second day of these processions, the paraders upon coming near the Kawasaki Dock turned down toward the yard and attempted to force their way in. The police, after a brief attempt to push back the men, drew their swords and attacked. A few of the men had impromptu weapons such as sticks or stones, but the great mass were wholly unarmed, and when the police charge came it was less than a minute before the men took flight. A few fought with desperate courage, grasping the swords with their naked hands, but the outcome was never in doubt, and the police pursued the fleeing men, cutting them down with mad fury as they overtook them. One man was mortally wounded, forty or fifty seriously, and over a hundred received minor cuts and gashes. Practically all the seriously wounded men were stabbed through the back, and a number of them had their fingers almost cut off. The mortally wounded man had had the policeman's sword driven clear through his back to the thorax until the point protruded on the other side. On the part of the police there were no casualties worth mentioning.

This affair was followed by wholesale arrests, some three hundred strike leaders being imprisoned, including the "militant pacifist" Mr. Kagawa, who had consistently counseled against violent methods. Strikers in the vicinity of the yards would be driven inside by the police, such labor meetings as were permitted were closely watched and many speakers stopped, and individual insults and threats were resorted to to break the spirit of the strikers, three-fourths of whom were standing solid. And while the Government appeared to be attempting to crush the strike by sheer terrorism, the companies were clearly determined to achieve this end by starvation. Distress was becoming more and more keenly felt among the strikers, and though public sympathy with the latter was rather increased than anything else, people were running short of money and could patronize the thousands of striker peddlers no longer—the last economic resource of the men.

With all the odds against them, however, the strikers remained so steadfast that attempts began to be made at mediation, both by the governor of the prefecture and the mayor of Kobe. These offers were finally rejected by the strikers on August 8, and immediately afterward they announced their intention of returning to work, making no terms whatever with their respective employers:

Our resolution to achieve our ends is unshaken. We shall

never lose sight of them. We are confident that with our (organized) power we shall be able to carry them out in the near future. Our movement is in accord with that (of labor) throughout the world, and justice is on our side.

What this means the writer is not prepared to say. The strike appears to be lost, but just what tricks the shipyard workers have up their sleeves no one but themselves knows, and only the future will make it clear. But 30,000 men in Kobe have gained the vision of labor control of industry, industrial democracy. They have heard the thing explained, have come to understand its possibilities, and know exactly what to expect from the authorities the next time. A hundred thousand organized workers throughout Japan have watched the struggle with tense interest, judging the possibilities for themselves in a struggle to take into their hands the reins of power and the control of their own destinies. These organized men are a still small minority of the Japanese workers. The mass of Japanese workers as yet do not possess the social vision, the sense of responsibility, and the administrative ability successfully to assume democratic industrial control, but the leaven is working, the ranks of organized labor are steadily growing, and a new day is dawning for Japanese labor. And through it all there runs the militant minority of enlightened workers, to whom their goal is ever coming clearer and closer—social, political, and industrial democracy, a new economic and social order in which labor shall be free.

Seventeen thousand men have made a step toward the thing itself, have attempted to establish their own democratic regime in the industries which they operate, and have found the things with which they must cope, and for which they must be fully prepared in their struggle. In this first battle for the new ideal the workers have met defeat, but this is not a struggle which is crushed by any number of defeats of this nature, and the words of Mr. Kagawa, before going to prison, may well be quoted:

The authorities . . . dispatched troops and organized a naval brigade, but if they think that by these means they can set restrictions on the awakening self-consciousness of the working classes they are greatly mistaken. . . .

. . . Through our unions we are gaining the experience, and the administrative and organizing ability, which will enable us to use our newly won freedom in the best interests of ourselves and the community. We will not stop until we have achieved industrial democracy, and the new serfdom has gone the way of the old.

Good Men

By JOHN HAYNES HOLMES

THERE were good men in David's town,
When Jesus climbed to Calvary's crown,

Good men who saw him seized and tried!
Good men who watched him while he died!

What said these good men on the street,
When they with neighbors chanced to meet?

What thought these good men, when the night
Curtained Jerusalem from sight?

What prayed these good men, when they trod
The Temple court, in quest of God?

Why . . . much the same as you and I,
Who now see *Debs* in prison lie!