Internationalizing Labor Relations: Japan, the ILO, and the Post-Versailles Order, 1919-1938

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Abstract

The International Labor Organization (ILO) was founded in 1919 at the Paris Peace Conference with the aim of promoting the universal improvement of working conditions via structured cooperation between the state, workers, and employers. Despite being primarily European in origins and memberships, one of the ILO’s most active members was Japan. Japan sent the largest delegation to the First International Labor Conference in 1919 and was the first country to establish a permanent office in Geneva to coordinate relations with the ILO. This thesis examines how Japan’s high-level of engagement with the ILO was both motivated and problematized by its ambiguous position in the interwar period. Following WWI, Japan emerged as a great power with a privileged position in the post-Versailles international order, but industrially had yet to achieve parity with its western peers. The result was tensions that could only be resolved in an international context. By participating in organizations like the ILO, even if their activities were irrelevant or even detrimental to its material interests, Japan could assert that it was a responsible and progressive leader in the international community and negotiate the ambiguities of its economic, political, and at times cultural circumstances. However, in attempting to articulate its relationship to a global order whose norms were largely outside of its control, Japan exposed itself to criticism from not only other nations, but also disenfranchised groups within its own borders, most notably labor unions. They could contest the state’s self-presentation with different readings of Japanese conditions that had different implications for domestic policy.
Acknowledgements

First, I would like to thank my first and second readers for tolerating the excessive length of my thesis and providing me with invaluable feedback. Professor Shin constantly pressed me to clarify and coherently structure my argument during the writing process. Professor Saler pushed me to improve my writing and was always willing to engage in thoughtful and critical discussions about my topic. I would also like to thank the Haverford History Department as a whole and Paul Smith in particular for fostering a deeper appreciation for historical research and its challenges. Lastly, I would also like to thank Margaret Schaus for helping me with the difficult task of finding sources in Japanese and navigating research in these unusual times.
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INTRODUCTION

The International Labor Organization (ILO) was established in 1919 as an affiliate of the League of Nations. It quickly became a central component of the post-war, Wilsonian order. Operating under the principle that state and non-state actors had a responsibility to cooperate in addressing economic and social problems, the ILO was conceived as an international mechanism for the gradual improvement of working conditions. At annual International Labor Conferences, it gathered representatives from the government, employers, and workers of participating countries to draft international labor conventions. While the members were not required to implement the conventions passed at these conferences, they were presented as standards to conform to.¹

Like its parent organization, the ILO was disproportionately European in its membership and focus.² However, one of the ILO’s most active participants in the 1920s and 1930s was Japan. Japan occupied a privileged position in the organization as a “State of Chief Industrial Importance” with permanent representation on the ILO’s governing body. It sent the largest delegations to the First International Labor Conference in 1919 and was the first to establish an office in Geneva to coordinate relations with the ILO.³ Moreover, both the Japanese government and Japanese labor movement invested in the ILO with unusual significance. For example, a

³ Partially the reason for this was the distance between Japan and the ILO in Geneva. For a first-hand account of the additional burdens distance imposed, see Nitobe Inazō, “The Organization and Activities of the League of Nations,” in Nitobe Inazo: From Bushido to the League of Nations, ed. Teruhiko Nagao (Sapporo: Graduate School of Letters, Hokkaido University, 2006): 33-34.
major demand of Japan's largest labor federation, the Nihon Rōdō Sodōmei, was the right to appoint the worker’s delegate to the International Labor Organization.

My thesis will examine the pre-war relationship between Japan and the ILO with a focus on how key actors in the Japanese labor movement and government understood the stakes of Japan’s membership in the ILO. How did Japan’s ambiguous status as simultaneously a great power and a still developing, Oriental country shape its relationship with the ILO? What new avenues did the ILO as a space where both state and non-state actors could meet in a global setting provide for Japan’s infant labor movement? To what extent did the ILO represent the awakening of a newfound global and social consciousness in Japan post-WWI, especially among workers, and how did Japanese understand the treatment of domestic issues as international problems inherent in the ILO’s purpose and structure? Finally, how did the answers to these questions change in the early 1930s as Japan transitioned from a liberal democratic state to an increasingly aggressive and isolated imperial hegemon?

Historiography

The existing historiography has failed to substantively examine these issues. There are only three works in English centered on Japan’s participation in the ILO. The first is Ayusawa Iwao’s 1966 *A History of Labor in Modern Japan*, which provides the most extensive account of the subject currently available. However, as a work of scholarship, it has serious limitations. Written from the perspective of someone who worked for the ILO, Ayusawa is primarily concerned with proving the ILO’s positive influence on Japan’s pre-war labor movement and social policy. He discusses the growth in union membership and the enactment of protection as
workers as significant accomplishments of the ILO’s in Japan, but only lightly touches on the tensions that manifested in Japan’s relationship with the organization. Moreover, Ayusawa was an expert on labor policy, not a historian, and as a result, the evidence he uses is primarily statistical.4

The second is Ehud Harari’s 1973 monograph, *The Politics of Labor Legislation in Japan: National-International Legislation*. Although an extensive account of the political dynamics of Japan’s relationship with the ILO, the book focuses primarily on the post-war era. Only in its first chapter does Harari examine Japan’s pre-war relationship with the organization, and even then his account is cursory and aimed at contextualizing the main event he analyzes in the rest of the book: a protest lodged by Japanese unions to the ILO in 1957 that took eight years to resolve.5

Lastly, the third, most recent, piece of scholarship on Japan participation in the ILO is a 2018 article in *Social Science Japan* by Bernard Thomann titled “Labor Issues as International Affairs: Japan and the International Labor Organization from 1919 to 1938.” Thomann surveys Japan’s pre-war history with the ILO, starting with the Washington Conference in 1919 and ending with Japan’s withdrawal from the organization in 1938.6 While his research is extensive and relies on diverse types of evidence, Bernard confines himself to a factual account of Japan’s history with the ILO. He almost exclusively describes major incidents like the ILO Director Albert Thomas’s visit to Japan in 1928 and only asserts the importance of the ILO to Japan’s pre-war history in general terms. For example, in his introduction, Bernard claims the ILO forced the government to commit to a policy of encouraging either “cheap, submissive labor or

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collective bargaining, better working conditions and higher productivity,” but does not expand on this idea in the rest of the article.\(^7\)

In addition to these three works, other studies examine Japan’s relationship with the ILO in the context of Japan’s domestic labor movement or post-WWI internationalism. Sheldon Garon’s 1987 book, *The State and Labor in Modern Japan*, analyzes the appointment of the workers’ delegate to the International Labor Conferences as a key issue in the state’s labor policy in the early 1920s. Similarly, Thomas Burkman’s 2007 monograph on Japan and the League of Nations discusses ILO while surveying Japan’s engagement with the League’s affiliate organizations.\(^8\) In these accounts, however, the ILO emerges as only a peripheral issue touched on only briefly. Furthermore, by operating through the lens of either Japanese industrial policy or Japanese internationalism, neither work is capable of addressing how the two interacted and overlapped in Japan’s relationship with the ILO.

In short, the existing historiography on Japan’s pre-war relationship with the ILO is limited and lacking a critical perspective. In general, scholars recognize the significance of the ILO to Japan’s labor and diplomatic history, but no one has yet attempted to examine that significance. Why did the ILO have such an impact on Japan’s industrial policy and labor movement? By what mechanisms did the ILO intervene in Japanese society? What meaning did the state, labor, and employer’s attach to the ILO and how did they attempt to use it to advance their own interests? The literature so far has only hinted at answers to these questions. In this thesis, I will address them head on. Moving past chronicling of Japan’s history with the ILO.

\(^{7}\) Ibid., 330.

organization or viewing it through the narrow lens of industrial legislation or the post-war international order, this thesis will synthesize sources from both Japan and the ILO to provide a fuller and more critical understanding of Japan’s participation in the ILO between 1919-1938. Specifically, I will focus on two aspects of Japan’s relationship with the organization that have been neglected by the current scholarship. The first is the economic and political circumstances contextualizing Japan’s participation in the ILO. What were the stakes of its ILO membership, and how did Japan’s specific position in the interwar order condition those stakes? The second is the implications of the ILO’s tripartite structure. The ILO was unique in being an organization that included representatives from workers’ and employers’ delegates of member countries. What strategic possibilities did that provide for the Japanese and global labor movements and how did the conflicts produced by the competing interests of delegates to International Labor Conference in response to domestic and international developments?

Such a study will allow us to think critically about the role of Wilsonian internationalism in the liberalization and subsequent militarization of interwar Japanese society. According to most scholarly interpretations, interwar Japan can be divided into two contrasting periods. Japan in the 1920s was defined by so-called “Taisho Democracy.” During this period, inspired by anti-bureaucratic protest movements at home and Wilsonian internationalism abroad, Japan transitioned from an oligarchic state under the leadership of select bureaucrats and military officers to a parliamentary democracy. Along with this process of democratization came a flourishing liberal society, marked by the growth of the labor movement, enthusiastic internationalism, and “peaceful expansion” in Asia.\(^9\) By contrast, scholars characterize the 1930s

as a period of rising Japanese nationalism and militarism. Following the Manchurian Incident in 1931 and the assassination of Prime Minister Inukai Tsuyoshi a year later, the liberal democratic society of the 20s was replaced by a repressive, nativist state with ambitions of imperial hegemony. Studies on this period have focused primarily on the rise of Japanese “fascism”,\(^\text{10}\) the dominance of military thinking over policymaking, and the intensification of Japanese penetration of the Asian mainland.\(^\text{11}\) As regards to the labor movement specifically, the scholarly consensus argues it became increasingly irrelevant as the decade progressed. A combination of rising nationalism, anti-communist measures, and the creation of so-called “patriotic unions” forced most left-wing unions to tow the state line until they were eventually dissolved and assimilated into Konoe Fumimaro’s fascistic New Order in 1941.\(^\text{12}\)

Within this paradigm, the ILO, as an international organization focusing on the promotion of free labor, is associated with the liberal trends of the 1920s. A study of Japan’s engagement with the ILO will help elucidate the central dynamics of Taisho Democracy. In particular, Japan’s relationship with the ILO reveals how interactions between international and domestic actors shaped this era of Japanese history. Scholars already recognize Wilsonian internationalism’s role in inspiring and legitimating Japanese democratic thought.\(^\text{13}\) However, in most accounts, the

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\(^{11}\) For example, see Michael A. Burkman, Japan Prepares for Total War: The Search for Economic Security, 1919-1941 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), Takashi Fujitani, Race for Empire: Koreans as Japanese and Japanese as Americans During WWII (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), and Louise Young, Japan’s Total Empire: Manchuria and the Culture of Wartime of Imperialism (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).


\(^{13}\) For example, see Dickinson, World War I and the Triumph of a New Japan.
post-Versailles world order emerges only as a semi-abstract “world trend” which while important in influencing Japanese society, did never concretely intervened in it. In part, this is due to scholarly attention focusing on the League as the centerpiece of that order. Until the Manchurian Incident, membership in the League indeed carried few practical consequences for Japan. By contrast, for two reasons, the ILO had a much more direct, and often neglected, role in shaping interwar Japan, particularly in the sphere of labor relations. First, unlike the League, the ILO dealt with problems of immediate relevance to Japan. The League was primarily a European organization and its activities reflected that. Until the Japanese take-over of Manchuria in 1931, no conflict involving Japan was brought to the League for mediation. By contrast, the ILO’s focus on standardizing international labor legislation was not only directly relevant to Japan’s economic and industrial policy but had the potential of making Japan a target of the organization’s regulatory activities. Second, the ILO included representatives from non-state organizations. The place given to labor unions was particularly significant. For the still infant Japanese labor movement, which unlike its western counterparts had little experience on the international stage, the ILO became an unprecedented platform for bringing Japanese labor’s demands to the world’s attention.

In addition to complicating the influence of Wilsonian internationalism on 1920s Japan, Japan’s history with the ILO also questions the predominant understanding of the 1930s. In recent years, several scholars have begun challenging the conventional view of the 1930s as a period of militant isolationism by examining the continuities in Japanese internationalist thought from the 1920s on through the war. Often they frame such continuities in terms of a shift from

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14 See Burkman, *Japan and the League of Nations*.
15 See, Jessamyn R Abel, *The International Minimum: Creativity and Contradiction in Japan’s Global Engagement, 1933-1964* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015). Abel attempts to draw a line of continuity in Japan’s internationalist thinking from the 1920s, through the war, and into the post-war years, arguing during this trans-war period Japanese leaders were expected to conform to a “minimum” of internationalist rhetoric. Also see Burkman, *Japan and the League of Nations*, 2013 and Takami Akami, *Internationalizing the Pacific: The United States, Japan*
global to regional visions of international cooperation. Within this argument, the ILO occupies an unusual place. While Japan left its parent organization, the League of Nations, in 1933, it remained in the ILO until 1938. During this period, Japanese participation in the ILO did not diminish. In fact, in certain aspects it intensified as the global crisis of the Great Depression heightened the need for international economic cooperation. By studying this 5-year period and how Japanese participation in the ILO was conceptualized post-League, I will examine the persistence and evolution of Wilsonian internationalism, as a global and not just regional internationalism, in the lead-up to WWII.

However, a study of Japan’s history with the ILO also reveals the broader importance of considering international organizations when thinking about global connections. As historians have become increasingly international and transnational in focus, they have paid more attention to the role of both governmental and non-governmental international organizations in shaping the modern world.16 The ILO is a unique example of such an organization. As an interstate organization that includes non-state representatives, the ILO stands at the intersection of national, international, and transnational histories. The existing historiography of the ILO itself, has failed to capture the complexities this entailed. Institutional histories of the organization or studies of its impact on labor legislation dominate the historiography, providing only a limited perspective on what was a multi-faceted organization.17 It was simultaneously an institution that recognized the universal character of labor rights and social justice and was capable of independent intervention in questions of internal policy, a space where nation and class-based economic interests came into conflict, where international forms of solidarity, along class and at

times cultural lines, formed and attempted to exert influence on a global scale, and an arena
where otherwise domestic conflicts were played out before a world audience. Although limited
in my focus on Japan specifically, I hope that this thesis will shed light on the dynamics of the
ILO as an institution where such tensions and interactions emerged outside of a purely national
or diplomatic context.

The Ambiguities of Japanese Empire

This thesis will combine a variety of evidence, including the minutes of International
Labor Conferences, newspaper articles, and government reports to uncover the dynamics of
Japan’s participation in the ILO prior to WWII. I will argue that Japan’s unique and ambiguous
position in the interwar international order shaped its relationship with the organization by
forcing Japan to negotiate the dissonance between its formal status as a great power and its still
developing industrial economy. Following WWI, Japan emerged as a great power on par with the
Western empires on the basis of its military and imperial might. It occupied a privileged position
at the Paris Peace Conference as one of the Five Big Powers, a position that extended to both the
League and the ILO. It was one of the few countries with permanent representation on the
governing bodies of both organizations. However, despite its equality with the Western powers
on an institutional and military level, it had yet to fully mature industrially. While WWI marked
a dramatic expansion of the Japanese economy, in terms of industrial output, unionization rates,
and labor legislation, Japan was still a far cry from Britain or France. In 1921 for example,
Japanese unions claimed only 103,447 members.18 In Britain that number was 6.6 million.19

and Labor in Modern Japan,
Indeed, even after a 50% increase in the labor force during the war, in 1919, there were only 1,391,000 workers employed in factories with more than 10 employees in all of Japan. Of those, a majority were female textile workers. Japan’s labor legislation was similarly underdeveloped. By 1919, the Diet had only one significant piece of legislation, the 1912 Factory Act, which would not be fully implemented in 1926 and only applied to children and women.

The contradiction between Japan’s status and its economic reality made its relationship with the ILO particularly contentious. On one hand, as a leading member of the organization, Japan was expected to take concrete steps in implementing its values, but the government was often unable or unwilling to do so. To the state, which treated unions as de facto illegal and had passed only one significant piece of labor legislation by 1919, rapidly implementing the right of association or conventions like an 8-hour workday was beyond the pale. On the other, if one of the ILO’s functions was the international standardization of labor legislation, Japan was a natural target of its activities. It was industrialized enough to be internationally competitive but had poor enough working conditions that other countries could perceive that competitiveness as unfair and demanding redress. The result was that Japan was uniquely vulnerable to criticism, from not only its own labor movement using International Labor Conferences to press their demands, but also from other countries. Both could point out Japan’s failure to live up to the ILO’s spirit or the international threat posed by its poor working conditions to pressure the government to adopt policies it otherwise would refuse to implement.

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21 Ibid., 28-29.

22 Again, the transitionary nature of the Japanese economy here is key. Had Japan been a fully developed industrial power like Britain with already mature labor legislation, there would have been little to criticize. At the same time, had it been a country of low international standing with minimal industry, such as China, few would perceive it as a commercial threat or as having an obligation to live up to ILO standards. Indeed, China was consistently as bad or worse than Japan on questions of industrial policy, not even sending a workers’ delegation to International Labor Conferences, but was the subject of little controversy.
This vulnerability manifested in two controversies, reflecting the ILO’s dual character as a tripartite organization where different class interests came into conflict and an interstate organization gathering national representatives. The first was over the appointment of the workers’ representative to International Labor Conferences. According to the ILO Constitution, workers’ representatives were chosen in consultation with the “most representative” labor organization in each country. Starting in 1919, however, the government instead appointed the Japanese labor representative through an election of all workers, unionized or not. This drew widespread criticism at International Labor Conferences, where workers’ delegations claimed Japan’s selection method hindered the development of independent unions and conflicted with the ILO’s commitment to free labor. The second controversy was over Japanese exemptions from and refusal to implement ILO Conventions. Although the rate of implementation for ILO Conventions was universally low, due to the comparatively poor state of Japanese labor conditions, Japan emerged as a focal point of criticism at International Labor Conferences for its perceived failure to adopt rigorous social legislation. Such a failure not only represented Japan’s failure to live up to its great power status, Japan’s critics argued, but posed a threat to labor conditions internationally.

In the following sections, this thesis will examine these two controversies, starting at the Washington Conference of 1919 and continuing to Japan’s exit from the ILO in 1938. Specifically, I will demonstrate that both controversies had important, albeit different, consequences for Japan. The right to appoint the Japanese workers’ delegate became a major demand of the Japanese labor movement. Still immature and facing legal repression from the state, for major Japanese unions, the right to elect the workers’ representative to the International Labor Conference promised de facto recognition of the right to organize. Unions repeatedly
lobbied the ILO to pressure the government to change its selection method in the early 1920s. The ILO’s willingness to actually exert such pressure was a deciding influence on the internal political development of the Japanese labor movement. Its initial failure to meaningfully censure Japan discredited reformism and encouraged the movement’s radical turn following the war, while its eventual firm stance towards the government pulled labor back to moderation. By contrast, the issue of Japanese failure to implement ILO conventions carried fewer domestic implications. Instead, at stake in the ensuing debates over Japan’s labor conditions was its reputation as an industrial power. Maintaining this reputation became a critical concern during the Great Depression when Japan faced rising economic nationalism in part justified by accusations that its poor working conditions gave Japan an unfair competitive advantage. Under such circumstances, defending Japanese labor legislation at International Labor Conferences assumed a direct relevance to Japan’s commercial success.
The Paris Peace Conference opened on January 18th, 1919. In attendance were representatives from across the world, gathered to negotiate the end to the then largest war in history. The task that awaited them was monumental in scope. Not only did they have to reckon with the wars’ immediate effects, including the disintegration of multiple empires and the transfer of territory on a global scale, but they also set out to establish a lasting framework for peace. The story of how the conference, guided by a sense of idealistic internationalism most famously articulated in President Wilson’s Fourteen Points, created the League of Nations as the centerpiece of a new international system based on interstate organizations and open diplomacy is well known. Less well known are the other new institutions produced at Versailles as subsidiary components of that new world order. Among them was the International Labor Organization (ILO).

When the Japanese delegation finally arrived in Paris after an arduous two-month journey, the prospect of an international organization dedicated to the resolution of social problems was far from the forefront of its concerns. Its first priority was the formal acquisition of the German territories in the South Pacific and Shandong peninsula it had captured during the war. The question of the League itself was ultimately subordinate to that objective. Even lower amongst the delegation’s considerations was the ILO. Unlike in the West, which had a comparatively more developed trade union movement and extensive existing industrial regulations, Japan’s labor movement and social policy were still in their infancy. As a result, the

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government had little interest in the ILO except as a potential risk to Japanese autonomy, if not a particularly serious one.

Nonetheless, Japan decided to participate in ILO just as it participated in the League. It would soon come to learn the consequences of that participation. While Japan was invisible at the Commission on International Labor Legislation when the ILO’s Constitution was being hammered out, it assumed center stage at the First International Labor Conference held in Washington in late 1919. As an industrially developed country with underdeveloped labor legislation, Japan was a natural target for the ILO’s activities. It immediately became a focus of criticism from workers’ representatives from Europe hoping to standardize industrial conditions internationally. In this section, I will examine Japan’s participation in both conferences with the aim of establishing first why and how it joined the ILO at Versailles, and second what controversies resulted from that decision at Washington.

The Creation of the ILO

If the League of Nations was a response to the horrors of a global military conflict, the ILO arose from the difficulties of managing a home front during a time of total war. The smooth operation of the wartime economy required unprecedented cooperation between the state, unions, and employers, creating new institutional linkages for the resolution of labor disputes. The result was a growing recognition on the part of national governments of the value in partnering with unions and the acceleration of moderate reformism among left-wing workers’

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organizations.\textsuperscript{25} At the same time, despite the promise of leaders in the labor movement to refrain from striking during the war, labor militancy rose as the war progressed. 1917 and 1918 saw a significant rise in both union membership and industrial disputes in Britain and France. The armistice, and the consequent demobilization of millions of soldiers, did little to quell these tensions.\textsuperscript{26} The rising threat of working-class agitation was made even more salient by the Russian Revolution and the specter of international communism it evoked. Class-based revolution was no longer just a theoretical possibility, but a practical reality. It demanded a response from both capitalist governments and moderate trade unions fearful of the growing challenge posed by domestic communist parties.\textsuperscript{27}

This combination of the need for an institutional framework that could address the demands of militant workers increasingly disposed to revolution and the existence of a model for such a framework in wartime cooperative arrangements was the foundation on which the ILO was built. The initial impetus for the organization came from non-state actors. One was the International Association for Labour Legislation (IALL). Founded in 1900, the association was composed of academics specializing in social and labor policy who sought to use their expertise to conduct research on and promote new ideas about labor regulations. As an international organization concerned with labor legislation with annual conferences, an International Labour Office, and even state funding, the (IALL) was in many ways a precursor to the ILO.\textsuperscript{28} The

\textsuperscript{25} For example, the first Director-General of the ILO was Albert Thomas, a French socialist leader who participated in the “sacred union” that brought management and unions together to support the war. According to Thomas, it was this type of cooperation that laid the foundation for the ILO. It forced the government to commit to improving the conditions of wage-earners and convinced many workers of the need for “legal protections” from the state Cabanes, Bruno, \textit{The Great War and the Origins of Humanitarianism, 1918-1924} (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014): 77-79.
\textsuperscript{26} Gary Rodgers, Eddy Lee, Lee Swepton, and Jasmin Van Daele, \textit{The ILO and the Quest for Social Justice, 1919-2009} (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009): 5. For example, during the Paris Peace Conference French Prime Minister Clemenceau moved additional troops into Paris out of fear of left-wing agitation.
\textsuperscript{27} Steiner, \textit{The Lights that Failed}, 4-5.
Second Socialist International was another. Although fatally wounded by national divisions that emerged during the war, leaders in the International assembled in Berne in February, 1919 to discuss the then ongoing Versailles Conference.29 There, they proposed that the Conference compose a labor charter guaranteeing certain rights like an 8-hour workday and freedom of association. They further called for a commission, composed of government and worker representatives, be created to carry out the charter and annual conferences empowered to “adopt binding resolutions” to standardized international labor conditions.30 This proposal contained many of the elements of the future ILO.

Leaders of both organizations would come together with government representatives at the Commission on International Labor Legislation at the Versailles. There, under the chairmanship of Samuel Gompers, President and founder of the American Federation of Labor, they drafted the constitution of the ILO.31 The organization the Commission eventually agreed upon was unique, then as now. Just as the Commission itself included both state and non-state actors, the ILO operated according to a tripartite system, with representatives from the government, labor movements, and business organizations of constituent countries. Tripartism was most visible in the annual International Labour Conference. Along with the Governing Body and the International Labour Office, the International Labour Conference constituted one of the ILO’s three core institutions. During these Conferences, four delegates from each participating country, two for the government, one for workers, and one for employers, met to discuss and draft international labor conventions. While members had no legal obligation to implement conventions passed by the conferences, they were required to bring them “before the authority or

31 Ibid., 448-450.
authorities within whose competence the matter lies, for the enactment of legislation or other action.”

In theory, conventions set international labor standards which, when adopted, would universally raise working conditions. This would provide a means for moderate reformism via institutional cooperation between the state, workers, and employers as an alternative to the communist vision of class-based revolution. The constitution’s preamble made clear the need for a specifically global structure. On one hand, it recognized that due to the impact of labor standards on the competitiveness of industrial products, “the failure of any nation to adopt humane conditions of labor is an obstacle in the way of other nations which desire to improve the conditions in their own countries.” Putting it more cynically, for western European powers like Britain and France who had by global standards unusually strong labor movements and rigorous social legislation, differences in working conditions across countries generally worked to their commercial disadvantage. Establishing an organization aimed at the international standardization of labor legislation thus served their economic interest. On the other hand, the ILO was envisioned as essential to the League’s mission of promoting world peace. The very first words of the constitution’s preamble read: “Whereas the League of Nations has for its object the establishment of universal peace, and such a peace can be established only if it is based on social justice.” “Social justice” was defined as including the improvement of working conditions, “the regulation of the hours of work,” and the “principle of freedom of association” among other ILO values.

33 Ibid., 1174.
Japan and the Paris Peace Conference

During these proceedings, Japan played a minimal role. Despite being one of the big five powers at the conference, the Japanese government was little prepared for and little interested in lofty designs for world peace. Its primary concern was securing the German Pacific territories it acquired during the war and quelling Chinese protests over its occupation of the Shandong peninsula.\(^{34}\) It only proposed one major provision to the League of Nations Covenant, a clause guaranteeing racial equality, which was rejected.\(^{35}\) It was even less relevant at the Commission on International Labour Legislation.

Japan’s wartime experience and industrial conditions were fundamentally different from those of the other great powers. Its involvement in the war had been limited to comparatively minor actions over Germany’s Asian and Pacific territories, meaning it never transitioned to a wartime economy.\(^{36}\) Instead, the Japanese economy experienced an unprecedented boom as the withdrawal of western manufactures provided new commercial opportunities. Exports almost quadrupled, textile production tripled, and for the first time Japan became a creditor rather than a debtor nation.\(^{37}\) Meanwhile, Japan’s labor movement was just emerging. The largest labor federation, the Yūaikai, claimed only around 30,000 members and did not actively promote strikes. Large-scale disturbances such as the 1918 Rice Riots did occur towards the end of the

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\(^{36}\) As explained in Dickinson, *World War I and the Triumph of a New Japan*, 16-18, the costs of war were “negligible” in Japan. With the war dead only slightly above 2000, some Japanese in rural Shikoku were apparently unaware that the war continued after Japan’s capture of Tsingtao in 1914.

\(^{37}\) Ibid., 21.
war and continued as economic expansion turned into a period of high inflation, but unions were only beginning to take a role in leading industrial action.\textsuperscript{38}

The government’s primary concern was thus not whether the ILO could help manage its domestic unrest, but rather its ability to interfere in questions of internal policy.\textsuperscript{39} This is evident in the limited contributions made by the Japanese representative, Ochiai Kentarō, to the Commission. While reluctant to speak, often citing a lack of instructions from his government, the few times Ochiai did it was to express doubts about the ILO. He, for example, questioned how “a State would be able to take measures to safeguard its national interests” if committed to “guarantee” freedom of association, to which Gompers reportedly replied by explaining “the general evolution of Trade Union liberty in Europe.”\textsuperscript{40} Ochiai further protested the requirement that Conventions be brought up for consideration by the Imperial Diet was incompatible with the Japanese Constitution, and claimed that while the “Government and people of Japan were very much concerned with labor questions,” due to differing conditions, adopting labor standards set by advanced western countries “would be contrary not only to the interests of industry, but also to those of the workers themselves in Japan.” He ultimately proposed in light of these considerations that Japan be allowed special exemptions.\textsuperscript{41}

Despite its lack of interest in the institution, however, Japan would ultimately join the ILO. In part, it had no choice. The ILO was a subsidiary organization of the League of Nations

\textsuperscript{38} Gordon, \textit{Labor and Imperial Democracy in Prewar Japan}, 155-171. In Tokyo’s Nankatsu district, labor disputes were negligible during the war, and only began to increase in 1919.
\textsuperscript{39} See Burkman, \textit{Japan and the League of Nations}, 87-91.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 52-53.
and all members of the League were automatically members of the ILO. As a result, the question of the ILO could not be disentangled from the question of the League.

Owing to lingering controversy within the government over the League, the Japanese delegation’s initial stance on the League was ambiguous: it refused to commit either way as to whether it would join. It quickly became clear that this tactic was unproductive. Recognizing that the creation of the League was inevitable and that refusing to join it could leave Japan diplomatically isolated, Japan’s representatives, led by Baron Makino Nobuaki (1861-1949), dropped their objections to the organization early in the conference. Instead, delegates adopted a course of modifying the League’s Covenant to prevent conflicts with Japan’s national interest and leveraging membership in the League to further their primary goal: the acquisition of German territories. Once that had been decided, the question of whether to join the ILO became a non-issue. If Japan was going to participate in the new international order centered on the League of Nations, it had no choice but to also participate in the subsidiary organizations of that system. Consequently, while Ochiai’s indicate an uncertainty about the ILO, they do not imply a refusal to participate in it. Instead, Japan adopted the same course of action it did regarding the League: modifying it to be more in line with Japanese interests. Ochiai’s only concrete request at the Commission on International Labor Legislation was that Japan be allowed exemptions from international labor conventions, a request eventually granted in the ILO constitution’s special countries clause.

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42 For example, article 387 of the Treaty of Versailles reads: “The original Members of the League of Nations shall be the original Members of [the ILO], and hereafter membership of the League of Nations shall carry with it membership of the said organisation.” Treaty of Peace with Germany, 1187.
43 For a discussion of internal governmental debates on the question, see Burkman, Japan and the League of Nations, 43-59.
44 Ibid., 60-80. For example, the Japanese delegation focused on weakening disarmament provisions and leveraged membership in the League to quell Chinese protests over Japanese acquisition of Germany’s Shandong Leasehold.
45 This clause, contained in Article 405 of the Treaty of Versailles reads “In framing any recommendation or draft convention of general application the Conference shall have due regard to those countries in which climatic conditions, the imperfect development of industrial organisation or other special circumstances make the industrial
Of course, participating in the League of Nations and the ILO also had a clear benefit to Japan’s international standing. Japan acquired unprecedented privileges at Versailles as one of the big five powers, and its deferential treatment extended to the League. It was one of only four countries with a permanent seat on the League’s Council, along with Britain, France, and Italy. It was similarly named one of the “Eight States of Chief Industrial Importance,” a status that gave Japan the right to appoint representatives of the ILO’s Governing Body. For a country that had spent decades attempting to revise Unequal Treaties between itself and the Western powers, to be treated not only on an equal footing with the West but as a leader in the international community was the culmination of Japan’s drive to great power status. That the government valued its institutional privileges is evident in diplomats’ anxiety about maintaining it. According to one time Foreign Minister Satō Naotake (1882-1971), when required to submit industrial figures substantiating Japan’s position as a State of Chief Industrial Importance, the Japan Office of the ILO in Geneva would occasionally inflate the statistics. The official in charge of the task, Kichisaka Shunzō, was reportedly so stressed by it that it made “his hair rapidly turn white.”

Whatever Japan’s reservations about the ILO then, the incentives to join the organization far exceeded the risks. By participating in the ILO, and its parent organization the League of Nations, Japan became a leader in the new international order created at Versailles. Compared to the dangers of becoming diplomatically isolated by staying outside of it, something Japan unlike the much wealthier and powerful United States could ill afford, the potential of the ILO to interfere in matters of domestic policy was a minor concern. To an extent, the government indeed

conditions substantially different and shall suggest the modifications, if any, which it considers may be required to meet the case of such countries.” Treaty of Peace with Germany, 1190.

46“The Appointment of the Governing Body of the International Labour Office: The Eight States of Chief Industrial Importance,” International Labour Office: Official Bulletin 3 (April 1919-August 1920): 451-457. The eight states were chosen by industrial statistics and were, in order of prominence, the US, Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Belgium, Japan, Switzerland, and Spain.

47Burkman, Japan and the League of Nations, 145.
had little to worry about; the ILO had practically no power to enforce the adoption of its conventions by member states. However, ILO membership still had its consequences. Whatever its initial expectations, by joining the ILO, the government had committed itself to the organization’s vision of moderate social reform via cooperation with organized labor. As the state soon realized, that commitment came with certain obligations it could not simply ignore.

The Washington Conference

The consequences of joining the ILO became apparent only a few months after the signing of the Treaty of Versailles at the First International Labor Conference, also known as the Washington Conference. Held in November of 1919, before the first meeting of the League of Nations, the Washington Conference was one of the first test cases for the new international order created at Versailles. Japan sent the largest delegation to the Conference and unexpectedly also became central to several debates that emerged over the course of it.

Officially, the conference’s mandate was to discuss a number of proposed conventions regulating industrial conditions, the most important of which would establish an 8-hour workday/48-hour workweek. Unofficially, delegates used the Washington Conference to conduct another debate. Being the first meeting of the International Labor Conference, the scope of its powers and influence remained undetermined. Were conventions passed by the International Labor Conferences templates for member countries to codify as domestic policy at their own discretion, or were Conferences arenas where the global community could pressure states that failed to live up to international expectations?
Within this conflict, Japan assumed an unforeseen importance. As simultaneously one of the great powers and a still developing country, Japan occupied a unique and vulnerable position at the Conference. Citing the immaturity of its industries, the Japanese government repeatedly requested exemptions from certain ILO provisions. While such exemptions were allowed for in the ILO Constitution, as one of the “Eight States of Chief Industrial Importance,” Japan’s claim to them was questionable. In response, workers delegates from across the world focused on the Japanese government in particular as an object of criticism. Pointing out the dissonance between its great power status and its repeated insistence on its industrial immaturity, representatives sought to use the conference to force Japan to conform to the international labor standards set by its western peers. Such efforts in turn exposed a core tension in the ILO itself, and by extension all interstate organizations. One of the goals of the ILO was the international equalization of working conditions, making Japan, an industrialized country with near nonexistent labor legislation, the natural target of its activities. However, Japan was also a sovereign state and a great power. Consequently, Japan forced the Conference to consider the tensions between its need to achieve meaningful gains with its hesitancy, and inability, to force member states to adopt specific policies.

Two issues in particular arose over the course of the conference, both centered on Japan. The first was over the question of the appointment of the Japanese workers’ representative. According to Article 389 of the Labor Section of the Peace Treaty, non-government delegates had to be “chosen in agreement with the industrial organizations, if such organizations exist, that are most representative of employers or workpeople.” In Japan, the only organization that could claim the status of being “most representative” of workers was the Yūaikai, or Friendly Society. Founded by Suzuki Bunji (1885-1946), a Christian socialist intellectual and friend of Samuel Ayusawa, *A History of Labor In Modern Japan*, 121-122.
Gompers in 1912, the Yūaikai began as a moderate labor organization devoted to self-help that gradually assumed a role in mediating labor disputes. Suzuki claimed that as the leader of the Yūaikai, he should be appointed as the workers’ delegate to the Washington Conference. The government disagreed. Claiming, as an organization of only 30,000 workers, the Yūaikai was too small to be considered truly representative, it instead selected the workers’ delegate through a multi-stage election including all industrial laborers, union and non-union. The delegate selected was Masumoto Uhei, a highly paid chief engineer of the Kawasaki Shipyards not associated with a national labor federation.\textsuperscript{49}

The Yūaikai refused to accept defeat. It took its cause to the Washington Conference where it was supported by labor delegations from around the world. In addition to the formal protest lodged by the Yūaikai to the Committee on Credentials, workers’ delegates, specifically those delegates who were also members of the International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU),\textsuperscript{50} unanimously denounced Japan’s method of electing its workers’ representative. The workers’ delegate from Belgium and prominent member of the IFTU, Corneille Mertens (1880-1951), voiced workers’ objections on the Conference floor. He explained that while workers’ did not reject Masumoto’s admission to the Conference, they did reject his legitimacy as a representative of Japanese workers. Japan’s refusal to appoint a union official to the position, Mertens claimed, demonstrated Japan’s opposition to the right of workers to organize themselves. Not only did opposition prevent the improvement of working conditions, but it was also “contrary to democratic ideas and in opposition to the fundamental spirit of the International Labor Conference.” In light of the circumstances, he urged “that the conference make

\textsuperscript{49}Ibid., 123. Also see Dorothy Sue Cobble, “Who Speaks for Workers? Japan and the 1919 ILO Debates Over Rights and Labor Standards,”\textit{International Labor and Working Class History} no. 87 (Spring 2015): 217-220.

\textsuperscript{50}ITFU was deeply concerned with using the Washington Conference as a mechanism to expand its own influence and was responsible for the election of the ILO’s first Director, Albert Thomas, who was closely aligned with the organization. See Tosstorff, “The International Trade-Union Movement and the Founding of the International Labour Organization,” 425-433.
representation to the Japanese government, so that in Japan, as in all countries forming a part of the League of Nations, the unrestricted exercise of the right of organization should be scrupulously acknowledged and respected.”

Mertens’ objection reveals that the point at issue was not whether Masumoto adequately represented the interests of Japanese workers, but whether the Japanese government respected workers’ right to organize. As an actual delegate, Masumoto was hardly a puppet of the state. In his opening statement, he launched a particularly dramatic denunciation of labor conditions in Japan. Beginning his speech, he stood up, pointed to the Rising Sun flag in front of the Japanese delegation, and announced: “this flag represents several million workers unjustly treated by autocracy, an enemy of social justice.” The appointment of the workers’ delegate to the ILO, however, had wider implications for Japan’s labor policy. Under the Police Law of 1900, unions were de facto illegal. While the law refrained from outright banning unions, it criminalized the act of “‘instigating’ or ‘inciting’ others to strike, join a union, or engage in collective bargaining, making it virtually impossible for unions to legally conduct their affairs. Of course, the law could only be sporadically enforced and organizations ostensibly devoted to self-help like the Yūaikai could circumvent it, but in the absence of a law recognizing unions, it defined the state’s orientation towards labor in unmistakably hostile terms. By choosing the workers’ delegate through an election of all workers rather than in consultation with labor organizations then, the state could continue its policy of refusing to recognize the legitimacy or even the legality of unions despite the right of association being a key tenant of the ILO.

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52 Ibid., 159.
53 For a discussion of the Public Order and Police Law of 1900, see Garon, The State and Labor in Modern Japan, 30-31.
To Japanese workers meanwhile, the ILO provided a unique opportunity to supplement their domestic weakness with the weight of international opinion. If they could pressure the government at the International Labor Conferences to change its method of selecting workers’ delegates, then even in the absence of a union law, they could force the *de facto* recognition of freedom of association for workers. Similarly, by supporting the Yūaikai’s claim and demanding the Conference to pressure Japan to change its stance towards union, workers’ delegates from European countries could further empower the ILO as an institution with the ability to secure workers’ right to organize even in countries where it was not legally recognized.

The second point of contention was Japan’s requested exemptions from the convention on the 48-hour workweek. Under the “Special Countries” clause of the Treaty of Versailles, states were allowed to ask for exemptions from international labor conventions on the grounds of inadequate industrial development. At the Washington Conference, the Japanese government requested that it only be required to establish a 9 ½-hour workday instead of an 8-hour workday. In doing so, it walked a fine line. On one hand, Japan occupied a privileged position as a State of Chief Industrial Importance. Maintaining that position and the prestige that came with it was a priority for the government, a task that could only be undermined by asking for exemptions on the grounds of industrial immaturity. However, Japan’s industrial legislation was immature compared to the other powers. Its only significant law regulating work was the Factory Act of 1911. The act restricted working hours for women and children in factories with more than 15 employees to twelve a day and prohibited nightwork for those same groups. Even this limited legislation was to be implemented over 15 years, meaning it wasn’t fully in place by the time of

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54 It is important to note that unions in 1919 were still in their infancy. In 1919 the largest labor federation, the Yūaikai, only had 30,000 members and unionized workers only made up a small fraction of the total work force. Even in 1924, after union membership had more than doubled, unionization rates were only 5.3%. (Garon, *The State and Labor*, 256)
the Washington Conference. Implementing an 8-hour workday required a massive, and to the government unacceptable, commitment to drastically improving Japan’s industrial conditions. Japan would go from a country with practically non-existent social legislation to one on par with the most advanced western powers. Since the government could not commit itself to implementing an 8-hour workday, nor could it publicly vote against so important a convention, its only option was asking for exemptions.

Unsurprisingly, the decision provoked criticism from workers’ delegates, who pointed out the obvious contradiction in Japan’s position. The Japanese workers’ delegate, Masumoto, led the effort, saying: “As everybody knows, Japan, so far, has been accorded equal treatment, as well as equal opportunity with other European countries in nearly everything. However, we now find ourselves given special treatment and a different kind of opportunity. They say it is good for Japan’s production, but we say it is good for autocratic oppression.” Workers’ delegates from western countries, again particularly from the IFTU, employed much the same argument. They elaborated on their claim by demonstrating that Japanese industry, which had grown rapidly during the war, was at an equivalent level of development to the West and even submitted a proposal to deny Japan its requested exemptions.

Similar to the question of the appointment of the Japanese workers’ delegate, the debate over exemptions to the 8-hour workday had broader implications than what was being discussed. On the Japanese side, workers used the issue to contest global perceptions of Japanese labor conditions. By pointing out its hypocrisy on the question of special exemptions, Masumoto did more than just criticize the Japanese government’s delegation; he presented Japan as a country

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56 Record of Proceeding, 160.
57 Dutch representative Jan Oudageest (1870-1950) for example said “he who plays the first violin in other matters should try and play the first violin also in the questions of factory legislation.” Ibid., 163.
fundamentally hostile to the core values of the ILO. He explicitly said as much in his opening speech, invoking the ILO’s preamble in denouncing Japan as an “enemy of social justice.” He proceeded to back up this accusation with examples of the state’s inadequate social policy, citing the 1900 Police Law and the poor state of female textile workers in particular.\(^5^8\) In making these criticisms and “laying bare the facts” as he put it, he used the issue of exemptions to present the challenges faced by Japanese workers domestically as international problems requiring an ILO response. This was a unique form of political pressure that only the International Labor Conference allowed. It was the only space where Japanese workers could directly address representatives of their own government before a global audience.

In response to workers’ tactics, the Japanese government did the only thing it could given its unwillingness to cave on the 8-hour question: argue that its requests for exemptions were legitimate and Japan was committed to the ILO’s principles despite its refusal to concretely implement them at home.\(^5^9\) In a speech refuting Masumoto’s criticisms, government representative Kamada Eikichi claimed that Japan was simply not industrialized enough to adopt an 8-hour workday. According to Kamada, the factory system was new to Japan and there were still “few industries which [could] compare with the corresponding industries in Europe or America, either in their organization or importance.” As a result, whereas the West had been dealing with labor disputes for a century, Japan had only become aware of “the importance of labor problems” at the Paris Peace Conference.” In fact, Kamada argued, Japan’s accomplishments despite these immaturities were impressive. Japan had only been aware of the “labor problem” for half a year and already made significant progress. It had passed a Factory

\(^{58}\) Ibid, 161.

\(^{59}\) This ambiguous and often defensive stance is also evident in Japan’s participation in the League of Nations, which conservatives Japanese leaders joined less out of principle, but as a way of solidifying its status as a great power committed to international peace in the new world order. (Frederick Dickinson, \textit{War and National Reinvention: Japan in the Great War, 1914-1919} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999): 221-233.
Act prohibiting night work for women and children and planned to enact further serious labor legislation in the future.60 He concluded his statement by reaffirming the Japanese government’s commitment to the ILO in unmistakably Wilsonian terms, pronouncing that “the permanent peace of the world can no longer be realized if the interests of working people are ignored.”61

If the stakes of the debate over exemptions were clear as it related to Japan, globally, the situation is less straightforward. On one hand, workers’ attempts to use the International Labor Conference to force Japan to make firmer commitments to workers’ rights represented a more radical vision of the ILO as an organization that could pressure unwilling states to conform to international standards. The push was of course self-interested, as relatively poor labor conditions of countries like Japan were seen as sources of unfair competition that held back working standards in the West. French workers’ delegate Leon Jouhaux (1879-1954) explicitly laid this out, saying “if we grant her today such special treatment, such leniency will flood...the European market with her products, and it will thus check to a large extent the industrial progress of other countries.”62

The argument, however, had cross-class appeal. Governments and employers also had an interest in equalizing labor conditions internationally. When the proposed motion denying exemptions to Japan came to a vote, it only failed by 42-45, with government representatives from France, Italy, and Belgium among others supporting it. By contrast, other than Japan, Britain was the primary opponent of the motion. The British government representative G. N. Barnes called for “practical statesmanship” in dealing with Japan and the British workers’ delegate G. H. Stuart-Bunning (1870-1951) was one of the few on the labor side to vote against

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60 This is something of a contradiction in his argument given that the Factory Act was passed 8 years before the Peace Conference.
61 Ibid., 159.
62 Record of Proceedings, 165.
the motion. This was not due to any difference in opinion regarding the threat of Japanese products, at least not outwardly. Indeed, in an interview with The Observer after the conference, Barnes noted Japan’s acceptance of the convention on an 8-hour workday, even with exemptions, as an “achievement of the highest significance” that demonstrated its “enlightenment” and helped quell anxieties about “Japan flooding European and American markets.” The difference thus seems primarily tactical; not whether Japan should conform to International Labor standards but how much autonomy it should have in doing so. Specifically, Britain’s defense of Japan was likely motivated by the Anglo-Japanese Alliance. Although of reduced importance in the new international system of multilateral conference diplomacy, the alliance would have motivated Britain to balance its economic interest in the equalization of labor standards with its diplomatic interests in maintaining good relations with Japan.

Ultimately, very little of practical significance was achieved by workers at the Washington Conference when it came to Japan. The contradiction between the ILO’s regulatory power and the autonomy of the nation-state resolved in favor of the latter. The Conference admitted Masumoto without challenge and allowed Japanese its exemptions from the convention establishing a 48-hour workweek. However, the debates that emerged in the Washington Conference would persist for the next decade and have profound implications for Japan’s internal labor movement. However unenthusiastic the Japanese government had initially been about the ILO, its tripartite organization provided institutional means for workers from both Japan and western countries to criticize its domestic policy. The question of the workers’ delegate in

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63 Ibid., 166, 180.
65 The vote cast by the British workers’ delegate is less straightforward, but possibly motivated by his non-membership in the IFTU. While all the aforementioned trade union leaders who criticized Japan were leaders in the IFTU who had agreed to coordinate their activities during the Conference, Stuart-Bunning was not and seems not to have been as active in voting with other workers representatives. See Tosstorff, “The International Trade-Union Movement and the Foundation of the International Labor Organization,” 420-430.
particularly would periodically emerge each Conference until Japan was finally forced to adopt a new selection method, marking the first step in its more conciliatory policy towards moderate labor unions in which representation in the ILO served as the proverbial carrot to the stick that was the anti-Communist Peace Preservation Law of 1925.
II. THE ILO COMES HOME

Taken on its own, the Washington Conference had little effect on international labor legislation. Although in theory member states had to forward ILO conventions to their respective legislatures within a year, theory rarely aligned with practice. Japan never implemented even a 9½ workday while the low rate of compliance with established conventions was a perennial concern of the ILO. However, in isolation resolutions provide an insufficient picture of the Conference’s influence. In order to fully understand the ILO’s impact on Japanese society, we must now turn away from Washington and examine how the Conference was discussed and understood within Japan.

Somewhat surprisingly given the Japanese delegations’ enthusiasm at Versailles, in the Japanese press, the Washington Conference was one of the most widely reported on events of the time. Major newspapers like the *Tokyo asahi shimbun* and the *Osaka mainichi shimbun* altogether published hundreds of articles on the Conference, following everything from the initial selection of delegates to the activities of the committees and the major debates at the general sessions. Japanese unions, most notably the Yūaikai, were especially inspired by and engaged with the Conference’s activities. The process of selecting the workers’ delegate required direct participation in the Conference’s proceedings while the ILO’s commitment to free labor promised legal recognition from the government, giving unions a material investment in its activities.

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66 Japan ultimately only adopted one ILO convention during the pre-war period. Garon, *The State and Labor in Modern Japan*, 152.
67 For example, the *Osaka asahi shimbun* commented that the Washington Conference “caused a greater excitement than the Paris Conference” (*Pari kaigi ijō no ōsawagi wo nasashimetaru*), partly because of the Japanese delegation was more open about meeting with reporters at Washington than at Paris. “Rōdō kaigi kōka: kōwa kaigi to hikaku,” *Osaka asashi shimbun*, December 11, 1919.
Initially, the Japanese public and unions shared an optimism about the post-war international order and emphasized the need for Japan to conform to “world trends” in dealing with labor issues. Following the conference’s conclusion, the two wildly diverged. The press came to a consensus on the need for the government to cooperate with a non-violent, moderate labor movement to resolve social problems, largely in keeping with the ILO’s vision. Workers by contrast, or at least workers conscious of the ILO, turned to a radical rejection of not just cooperation with the government, but the ILO itself. In response to the Washington Conference’s perceived failure to deliver on its promises, they rejected the cooperative model represented by the organization and began advocating instead for building the “real strength” of the movement independent of outside influences. Labor’s divergence from public opinion marked a turning point for the movement and contributed to its radicalization in the post-war era. Only by examining why it occurred and why workers’ reacted so negatively to the Washington Conference can the ILO’s significance for Japan be understood.

The Washington Conference and the Japanese Public

It was by no means inevitable that the wider public would care about the Washington Conference. As we have seen, the government had been ambivalent at best at the Commission on International Labor Legislation and contributed little to its proceedings. And if public consciousness of the League had been weak prior to Versailles, there was even less of a pre-existing demand for an organization dedicated to the international resolution of social problems. Why then did the Washington Conference illicit such widespread interest?
In part, just as membership in the ILO was tied to the League, the Washington Conference was inseparable from the global order which constituted it. While Japanese support for that order had been tenuous at the Peace Conference, public reception was much more favorable. Again, due to differing wartime experiences, the reasons for this support were different than in Europe, but there were still powerful factors motivating many Japanese to embrace the League. First, the creation of the League coincided with the general liberalization of Japanese society usually associated with “Taisho Democracy.” A combination of the expansion of the newspaper-reading public, the growth of the urban middle and working classes, and a series of anti-bureaucratic protest movements culminating in the first party cabinet in Japanese history under Hara Takashi in 1918 produced a new popular consciousness of the need to reform society along more democratic lines. The League both aligned with and legitimated this consciousness by contextualizing it within a global movement for the realization of Wilsonian ideals. However, Japan’s embrace of the League was also a continuation of its quest to join the modern great powers. Similar to how the confrontation with a hegemonic west led Japanese intellectuals to advocate for “civilization and enlightenment” in the Meiji Period, so too did the seismic shift in international relations that occurred at Versailles prompt an awareness that Japan had to conform to “world trends (sekai no taisei)” or “current trends (ima no taisei).” The difference was that “the universal standard to emulate” was no longer “the modern, industrial nation-state,” but “Woodrow Wilson’s vision of a concert of power based upon democratic government, free international intercourse and a reduction of armaments.”

Japanese engagement with the League extended to the ILO. The Washington Conference was the first test case of the international system constructed at Versailles, and many were

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68 See Gordon, Labor and Imperial Democracy in Prewar Japan, 1-25.
69 Dickinson, World War I and the Triumph of a New Japan, 32. Dickinson extends the argument further and suggests post-war Japan underwent a “Taisho Restoration” that in many ways parallels the Meiji Restoration.
attentive to see its lofty ideals of world peace put into practice. Legal philosopher Tsuntō Kyō, at the time a professor at Dōshisha University, perhaps put it most aptly when he wrote that whereas previously the League had seemed idealistic and “utopian,” with the opening of the International Labor Conference, “the reality of the League suddenly became more profound (kokusai renmei no jissaisei wa niwaka ni sono jūkō wo kuwaeta).” This association between the ILO and Wilsonian internationalism was constantly inscribed in the language used to discuss it. In discussions of the Washington Conference, invocations of “world trends” and “current trends” were ubiquitous. During the Taishō period, “world trends” was often used to refer to the post-war spirit of democracy and open diplomacy, usually to the effect of arguing that Japan must adapt to the new global standard. That discussions of the ILO were frequently couched in such language implied an understanding of the organization as representing an international progressive consensus which Japan had to take seriously lest it be left in the past.

However, by its very nature, the ILO did not simply represent an abstract vision of world peace, but was deeply intertwined with the most pressing social problems of the day. These problems had become particularly acute following the 1918 Rice Riots. The Rice Riots of 1918 were a series of nation-wide popular protests in response to rising rice prices that were responsible for bringing down the cabinet of Terauchi Masatake and establishing the first party

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71 For example, in discussing the Washington Conference and Japanese interest in it, the Osaka shinpō declared “Japan has been jolted by the current trends of the world and is already waking from its long sleep (Nihon wa ima ya sekai no shichō ni yurarete chōya no nemuri yori sedeni samatsu tsutsuari)” while in the Tokyo Asahi shimbun, Keiō University Professor Horie Kiichi advised the capitalist delegate to the Conference that “because from now on the direction of the world will be determined by how labor problems are resolved, we must adapt to the world’s general trends and walk in step with the tendency of the age.” See “Rōdō mondai to shakai seisaku,” Osaka shinpō, December 11, 1919 and “Sekai no taisei wo miru you shihon kadaihyou ni chūmon,” Tōkyō asahi shimbun, September 13, 1919.
72 See Dickinson, World War I and the Triumph of a New Japan. 1-12.
cabinet under Seiyukai President Hara Takashi.\textsuperscript{73} Compared to earlier popular protests like the 1905 Hibiya Riot, the Rice Riots were larger, more violent, and emerged independent of middle-class leadership. Combined with the proliferation of industrial disputes in the postwar era of high inflation and retrenchment, the riots heightened anxiety about working-class discontent. The public found a solution to that anxiety in the ILO and its program. Indeed, for Japan, which had little experience with international labor organizing or industrial legislation, the ILO’s establishment just as class tensions burst into the popular consciousness imbued the organization with special significance as the embodiment of the progressive model of labor relations being introduced to the country. Unlike in the West, where a consciousness of the need for the state and labor to cooperate in improving working conditions pre-dated the ILO and gave rise to it, in Japan, ILO was the mechanism by which those ideas disseminated through society. Through public discussions about the ILO and the Washington Conference, people could learn about novel solutions to the social problems they felt were becoming ever more critical.

Beyond serving as a symbol of a new international order then, the Washington Conference provided an opportunity for and even demanding a national conversation on Japanese labor relations. The results of this conversation were not always straightforward. In general, in both the leadup and aftermath of the Washington Conferences, public commentators supported the ILO’s core values and criticized any perceived deviance from them. There was a consensus that a labor movement was necessary, perhaps desirable, and that workers, employers, and the government had a responsibility to come together to resolve social problems. However, this consensus failed to translate into firm support for unions or concrete issues like the 8-hour workday. Almost all commentators might rhetorically be unapologetic in advocating that Japan

\textsuperscript{73}The violent and destructive nature of the riot, as well as the fact it occurred without middle class leadership, lead to a new consciousness in elite circles of the threat posed by working-class militancy. Gordon, \textit{Labor and Imperial Democracy in Prewar Japan}, 50-62.
join the rest of the industrialized world in promoting progressive social legislation, but what that meant in practice was still a matter of debate.

For example, in keeping with ILO’s mission, most newspapers advocated that the Japanese labor delegate be truly representative of workers and criticized attempts to subordinate them to either capital or the government. Thus, the *Tokyo asahi shimbun* rebuked the employers’ delegate, Mutō Sanji (1867-1934), for suggesting that it was necessary for the workers’ and employers’ delegates to “coordinate (*kyōchō*)” prior to the Conference. Delegates represented their class, not Japan, and in fact the value of the Conference lay in its role as an arena where labor and capital could come into conflict. Rather than finding someone capable of cooperating with Japanese employers, the newspaper argued, the labor delegate must be someone who could work “along with worker representatives from various countries to truly advance the interests of workers.”74

However, the *Tokyo asahi shimbun* was noticeably silent on the question of unions. It only argued that the workers’ representative should be truly representative of working-class interests without addressing the core of the problem: the role of unions in appointing them. And this was not the only example of the newspaper having ambivalent support for unions. In another article responding the controversy over the workers’ delegate, the *Tokyo asahi shimbun* declared its full support for a labor movement, yet cautioned against a focus on workers’ “material desires (*bushitsuue no yokubō*).” Instead, it advocated for a “spiritual movement to establish the true meaning and essence of labor (*rōdō no shinigi to shinseimeito wo kakuritsusuru seishinteki undō*).”75 It in turn linked the labor movement with a criticism of the conservative state of

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75 “Rōdō undō to kokumin,” *Tokyo asahi shimbun*, October 9, 1919.
Japanese education, suggesting the paper’s concern was less with workers’ conditions than with the liberalization of Japanese society.\(^{76}\)

The *Asahi shinbum*’s stance, supportive of the assertiveness of workers but ambivalent about unions and their role in securing material gains for the working class was common to many commentators. The differences were largely rhetorical and reflective of pre-existing ideological dispositions. Hence the liberal *Tokyo asahi shimbun*’s denunciation of the backward state of the Japanese education system. By contrast, the *Osaka shinpō*, a paper associated with the conservative Seiyukai party that had once been headed by Hara Takashi,\(^{77}\) was more explicitly anti-union. While also supportive of the ILO’s mission and critical of Japanese capitalists for being insufficiently conscious of “the great question of the 20th century,” it displayed little sympathy for unions’ demands.\(^{78}\) The paper dismissed Yūaikai’s objections to the selection of the labor delegate and in response to Masumoto’s speech at the Washington conference openly defended the Police Law of 1900 as necessary to curtail workers' violent tendencies.\(^{79}\) Others like Horie Kiichi (1876-1927), a Professor of Economics at Keio University who was an early advocate of social reform, placed more emphasis on the positive role of unions. Partially in response to state indifference to workers demands as exemplified in the controversy over the selection of the workers’ delegate, Horie called for the authorities to “wake up (*sameyo*)” to the labor problem and argued that a workers organizations were necessary as a “movement to liberate a class that has been socially and politically oppressed for many years (*einen seijini shakaiu eni appakuseraretaru kaikyuu no kaihou undo*).”\(^{80}\) Even this pro-union stance had its

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\(^{76}\) For discussions of the broader trends of liberalization in the Taisho Period, particularly with respect to education, see Peter David Rothstein, “Seeds for Change: Creating Alternative Spaces for Education in Taisho Japan” (PhD Diss. University of Chicago, 2010).

\(^{77}\) Hara Takashi, while the first “commoner” Prime Minister and the first Prime Minister to concurrently serve as the head of a party in the National Diet, was generally conservative on labor issues.

\(^{78}\) “Rōdō mondai to shakai seisaku,” *Osaka shinpō*, December 11, 1919

\(^{79}\) “Riyū naki kōgi: tobbi no rōdō undō,” *Osaka shinpō*, November 11, 1919.

caveats, however. Horie primarily advocated for parliamentary reform, calling it a “safety valve (anzenben),” and discouraged direct action. He was even sympathetic to Masumoto’s position as Japan’s workers’ representative, going so far as to say that after his poor treatment from organized labor, “workers had no right to demand anything of him.”

In short, the general opinion on unions, if framed differently by ideologically diverse commentators, was that unions were desirable so long as they were moderate. A focus on “material desires,” violent activities, or direct, extra-parliamentary action was to be discouraged. Of course, this conformed with the ILO’s core values. The organization aimed to channel working-class energies away from direct action and towards institutionally structured cooperation with the government and employers. The consensus that Japanese union activity must be kept within certain limits was a valid interpretation of the “trends of the world.” Nor was ambivalence new. Although the liberal press had repeatedly encouraged anti-bureaucratic protest movements during the 1900s and 1910s, they had always done so with the goal of strengthening parliamentary, or “Constitutional,” government. Support for extra-constitutional agitating as a political norm was tenuous at best, especially after the Rice Riots of 1918. The riots had not only achieved many of the liberals’ goals by producing the first party cabinet in Japanese history, but also marked the emergence of working-class action independent of middle-class leadership. Under such circumstances, further direct action independent of the newly secured parliamentary, and now international, channels was no longer desirable to many in the press who began to see independent working-class organizing as a potential threat.

Opinions on the question of exemptions to the 8-hour workday showed a similar ambivalence. The press agreed that Japan had to live up to world trends, but camae to no

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82 Gordon, Labor and Imperial Democracy in Prewar Japan, 59-62.
consensus on whether doing so required immediately adopting an 8-hour workday. Again, differences in rhetoric corresponded to ideological and institutional positions. For example, the pro-business and Mitsui Corporation-affiliated *Chūgai sangyō shinpō* agreed that adopting some form of the 8-hour workday was inevitable due to the “current trends (*ima no taisei*),” but argued implementing it immediately would reduce production and raise prices. As such a situation would only be detrimental to consumers and workers, but favorable to capitalists, workers’ objections to exemptions only harmed themselves.\(^{83}\) The more liberal *Jiji shinpō* similarly favored exemptions, portraying even the 9½ hour-workday as a significant improvement, but it also called on capitalists and the government to forsake their “traditional attitude (*jūrai no taido*)” and instead follow “how labor problems are dealt with in the world and abroad.”\(^{84}\) The *Kobe shimbun* meanwhile viewed the exemptions as shameful indications of industrial immaturity and advocated that Japan adopt an 8-hour workday as a soon as possible in order to “maintain its reputation as one of the Eight Chief Industrial States (*hachi daikōgyōkoku no ichitarumi to menboku to wo tamotsuni tsutomezaru karazu*).” Doing so, it claimed, would benefit Japanese industry, because while it would decrease working hours, it would also increase efficiency. The newspaper pointed to Kawasaki Shipyard as an example of where this had been the case and advised more employers to recognize this “trend” and prepare to implement an 8-hour workday.\(^{85}\) This was not necessarily due to any ideological conviction, however, but likely motivated by the paper’s close association with the Kawasaki family.

In general then, although there was a general agreement with the ILO’s basic values, namely that the cooperation between government, employers, and a moderate trade union

\(^{83}\) “Hachijikan rōdōsei: ryōin no iken,” *Chūgai sangyō shinpō*, October 8, 1919.
\(^{84}\) “Rōdō in no kichō,” *Jiji shinpō*, January 16, 1920.
\(^{85}\) “Hachijji rōdōsei no sansei: jikan tanshuku to nōritsu,” *Kōbe shimbun*, December 14-15, 1919. This specific reference to the Kawasaki Shipyard perhaps betrays an alternative reason for the newspaper's stance considering that it was originally founded in 1898 by the Kawasaki family.
movement was necessary to gradually improve workers’ conditions, that did agreement did not coalesce into a support for unions or for specific policies like the 8-hour workday. However, even if it stopped short of translating into a concerted push for concrete changes, this more loose consensus about the ILO was still significant. It established a new standard vindicated by “world trends” against which heavy-handed government policy, militant workers, and greedy capitalists could all be measured. It also generated widespread interest in and discussion about labor issues. Such discussions included not just the aforementioned newspapers and commentators, but also delegates to the Washington Conference. Newspapers widely reported on the minute debates of the Conference, even those unrelated to Japan. The International Labor Conference brought the reading Japanese public, which at the time included a growing number of workers, into a worldwide discourse on industrial legislation and required critical introspection on Japan’s place in that discourse.

The Workers’ Side

If the general public responded positively to the ILO and associated it with “world trends” that Japan had to adjust to, workers, or at least those who claimed to represent them, had a more complicated relationship with the organization. Initially, labor’s position was practically indistinguishable from that of the general public. The only difference was that enthusiasm among organized labor for the Washington Conference far outstripped anything that could be found in the press. For unions, “world trends” were more than just an abstract standard to conform to.

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86 To give just one example, the Osaka mainichi shimbun reproduced a lengthy speech made by Samuel Gompers at the Conference on the question of the 8-hour workday in “Gomupasu netsuben wo furuu: yonjū hachijikan tai yonjuuonjikansei,” Osaka mainichi shimbun, January 6, 1920.
87 For example, four-fifths of working-class households in Tsukishima, Tokyo subscribed to at least one newspaper. See Gordon, Labor and Imperial Democracy in Prewar Japan, 19.
They were a weapon in their fight for recognition from the state. Japan’s participation in an organization devoted to free labor promised the immediate repeal of the Police Law of 1900 and the affirmation of workers’ right to organize. It is important to note that the appeal of this promise, and why workers were so initially in step with the public, was that through the ILO organized labor could achieve its goals via a reliance on a broader liberal consensus developing both domestically and globally rather than independent organizing. For the still moderate and immature Japanese trade unions, it was a reformist, conflict-free alternative to the vision of class struggle offered by the revolutionary left.

However, once the Washington Conference concluded, it became apparent that the ILO’s promise was a false one. Beyond giving Japanese workers a global platform to express their demands, it failed to deliver any meaningful victories. The Conference refused to support union protests against Japan’s process of selecting the workers’ representative, and allowed the government its requested exemptions. The result was a complete reversal in labor’s position. The ILO was no longer the harbinger of global progress, but a conservative organization designed to seduce workers away from independent organizing and towards conciliatory reformism.

The process of going from high expectations to rejecting the ILO is particularly dramatic in the case of the Yūaikai and Suzuki Bunji. As previously mentioned, the Yūaikai was a moderate labor organization founded in 1912 by Christian socialist and Tokyo Imperial University Graduate Suzuki Bunji. Its initial objectives had been limited to self-help and cooperation with employers. In its Basic Principles, it listed mutual aid, the development of “knowledge” and “virtue,” and “steady” improvement via “cooperation.”

88 “1. We shall maintain friendly relations with each other and assist each other with a unity of spirit, in order to fulfill our basic objectives of benevolence and mutual help. 2. We shall follow the ideals commonly held by humanity and endeavor to develop knowledge, nurture virtue, and advance technology. 3. Through the power of cooperation, we shall find a practical and steady means of improving our position. David J. Jun, Japan: A Documentary History: The Late Tokugawa Period to the Present (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1997): 390.
endorse a vision of class struggle, emphasize the unique position of the worker in capitalist society, or involve itself in industrial disputes. As time went on, however, Suzuki’s original vision of mutual aid and cooperation transformed into a more robust trade unionism. Yūaikai members began meditating, and sometimes even leading, strikes and the growing influence of workers in the organization shifted focus towards confrontation with employers.89

It was amidst the Yuai’s transition that the ILO was established. For the still infant Yūaikai, the ILO provided an internationally constituted framework for its new activities. If Wilsonian internationalism aligned with and legitimated a growing democratic consciousness in Japanese society, the ILO did the same for the Yūaikai’s emerging trade unionism. At the Yūaikai’s national convention in August 1919, the organization abandoned self-help and business unionism in favor of more assertive organizing. In an official declaration, the Yūaikai framed its transformation in terms of the League and the ILO: “We workers declare to the world that the workers of Japan, with the League of Nations, will struggle like martyrs, in the spirit of the Labor Covenant in order that peace, freedom, and equality may rule the earth.” It grounded this new direction in a list of demands, virtually all of which were also goals of the ILO.90

However, the ILO did more than just provide the Yuai with the rhetoric to frame its transition to trade unionism in terms of international significance. Had that been all, it is unlikely the Washington Conference would have elicited much, if any, enthusiasm from organized labor. After all, revolutionary communism offered no less powerful an ideological framework. The appeal of the ILO specifically was not just that it represented a globally constituted model of moderate trade unionism, but also lay in its role as a supra-national organization labor unions could appeal to in order to achieve concrete, immediate gains.

89 See Gordon, Labor and Imperial Democracy in Prewar Japan, 80-122.
Perhaps no one better articulated this promise than Suzuki Bunji himself. Upon returning from the Commission on International Labor Legislation in Versailles, where he had been at the last moment added as an advisor to the Japanese delegation, Suzuki was overwhelmingly optimistic about Japan’s future with the ILO. At a packed theatre in Kobe with 2000 people in attendance, mostly from the Yūaikai, he triumphantly declared: “the Japanese labor movement is now no longer the labor movement of a small island country. It is the labor movement of the world. (nihon no rōdō undō wa mohaya shōtōkoku no rōdō undō de wa nai. Sekai no rōdō undō de aru).” The ILO’s creation did not just mark the globalization of the Japanese labor movement. It also marked its liberation. “There are no shackles,” he continued “no handcuffs. We are free. Already, we have the workers organizations of the world at our back. We must press forward and defeat the old customs of the past.” While he recognized the likelihood of government intransigence, and criticized the Japanese delegation’s behavior at Versailles, he was confident that the weight of world opinion would be on the side of workers. If unions appealed to the League regarding the government’s refusal to recognize unions despite it being one of the “five major powers (godaikoku no ichi),” it would have to comply: “World trends no longer permit Japan to be the sole exception. We must say the time has now come for the official recognition of unions. (sekai no taisei wa mohaya nihon no mi ni jogairei wo yurusanakunatta. Imaya kumiai kounin no jiki wa kita mono to iwanebanaranai).”

In examining Suzuki’s enthusiasm for the ILO, two things are immediately of note. First is the repeated invocation of outside forces. It was the “workers organizations of the world” and

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91 Suzuki Bunji was added as an advisor once the Japanese delegation realized they were the only great power on the Commission on International Labor Legislation without a representative from labor. He however had little actual input or influence. Burkman, Japan and the League of Nations, 88.
92 “Pari no kokusairoudoukaigi kara kaetta Suzuki Bunji shi no hōkoku enzetsu: kagaribi to gekkeiju wo somedashita Yūaikaiki ni kakomarete,” Osaka mainichi shimbun, August 4, 1919.
93 “Ashikase mo nai, tekase mo nai. Jiyū de aru. Shikamo warera no se ni wa sekai no rōdō dantai ga hikaeteiru. Warerea wa kako no inshū wo dahashite mōshinsenabanarani.” Ibid.
94 Ibid.
“world trends” that guaranteed the liberation of labor, not the independent energies of Japanese workers themselves. Second, there was a sense of immediacy to Suzuki’s declaration, as if the establishment of the ILO itself marked the liberation of working people. While he did speak of a need for Japanese workers to take action, his repeated use of “already/now (mohaya)” implied that their victories would soon be realized. In other words, the ILO seemed to promise the Yūaikai immediate gains such as the recognition of unions through the intervention of global forces. For the still small and moderate organization, the prospect of these gains undoubtedly made participation in the ILO more appealing than the slow process of movement building and struggle against the state that was its alternative.

It also provided a means of advancing labor’s agenda without becoming alienated from middle-class Japanese society. Some scholars like Andrew Gordon argue that the 1918 Rice Riots marked a break between the broader public and the more militant working classes.\(^95\) Rhetorically at least no such break is evident in early discussions of the Washington Conference. While the Yūaikai’s embrace of the ILO implied a greater awareness of workers as distinct political subjects constituting a labor movement than before, it was perfectly consistent with the broader liberal consensus developing in Japan. The Yūaikai could appeal to the same “world trends” constantly invoked in the press to advance and legitimize its demands. This is already implicit in Suzuki’s speech, but particularly evident in the Yūaikai’s response to the government’s method of selecting the Japanese workers’ delegate.

Initially, Suzuki participated in the committee tasked with selecting the Japanese worker representative.\(^96\) He almost immediately quit once it became apparent that many of the members

\(^{95}\) For example, in Gordon, *Labor and Imperial Democracy in Prewar Japan*, 50-62, Andrew Gordon argues that the Rice Riots marked the moment when workers broke with the larger movement for “imperial democracy” and began building their own organizational and symbolic frameworks.

\(^{96}\) The exact selection process for the labor delegate required workers in each region to send delegates to a prefectural meeting, who then elected delegates to go to a national meeting. This meeting then selected three
were not even workers, but he remained open to compromise with the government. Even though he announced his determination to make the issue an “international dispute (kokusaiteki kōsō)” by submitting a protest to the Credentials Committee via Samuel Gompers, he also stated “if the government adopts a policy that is approximate to the Yūaikai’s and allows us to maintain our dignity, then at this time of national urgency, we will not needlessly cause a conflict or persist in advancing our claims.”

He showed little enthusiasm for a departure from the Yuaikai’s traditional moderation in dealing with the government. Publicly at least, Suzuki was just as wary of unions causing “needlessly causing conflict” as the liberal press.

The official statement by the Yūaikai on why it opposed the selection process was similarly moderate in tone. The three reasons it listed all operated in either the discourse of Taisho Democracy or appealed to the values of ILO. The first reason it listed, “to reject unconstitutional actions and try to establish a spirit of democracy (hirikken kōdō wo haishi demokurashii no seishin wo kakuteisen to suru ni aru),” explicitly invoked the rhetoric of Taisho Democracy and earlier anti-bureaucratic protest movements. It’s second and third were “rejecting compromise and electing a true workers’ representative” and “protecting and getting the government to accept the spirit of international labor legislation.” As we have seen, neither demand would be out of place in the Asahi shimbun. The Yūaikai even framed its protests as

97 “Waga Yūaikai no shuchō ni chikai teido no hōsaku wo gudaikashi wareware no menboku wo tatetekureru naraba kono sai aete kokka no kyū ni saishi itazura funsō wo okoshi dokomademo shuchō wo koshitsusuru mono de wa nai.” “Deyō ni yote dakyō”: seifu to Suzuki shi to no aida ni aru ishi no totsū ga dekita to iu setsu ni tsuite Yūaikai no Suzuki shi wa kataru,” Osaka asahi shimbun, September 21, 1919.

98 Invocations of the “constitution” and “constitutional government” were common in pro-parliamentary protest movements such as the Movement to Restore Constitutional Government of 1912. See Gordon, Labor and Imperial Democracy in Prewar Japan and Carol Gluck, Japan’s Modern Myths: Ideology in the Late Meiji Period (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985): 42-73.
advice for the government to “reflect on,” and called its objection an “act of true patriotism (shin no aikokuteki kōdō).”

If the Yūaikai’s position in late 1919 was moderate, largely aligned with the press, and enthusiastically pro-ILO, in a few months that would change completely. One need only look at the January 1920 edition of Rōdō, the official journal of the newly renamed Dai Nihon Rōdō Sōdōmei Yūaikai, to see practically the opposite perspective. In a section entitled “Current Affairs of the Labor World,” none of labor’s optimism about “world trends” is evident. Instead, the journal denounced the Washington Conference as an “international conference devoted to capitalist paternalism (shinhonkateki onjōshugi no kokusaiteki kaigi)” that was at odds with the “true spirit of the labor movement, which aims for not only the personal liberation of the worker, but the liberation of all humanity (rōdōsha no jinkakuteki kaihō wo keshi, hiite zenjinrui no kaihō wo risō to suru rōdōundō no shinzui).” The article went on to explain that whereas in the advanced western countries, because they had essentially already achieved victories like the 8-hour workday, the Conference “had little meaning beyond being seen as a way to implement their ideals (mattaku karera no risōjitsugen no shudan to miru no hotondo igi no nai mono de aru),” Japan was different. In Japan, where unions were not even recognized, the Conference did have meaning (mattaku igi ga nai de wa nai). Specifically, it promised the chance for workers to achieve the gradual improvement of industrial policy and “gain the education and strength to realize their ideals.” The results of the Conference, however, had been a “betrayal” of workers’ hopes, as evidenced by the exemptions granted to Japan from the 8-hour workday. Capitalists and the government intransigence demonstrated they had no intention of improving horrible working conditions. The article concluded by saying that “those who participated in the

99 “Yūaikai no hantai riyū happyō: ‘wareware wa naze Takano hakushi no judaku ni hantaiseruka,’” Osaka asahi shimbun, October 1, 1919.
conference were of another world than us (kaigi ni sankaseru hitobito wa warera to wa betsu no sekai no mono de aru)” and calling on workers “to carve an independent path (dokuji no michi wo kirihi rake banaranai)” for themselves.⁹⁰

Perhaps even more total in his shift in perspective was Suzuki Bunji. When Suzuki looked back on the Washington Conference in a lengthy piece published in the Tokyo asahi shimbun in 1922, he described the ILO not in terms of international working-class solidarity, but as an “an institution devised to discreetly depress the new and energetic working-class (shinshinkiei no rōdō kaikyū no debana wo teiyoku kujikan ga tameni anshutsushita shiseteu de aru).”¹⁰¹ He traced out the process by which this occurred, discussing the sacrifices made by workers during the war and their hopes to “create a new social order from the standpoint of workers themselves (rōdō jishin no tachiba yori atarashiki shakaiteki chijo).” These hopes had been twisted by the government and capital, who instead used the opportunity to suppress the rising working-class via the International Labor Conference. He proved his claim by looking at the Washington Conference. He pointed first to the government’s method of selecting the workers’ representative, then to the government’s refusal to even consider implementing any of the conventions passed by the Conference to show that the organization’s “true value (shinka)” was not to actually benefit workers. Its only real value was to the capitalists, who could use the name of labor to “seduce (yūwaku)” workers into placing their trust and hope in the ILO rather than in an “independent movements.” Hence, Suzuki explained, workers had rejected the International Labor Conference and futile requests that the government “reflect (hansei)” on its policies. The working class could no longer entrust its future to the government, capitalists, or the ILO. Instead, it must instead “believe solely in itself and earnestly work towards the

development of the strength of labor organizations (wareware nomi wo shinjite, henni rōdō
dantai no jitsuryoku no yōsei ni dōryokusuru).”

In very little time then, Yūaikai and Suzuki went from triumphantly announcing the dawn of a new age in the Japanese labor movement, one in which the combined weight of the world’s workers’ organization and the moral force of the ILO would liberate workers from their shackles to denouncing the ILO as a capitalist organization and implicitly rejecting any hope of compromise with the government. Although it is tempting simply to read this as a reaction to the Yūaikai’s exclusion from the Washington Conference, such an explanation is inadequate. For one, even after Suzuki was denied appointment as the workers’ representative, he and the Yūaikai continued to be moderate in their language. Only after the Washington Conference concluded did a radical shift occur. More significantly, the workers who did participate in the Conference were no less negative in their appraisal. Masumoto, writing in the Taishō nichi nichishinbum upon his return to Japan, described his activities at the conference as “a total failure” (zenbu shippai de aru). He retrospectively denounced his own appointment as a delegate to the Conference, arguing that a workers’ delegate had to represent labor unions. More than that, he rejected the ILO itself as an institution. Comparing it to the post-Napoleonic Holy Alliance, Masumoto argued its primary purpose was to crush the liberalism and “revolutionism” (kakumei shugi) produced by the war and that it would likely bring no benefit to the working class. Mutō Shichirō, an advisor to the Japanese labor delegation at the conference, promoted a similarly negative view of the Washington Conference. Mutō was less critical of the ILO generally, but in his view it had little to offer to Japanese workers. This was because in a “country like Japan

102Ibid.
103 It is possible this invocation of the Holy Alliance is specifically a reference to The Communist Manifesto, which mentions the Holy Alliance in its opening passage.
where the state and capital are united (*nihon no gotoki seishi gōdō koku,*” the ILO’s tripartite system was inherently unbalanced. With two government delegates, one employer delegate, and one workers’ delegate, workers faced a three to one disadvantage. As a result, it was almost impossible for Japanese workers to secure meaningful victories at the conference. In his view, their only accomplishment was impressing on western workers that the Japanese were not “naturally disposed to compromise (*yurai dakyō*)” by being outspoken in their criticism of the state.  

Why then did the Washington Conference elicit such a negative response from Japanese workers and why did organized labor direct so much criticism towards the ILO itself rather than just the Japanese government? After all, the International Federation of Trade Unions, a socialist, if moderate, organization, continued to support the ILO even after the Washington Conference’s “failures.” Ultimately, the problem lay less in the Conference itself than in Japanese labor’s unrealistically high expectations for it. Here, the contrast drawn in *Rōdō* between western and Japanese workers with regards to the meaning they gave the ILO is revealing.

As previously discussed, the ILO was in part the product of wartime cooperative agreements between the state and large, already mature labor movements. The war, along with rising working-class militancy and the Russian Revolution, gave unions unprecedented legitimacy and institutional leverage. The appeal of the ILO was that it helped them consolidate that leverage. It created new channels through which labor could exert influence on sources of unfair competition, provided legal protection on an international scale, and helped suppress rival communists within the labor movement. The Japanese labor movement, by contrast, was still in its infant stages. The Yūaikai was only seven years old in 1919 and had a scant 30,000 members. Meanwhile, far from cooperating with unions, the government’s official stance was that most

union activities were illegal. Simply put, Japanese unions lacked the institutional clout to take advantage of the ILO the same way its western counterparts did.

But if the promise of the ILO was not the same in Japan as in the West, it still clearly promised something. Essentially, because it was designed by and for the Western labor organizations, the ILO turned what were by global standards the unusually privileged position of those organizations into an international norm. This norm could in turn be appealed to as a “world trend” by the Japanese labor movement to supplement their own domestic weakness. For Japanese labor, the ILO essentially promised an opportunity to skip ahead. By using the ILO and the weight of global opinion it represented, Japanese unions could secure, both nationally and internationally, an institutional position equal to the more mature labor movements of the West without going through the slow process of organizing and struggle that had gotten them there. Hence Suzuki’s declaration that the establishment of the ILO itself had marked the liberation of the working class and that surely “world trends” would force the government into recognizing unions.

However, no such liberation occurred. The Washington Conference lacked the power to make the government negotiate with unions or adopt any legislation it opposed. And if the ILO was designed for the benefit of already mature and institutionally recognized labor movements, and could not guarantee that recognition where it did not exist, then for infant Japanese organizations like the Yūaikai it had little to offer. Once that realization crushed workers’ initial optimism, it should come as no surprise that leaders in the labor movement rejected the organization. As they explained, putting faith in the government or capitalists to simply reward workers was futile. Instead, workers could only rely on themselves to carve an “independent path” and build the “real strength” of the movement as western unions had done before them.
This implied not just expanding union membership, but constructing a new ideological framework separate from the ILO and the broader liberal consensus it represented.

As we shall see, the Yūaikai’s shift away from trusting the global liberal consensus and towards independent movement-building marked a critical turning point in the history of Japanese labor. The years following the Washington Conference witnessed the rapid radicalization of the Yūaikai. While the Washington Conference was not the sole cause, its perceived failure and consequent delegitimization of its model of industrial relations, was a significant factor in causing it by forcing workers otherwise disposed towards cooperation with the government to turn to militancy.
III. THE WORKERS DELEGATE AND JAPANESE UNIONISM

At the same time that organized labor was avidly following the proceedings of the Washington Conference, it also underwent a profound transformation. In 1918, the Japanese labor movement had been small and moderate in disposition. Within a few years, it looked almost completely different. The labor movement of 1920–1924 was both significantly larger and more militant. On the one hand, the combination of a wartime boom followed by a post-war recession led to an increase in both union membership and the frequency of industrial disputes. On the other, the resurgence of leftist thought after the Russian Revolution brought an influx of radical intellectuals into the movement. Both contributed to a leftwards shift among unions and the adoption of revolutionary rhetoric and tactics.

However, recognizing that the labor movement radicalization arose out of deeper structural and intellectual developments does not mean we should ignore the significance of the Washington Conference as a turning point in that process. In fact, only by exploring the tensions and ambiguities in the labor movement’s transformation during the postwar era can the ILO’s influence on the development of Japanese trade unionism be understood. For organized labor’s move left was neither experienced homogeneously nor free of conflict. Even if many in the Japanese labor movement radicalized became committed revolutionaries, for others like Suzuki, the adoption of a more militant posture was contingent on the absence of a viable moderate alternative. The Washington Conference’s significance was that it seemed to discredit such an alternative. Without a liberal model of trade unionism to appeal to, the contradictions latent in the labor movement between its “right” and “left” wings lost much of their immediate
significance. Once the ILO did provide Japanese labor with a victory, however, and revived as a potential alternative to militancy, those contradictions exploded into force.

In this section, I will explore labor’s transformation in the early 1920s and the role of the ILO and the workers’ delegate controversy within that process. I will argue not only that the perceived failings of the Washington Conference solidified labor’s radicalization during this period, but that the government’s ultimate decision to recognize unions’ right to appoint representatives to International Labor Conferences in 1924 was instrumental in bringing about the first split within the Japanese labor movement and the maturation of a cooperative relationship between the state and moderate unions.

**The Movement in Conflict: 1919-1924**

In the immediate post-war years, two key developments contributed to a transformation of the Japanese labor movement. One was structural changes in the Japanese economy. The wartime boom significantly expanded the Japanese labor force, while the post-war period of retrenchment led to widespread layoffs and wage reductions.\(^\text{106}\) The result was both an expansion in union membership and the proliferation of industrial disputes. In 1918, there were only 107 unions in Japan, but by 1922 that number had more than quadrupled to 389 with 137,381 members.\(^\text{107}\) Disputes meanwhile increased from only 108 with 8,418 participants in

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1916 to 497 with 335,225 participants in 1919 and 282 with 127,491 in 1920.108 These disputes were not only more numerous but on average longer and more frequently organized by unions.109

Another development was the resurgence of leftist thought. Japanese socialism and anarchism date back to the Meiji Period (1868-1912), but prior to the Taisho Period (1912-1926) left-wing movements were small and ideologically heterogeneous.110 They were dealt a nearly fatal blow by the High Treason Incident of 1911, when 12 radicals, including prominent anarchist Kotoku Shūsui, were executed for allegedly plotting to assassinate the Emperor.111 Only after the war did anarchist and socialist thought witness a revival. Marxism in particular, which did not constitute a distinct ideology in Japan until that point, became increasingly popular in Japanese academia following the Russian Revolution.112 While on one hand, socialism’s resurgence led to the creation of the Japanese Communist Party in 1922,113 it also resulted in a new group of politicized intellectuals, particularly students. Most famous was the Shinjinkai, or “New Man Society,” created by prominent Law Professor at Tokyo Imperial University Yoshino Sakuzō (1878–1933). Yoshino himself was a liberal, but many of his students were socialists and became active in the labor movement. Asō Hisashi (1891–1940), for example, a Shinjinkai member, was a leader in the Yūaikai and a key figure in future intra-labor disputes.114

109 For example, in the Nankatsu region, whereas unions had only been involved in 5 out of 36 disputes pre-1918, between 1918 and 1923 they were involved in 27 out of 77 disputes. Moreover, whereas there had only been 1 dispute pre-1918 that lasted more than a week, between 1918 and 1923 there were 16. Aoki Kōji, Nihon rōdō undō shi nenpyō (Tokyo: Shinseisha, 1968) in Gordon, Labor and Imperial Democracy in Pre-war Japan, 162-164.
This combination of a numerically growing labor movement and the influx of anarchists, communists, and politicized students from Japanese universities changed the character of the Yūaikai. Older moderates like Suzuki were pushed to the side by more radical intellectuals and union leaders from actual working-class backgrounds like Komakichi Matsuoka (1888–1958) and Nishio Suehiro (1891–1981). The Yūaikai marked this shift by renaming itself, first as the Dai Nihon Rōdō Sōdōmei Yūaikai in 1919 and then simply the Nihon Rōdō Sōdōmei (Sōdōmei) in 1921. While the term Yūaikai, literally Society of Friendly Love, was evocative of the cooperative friendly societies in Great Britain, Nihon Rōdō Sōdōmei, or Japanese Federation of Labor, called to mind the American Federation of Labor, or Amerika Rōdō Sōdōmei in Japanese. Ironically, the Sōdōmei would quickly become far more radical than its American counterpart, particularly as the anarchist, and then communist factions gained strength. The Sōdōmei’s founders may have been moderate socialists, but the Sōdōmei’s decentralized structure gave them little power to enforce ideological uniformity. As a result, more militant groups had free rein to promote their own agendas. For example, anarchists successfully pushed for the radicalization of the Sōdōmei rhetoric and the cessation of its advocacy for universal male suffrage in 1920. They also provided an ideological critique of the ILO, which as an organization devoted to moderate trade unionism was antithetical to their revolutionary convictions.

However, in spite, or because, of their successes, the influx of anarchists and communists exacerbated conflicts between competing ideological and strategic visions. Even if moderates like Suzuki began adopting more radical language, he and the majority of the Sōdōmei’s established leadership never became committed revolutionaries. Meanwhile, the anarchists and

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115 Suzuki himself would remain as the honorary President of the Sōdōmei and a prominent voice for the labor movement, but lose direct control of the organization.

communists were hardly allies and each had their own distinct agendas and tactics. The result was constant power struggles within the Sōdōmei. The first emerged between the anarchists and an alliance of social democrats and communists opposed to their push for a decentralized, militant movement. This lasted until 1923, when the anarchist faction collapsed following assassination of anarchist leaders like Osugi Sakae (1885–1923) in the aftermath of the Great Kanto Earthquake. Without a common enemy, the social democrats and communists turned on one another, initiating a second phase of factional infighting that lasted until 1925.¹¹⁷

The ideological heterogeneity and tensions manifest in the Sōdōmei’s internal politics extended to its position on the ILO. Despite denouncing the organization as a capitalist ploy to quash worker radicalism post-Russian Revolution, only for some factions of the Sōdōmei was that critique was fundamentally ideological. For others like Suzuki it was conditional and strategic. Suzuki and the Yūaikai went from enthusiastically embracing the ILO in October of 1919 to unanimously denouncing it only a few months later in January of 1920. Organized labor’s ideological shift may have contextualized its reversal, but changes in the underlying structure or composition of the Sōdōmei cannot explain so sudden a transformation.

An examination of the Fourth International Labor Conferences brings some of the ambiguities and contradictions in the Sōdōmei to light. While the Second and Third International Labor Conferences, which were about maritime and agricultural workers, attracted little attention from the organization, the fourth, held in 1922, was more contencious. A particular object of criticism was the appointment of the Japanese workers’ delegate. Once again, the selection process took place without Sōdōmei involvement, but particularly odious to the organization was the candidate ultimately selected. Tazawa Yoshiharu (1885–1994) was a former bureaucrat and graduate of Tokyo Imperial University who at the time served as Director of the Kyōchōkai, or

Harmonization Society. Created at the impetus of Home Minister Tokonami Takejiro (1867–1935) and Shibusawa Eiichi (1840–1931), the “father of Japanese capitalism,” the Kyōchōkai promoted a conservative vision of “industrial harmony” which posited a paternalistic relationship between worker and employer. Although it was far more liberal and research-oriented than initially intended, organized labor viewed it as a joint capitalist-state enterprise designed to crush independent workers’ organizations.\textsuperscript{118}

In reaction to Tazawa's appointment, the Sōdōmei denounced not just the government’s election process but the ILO itself. The Sōdōmei’s Central Committee used the opportunity to reject the ILO, reaffirming its commitment to “fight to the end against the oppressive persecution of the capitalist class” and stating “the worker and capitalist classes cannot coexist.”\textsuperscript{119} Suzuki’s aforementioned editorial in the Tokyo asahi shimbun was also a response to Tazawa’s appointment and Rōdō took advantage of Tazawa’s position as head of the Kyōchōkai to call the International Labor Conference an “international Kyōchōkai (sekaiteki rōshi kyōchōkaigi)” and a “capitalist conference irrelevant to us workers (wareware to kankei nai shihonkakaigi).” Just as the Kyōchōkai was formed by the “Bourgeoisie” in the aftermath of the 1918 Rice Riots to suppress the working-class, so too was the ILO created “to relieve and curtail the fierce movement for workers’ liberation that arose following the war (taisen no ato, rōdōsha no shiretsu naru kaihōundō wo kanwashi yokusei suru tame ni).”\textsuperscript{120} The language employed, emphasizing class conflict, revolutionary tactics, and the inability to compromise with the

\textsuperscript{120} “Kokusai rōdō kaigi to wagakuni no rōdōkaikyū,” Rōdō 137 (September 1923): 1-2 in Rōdō/Hōsei Daigaku ōhara shakai mondai kenkyūjō, Sōdōmei Gojūnenshi Kankō Inkai hen (Tōkyō: Hōsei Daigaku Shuppankyoku, 1976-1978): 363-364
government, reveals the Sōdōmei left-ward shift as an organization, especially when compared with their statements leading up to the Washington Conference.

However, this deluge of criticism was not unanimous. As the Sōdōmei was denouncing the ILO and claiming Tazawa’s appointment revealed its true character as a capitalist conference, it also appealed to the very International Labor Conference it had judged “irrelevant to workers.” Specifically, a self-proclaimed minority faction of the Sōdōmei submitted a protest against Tazawa to the Conference’s Credentials committee. Unlike the majority of the Sōdōmei, it framed its objection in decidedly moderate terms. It appealed primarily to the text of the Treaty of Versailles to argue that the government’s selection method was illegitimate and only hinted at a critique of the ILO when it noted that “many of the organized workers in Japan have already lost faith in [the International Labour Conference].”

Even as the majority of the Sōdōmei rejected the ILO then, there remained a faction sufficiently committed to it to send a representative all the way to Geneva to submit an official protest. Moreover, a closer examination of many who did denounce the ILO reveals ambiguities in their position. For example, even when Suzuki Bunji criticized the ILO publicly, he never developed a cohesive argument against it. While on one hand, he called it an organization designed to crush “the new and energetic working class,” on the other he was criticizing the government for failing to live up to the ILO’s spirit by appointing an illegitimate workers’ delegate and refusing to implement its conventions. It was often unclear whether the problem was the ILO itself or the government’s failure to conform to its standards. The same ambiguity is evident in an appeal sent by the Sōdōmei to workers’ organizations in Britain, America, and Germany explaining why it refused to recognize the International Labor Conference. The statement was explicitly critical of the ILO, going so far as to suggest other countries should

refuse to send workers’ delegates to the next conference, but the extent to which that criticism was fundamentally ideological is more questionable. For one, the appeal was sent to labor organizations that participated in ILO and concluded by expressing hope that Japanese workers could “cooperate (kyōryōku)” with them outside the International Labor Conference. This suggests a sense of solidarity with the moderate rather than revolutionary wing of the global trade union movement. And, as with Suzuki, the statement spent more time discussing the ILO’s failure to remonstrate the Japanese government than it did denouncing the organization’s inherently reactionary motives, leaving room open for the Sōdōmei to recognize the International Labor Conference should it take a firmer stance towards Japan.

In other words, opinions within the Sōdōmei regarding the ILO reflected the heterogeneity of its membership. Although the majority of the Sōdōmei criticized the International Labor Conference in 1922, there remained a sizable faction openly supportive of the organization. Moreover, among those who did reject the ILO, only in some cases was that rejection fundamentally ideological. For moderate socialists like Suzuki, opposition to ILO emerged more from the Washington Conference’s failures than from any principled commitment to revolution. Anarchist and communist thought may have influenced how they structured their critique of the ILO, but did not generate it.

If the Sōdōmei’s left-ward shift only partially explains its critical perspective on the ILO, the opposite question remains: to what extent did the failings of the ILO promote radicalism within the Japanese labor movement? In part, the question is difficult to answer due to how thoroughly the Sōdōmei relationship with the ILO intertwined with other factors such as the government’s refusal to recognize labor unions and the strategic weakness of the still small and immature movement. Nonetheless, the Washington Conference’s failure to provide concrete

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victories to Japanese labor promoted radicalism by discrediting moderate reformism as a viable alternative. The main reason that the conflicts produced by the Sōdōmei’s ideological heterogeneity did not tear the organization apart, at least initially, was that the range of possible action for Japanese unions was limited. The state refused to recognize unions and most proletarians were disenfranchised, so without representation in the ILO, the Sōdōmei’s moderate faction lacked any legal means to advance its agenda. Militancy was its only option. Had the ILO provided the Sōdōmei with a legal mechanism for pursuing its interests, however, its ideological contradictions would have become more pronounced and made running it as a heterogeneous umbrella organization impossible. As we shall see, this was exactly what happened in 1924.

The Resolution of the Workers’ Delegate Issue

If the post-war years saw a gradual radicalization of the labor movement, the government underwent the opposite process. The state’s hardline stance on unions moderated as the liberal, western model of cooperative labor policy championed by the ILO became more popular in bureaucratic circles. As Sheldon Garon has documented, central to this process were the so-called “Social Bureaucrats,” officials in the Social Bureau of the Home Ministry who studied and took inspiration from labor relations in the West. The Social Bureaucrats, even in the face of conservative opposition, made significant strides in liberalizing Japanese labor policy. The early 1920s saw the implementation of a whole slew of social legislation, such as the 1921 Seaman’s Employment Exchange Act, the 1922 Health Insurance Act, and the 1923 revision of the 1912 Factory Law which expanded its protections and hastened its implementation.

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Various government agencies even prepared drafts of a union law recognizing the right of association to be brought up for consideration.\textsuperscript{125}

The impact of the ILO on these post-war reforms is debatable. The only one that was an actual ILO convention was the Seaman’s Employment Exchange Act and Japan’s rate of compliance with ILO conventions was low. Whether the others can also be traced back to the ILO and the “world trends” it represented is questionable. Ayusawa Iwao, an expert in labor policy who used to work as a staff member of the ILO, attributes most of Japanese industrial legislation during the interwar period to the ILO’s influence.\textsuperscript{126} Others like Garon emphasize the role of labor policies in specific countries like Britain and Weimar Germany as an inspiration rather than the ILO itself.\textsuperscript{127} Regardless of whether discrete pieces of legislation are attributable to ILO, however, one significant policy undoubtedly was: the recognition of labor unions’ right to appoint the workers’ delegate to the International Labor Conference. On the surface, this change seems like a minor one, but it had far broader implications for Japan's labor movement. It marked the informal recognition of unions and the opening of a new era in state-labor relations.

While the Washington Conference accepted Masumoto Uhei’s credentials as Japan’s workers’ representative, the controversy over the Japanese selection method re-emerged at each subsequent conference. At the 1921 International Labor Conference, Shiroshi Nasu, a technical advisor to the workers’ delegation and Professor at Tokyo Imperial University rebuked the Japanese process of selecting the workers’ representative on the conference floor. He argued the government’s method contradicted the spirit of the Peace Treaty and explicitly claimed that the Sōdōmei should have the right to appoint Japan’s labor delegate.\textsuperscript{128} As previously explained,

\textsuperscript{125} Garon, \textit{The State and Labor in Modern Japan}, 254-255.
\textsuperscript{126} Ayusawa, \textit{A History of Labor in Modern Japan}, 170-220.
\textsuperscript{127} Garon, \textit{The State and Labor in Modern Japan}, 83-85.
1922 saw a comparable controversy over the selection method of the workers’ delegate. Interestingly, despite the Sōdōmei’s denunciation of his appointment, Tazawa was no less scathing than Nasu. He called the government’s refusal to shorten working hours “on one hand to be contrary to the dictates of international morality and common humanity and on the other to be deliberately setting at naught their human obligations to their nationals” and again cautioned of the growing disillusionment towards the ILO among workers. His speech was so long that the translation of it had been cut off before it finished and was only admitted into the minutes by a vote.\textsuperscript{129}

It was in 1923, however, that the issue of Japan’s workers’ delegate exploded into the forefront of the Conference’s proceedings. The instigating incident was when Uno Riemon, Japan’s workers’ delegation, renounced his own credentials, going so far as to submit a protest to the Credential’s Committee. In it, he argued that the process by which he’d been selected was antithetical to the spirit of the Paris Peace Treaty and detrimental to the development of trade unionism in Japan. He explained that he was elected primarily by non-unionized workers in clear conflict with the ILO’s commitment to the right of association. Considering that and hoping “to utilize the International Labour Conference in the most effective manner,” he urged the Conference “to warn the Japanese government in a more effective and definitive way than before.”\textsuperscript{130} Such a bold statement, made all the more impactful by the fact that government delegate Adachi Mineichiro had to temporarily step down as President of the Conference while it was being discussed by the Conference, provoked a deluge of criticism not seen since the Washington Conference. The Credentials Committee ultimately upheld his credentials, but its

weak expression of hope that when “organizations are truly representative, agreement will be reached with them” hardly resolved the issue.

Once more workers’ delegates from across Europe rallied to the side of Japanese workers. French representative Jouhaux led the effort on the Credentials Committee, submitting a minority report that condemned the Japanese government. In the general session, he was joined by the British, Belgian, Dutch, and Czechoslovakian workers’ delegates, all of whom gave speeches urging Japan to rectify its policy. By contrast, the only people speaking in Japan’s defense were the Parra Perez of Venezuela, who was more concerned about the potential precedent of “[reflecting] blame on the conduct of sovereign States” than the actual issue and M. Zaalberg of the Netherlands, who only tentatively agreed that Japanese labor unions were not truly representative.

In order to resolve the controversy, one of the British government representatives, Henry Bucknall Betterton, proposed an amendment to the Credential’s Committee report to include stronger language. The amended report expressed hope “that in the future methods may be found for choosing the Workers’ Delegate which will give general satisfaction and will avoid the protests of the organised workers which have now been repeated at four International Labour Conferences” and concluded by saying “the Committee feels confident that such methods will successfully be discovered before next year’s Conference.” Framed diplomatically, there was still no mistaking

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131 Ibid., 71, 73, 85.
132 Ibid., 75.
133 The full text of the amendment reads: “While not questioning the legal validity of the method adopted by the Japanese Government on this occasion, it is hoped that in the future methods may be found for choosing the Workers’ Delegate which will give general satisfaction and will avoid the protests of the organised workers which have now been repeated at four International Labour Conferences. Appreciating as it does the progressive efforts which have already been made by the Japanese Government in this direction, the Committee feels confident that such methods will be successfully discovered before new years’ Conference. Ibid., 82.
the force behind the recommendation or the implicit threat that Japan’s next workers’ representative might be rejected. The amendment passed by an overwhelming 75 to 5.

The Conference had been building to such a decision for some time. Prior reports by the Credentials Committee were less forceful and unspecific with regards to a timeframe, but also expressed hope that Japan would act “in conformity with Article 389 of the Treaty of Peace” when selecting workers’ and employers’ delegates. The report presented to the Fourth International Labor Conference of 1922, despite not being “able to conclude that the Japanese Government has failed to fulfill the obligations under Article 389 of the Treaty of Versailles,” still diplomatically recommended Japan change its policy and “not hesitate to appoint the Workers’ Delegate in complete conformity with Part XIII of the Treaty of Peace.” The statement made in 1923 was simply a harsher version of past recommendations and the culmination of years of persistent protesting by Japanese workers. Once it became clear that the issue would not go away, and was only getting more contentious, some forceful recommendation by the conference was necessary lest the ILO lose its credibility as an organization devoted to free labor.

Now faced with an implicit ultimatum from the International Labor Conference, the Japanese government was forced to make a decision on whether to continue its policy. In addition to international pressure from the ILO, the issue was becoming more serious domestically. In the House of Peers, for example, Count Yanagisawa Yasue, who had attended

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134 The role of the British government in proposing this amendment is interesting given Britain’s staunch defense of Japan at the First Conference. The fact that Japan’s greatest ally urged a change in its selection process likely added weight to the statement. Alternatively, considering that the proposal was made at the beginning of a new sitting, it is also possible that the consent of the Japanese government had been received beforehand.

135 Due to the amendment being passed via a show of hands, a more precise breakdown is not available. Ibid., 90.

136 Record of Proceedings: International Labour Conference, 1921, 610

137 "Familiar as it is with the spirit of progress manifested by the Japanese Government, this Committee feels sure that the Government will encourage the 'free development of the workers' organisations, and that in the future, it will not hesitate to appoint the Workers' Delegate in complete conformity with Part XIII of the Treaty of Peace." Record of Proceedings: International Labour Conference, 1922, 457.
the Fifth International Labor Conference as an advisor to the government delegation, questioned Home Minister Mizuno Rentarō (1869–1949) on whether the selection method for the workers’ delegate would change. When Mizuno gave an evasive answer, saying the government was looking into the matter, Yanagisawa angrily replied “if I was just inquiring whether you were considering it, I wouldn’t have asked any questions.”

The reason for Mizuno’s hesitance was continuing bureaucratic infighting. While the Home Ministry, the Social Bureau in particular, and the Foreign Ministry were in support of recognizing unions, the Ministry of Agriculture and Commerce, as well as officials in the army and navy, were more hesitant. This particular fault line is unsurprising. The Social Bureau had already been advocating for the recognition of unions as part of their vision of industrial relations that took the West as its model and for the Foreign Ministry the international embarrassment caused by the continuing controversy was a threat to Japan’s prestige. By contrast, the Ministry of Agriculture and Commerce was more conservative on labor policies and generally opposed to the Social Bureau’s reformist efforts.

The former side ultimately won the day, in large part because the Cabinet agreed that Japan could no longer maintain an inflexible position on unions without damaging its international standing. On February 15th, 1924, the government announced it would henceforth appoint the Japanese workers’ representative in consultation with labor organizations with more than a thousand members. The significance of the change was not lost on anyone. It constituted a de facto recognition of unions and implied a dramatic step forward in Japanese labor policy. Although a more moderate stance towards unions had been slowly developing for

138 “Rōdō kumiai no shōri: kokusai rōdō kaigi daihyō mondai,” Tokyo asahi shimbun, February 7, 1924.
139 Ibid.
140 Garon, The State and Labor in Modern Japan, 108.
141 For example, the Osaka asahi shimbun declared the move “the first step towards the recognition of labor unions” and credited the International Labor Conference with having forced the government’s hand. “Rōdō kumiai kōnin no daiippo: rōdō daihyō senteiho,” Osaka asahi shimbun, February 17, 1924.
some time, it was the issue of Japan’s workers’ representative that forced the first concrete step towards full recognition of the right to organize.

The New Equilibrium

At the same time the Cabinet was meeting to reconsider the selection method for Japan’s workers’ representative, the Sōdōmei gathered for its annual convention, held in Tokyo from February 10 to the 12th. If the Sōdōmei had been drifting farther left since the end of the war, the Sōdōmei convention of February 1924 marked a “change of direction” for the movement. In a clear repudiation of the communist wing of the organization, for the first time since 1920 the Sōdōmei expressed its support for universal suffrage, parliamentary tactics, and, unsurprisingly, the ILO.

In a statement drafted by the convention, the Sōdōmei laid out the rationality behind its new approach. Despite being masked with Marxist-Lenninist rhetoric, the statement articulated a clear tactical shift. It began by announcing that due to “fierce worldwide international competition,” Japan had skipped the liberal phase of capitalism and entered the imperialist phase, the “last stage of capitalism.” As a result, the government was “endowed with the flavor of autocracy,” creating “many hurdles to suppress the freedom of the proletariat.” However, the statement continued, while in such circumstances, it is difficult for the proletariat to clearly perceive its role, the insistence on “purity” by “minority members” of the Sōdōmei had only led to “inflexibility.” Hence, the Sōdōmei needed to adopt policies “that are more realistic and positive.” The specific measures proposed were as follows: “after the implementation of universal suffrage, we must use our right to vote effectively and gain partial political advantages;
we must promote political awareness among the proletariat; and we must find ways and means of promoting our goals through participation in the International Labor Conference.”

In other words, militant tactics would be abandoned in favor of more “realistic” and ultimately reformist alternatives, namely parliamentary organizing and the ILO.

The Sōdōmei’s sudden reversal was particularly dramatic considering its response to the Fifth International Labor Conference, held only a few months earlier. Unlike in 1922, the Sōdōmei refrained from sending a protest to the Credentials Committee of the Fifth International Labor Conference of 1923, likely out of a sense of futility. It only released a statement denouncing the selection process for the workers’ representative and the ILO. The rhetoric employed was by then fairly standard. It explained how the ILO had been established post-war to suppress the rising working class, denounced the Japanese government’s selection policy, and concluded by stating “we cannot trust the International Labor Conference or our own government” and that “we more and more keenly feel that we must pioneer our own path by relying solely on our strength as a class.”

The timing of this shift, coming only three days before the Cabinet announced its new selection policy, was not a coincidence. For the more moderate faction of the Sōdōmei, militancy was only embraced in the absence of a viable alternative. Since the failure of the Washington Conference and “world trends” to mitigate government intransigence in 1919, no such alternative existed. Now that the ILO had finally lent its support to Japanese workers and the government was on the verge of informally recognizing unions, gradual reformism once more became a

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143 The protest sent by Japanese unions to the Credentials Committee was not in the name of the Sōdōmei, but rather the Kansai Rōdō Kumiai Dōmeikai. *Record of Proceedings: International Labour Conference, 1923*, 60-63.
144 Warera ha kokusai rōdō kaigi narabi ni wagakoku seifū wo shinzuru koto ha dekinai, warera ha warea no kaikyūteki iryoku ni yotte no mi, warera no shiro wo kaitaku subeki koto wo masumasu tsūkan suru no de aru.” *Rōdō undō gaikyō* (Tokyo: Shakai-kyoku, 1923): 60-63.
practical course of action. As such, the Sōdōmei established leaders seized the opportunity to change course. They placed their faith in the ILO once more and returned to the parliamentary tactics they had abandoned.

The government’s new selection method marked yet another critical turning point in the political evolution of the Japanese labor movement. Similar to how the government’s own reversal had been building for some time, there were already hints that labor was moving away from radicalism. These two phenomena were of course interrelated and one of the most visible signs of a renewed willingness on both sides to cooperate occurred in the aftermath of the Great Kanto Earthquake of September 1, 1923.\textsuperscript{145} Here we can see the beginning of a dual-pronged approach to dealing with the labor movement. On one hand, the aftermath of the earthquake bore witness to the extrajudicial police murder of radical socialists and anarchists like Ōsugi Sakae. On the other, it was the first time the government officially cooperated with trade union leaders. Gotō Shinpei (1857–1929), who was in charge of rebuilding Tokyo, invited Suzuki and the Sōdōmei to assist in relief efforts. This accommodation marked an important step towards a more conciliatory labor policy. Looking back on the moment, Suzuki would later write that the Great Kanto Earthquake taught labor leaders “that spouting theories is useless for trade unions.” Instead, the movement needed “actions rather than words, practice rather than theory, reality rather than idealism.”\textsuperscript{146}

Still, if the Sōdōmei’s return to moderation was foreshadowed, the change in the workers’ delegate’s appointment undoubtedly accelerated it. Cooperation in the aftermath of the Great Kanto Earthquake constituted by its nature an extraordinary measure and one that occurred primarily between Goto and Suzuki rather than between the state and the Sōdōmei more

\textsuperscript{145} Gordon, \textit{Labor and Imperial Democracy in Prewar Japan}, 177-181.
generally. The new selection method for the workers’ delegate by contrast was an institutional change made by the Cabinet that had wide-reaching implications for the Japanese labor movement. It resulted in the informal recognition of unions, a recognition enforced by international consensus. The right to select Japan’s workers’ delegate signaled a permanent change in the state’s labor policy and offered unions unprecedented institutional legitimacy.

It did not take long for the Sōdōmei to complete its return to moderation. While the Sōdōmei’s reverse course in the wake of the Fifth International Labor Conference was incomplete, as evidenced by the continuing use of Marxist-Leninist rhetoric, its rejection of Communism proceeded very rapidly. The inclusion of such phrases in the Sōdōmei’s statement such as “we do not expect full liberation of the working class by a Diet dominated by the bourgeoises” and “we shall engage in an all-out war against the oppression of the capitalist class” militated the obvious rejection of revolution by the Sōdōmei’s leadership, but there was no mistaking the organization’s new direction. Unionized workers elected Suzuki Bunji as Japan’s workers’ representative to the Sixth International Labor Conference\(^\text{147}\) in clear statement of support for the anti-communist ILO. The same year, Sōdōmei intellectuals like Akamatsu Katsumaro began articulating a vision of “realist socialism (genjitsuteki na shakaishugi)” that explicitly rejected communism.\(^\text{148}\) In response, communists became bolder in attempting to seize power within the Sōdōmei, taking control of the large Kantō Iron Workers’ Union in April 1924. Escalating tensions culminated at the Sōdōmei’s next national convention in March 1925. During the convention, Sōdōmei leaders expelled communists from the organization, leading to the first split in the Sōdōmei. The communists went on to form a rival organization, the Nihon Rōdō

\(^{147}\) Large, *Organized Labor and Socialist Movements in Interwar Japan*, 58-60.

\(^{148}\) Ibid., 180-200.
Kumiai Hyōgikai, or Hyōgikai, which competed with the Sōdōmei for leadership of the labor movement until its forced dissolution in 1928.\textsuperscript{149}

The divide between the communist and socialist factions of the Sōdōmei, or the “left” and “right” wings of the movement, was entrenched by the simultaneous maturation of the state’s new labor policy. Key to this process was the ascension of Katō Takaaki (1860–1926) to the premiership. The leader of the more liberal Kenseikai Party, Kate came to power in April of 1924 after the Second Movement for Constitutional Government brought down Kiyoura Keigo’s so-called “Cabinet of Peers.”\textsuperscript{150} The Kenseikai had already committed itself to Universal Suffrage and had close ties to the Social Bureaucrats in the Home Ministry.\textsuperscript{151} Once in power, it enacted a series of reforms that further articulated the state’s more liberal stance towards labor. The General Election Law of May 5 1925 extended the suffrage to all men 25 and over without tax qualifications, Article 17 of the Police Law, which had outlawed union activities, was repealed a year later, and a law officially recognizing unions was drafted and submitted to the Diet in 1926. Simultaneously, the Diet passed the Peace Preservation Law on May 12th, 1925, making it illegal to form or join “an association with the aim of altering the kokutai or the system of private property,” i.e. any association committed to communist revolution.\textsuperscript{152}

In implementing these policies, the Kenseikai’s administration marked the institutionalization of a liberal industrial policy characterized by a carrot and stick approach. Universal Suffrage, which extended voting rights to workers, made organized parliamentary

\textsuperscript{149} Ibid., 66-69.
\textsuperscript{151} Ibid., 140-150.
action possible while decriminalization of union activities strengthened the labor’s legal position. Complementarily, the outlawing of anti-capitalist activities suppressed the left-wing of the movement and forced the right-wing to more sharply separate itself from the communists. The result was a labor movement divided between a moderate faction led by the Sōdōmei which was increasingly open to cooperation with the state and ILO and a communist faction, centered on the Hyōgikai, in open conflict with the government.\textsuperscript{153}

Once more, the ILO played a central role in altering the character of the Japanese labor movement. If the Washington’s Conference’s failure to side with Japanese labor against the state spurred the movement’s radicalization, the ILO finally living up to Suzuki’s expectations that “world trends would no longer allow Japan to be the exception,” brought it back to moderation. And just like the Washington Conference’s significance lay in reinforcing the already developing militant tendencies of the labor movement, the Fifth International Labor Conference accelerated, rather than created, the new accommodation between the Sōdōmei and the state. It was the International Labor Conference’s ultimatum that strengthened the Social Bureau’s position in face of conservative bureaucratic opposition. And it was the state’s new selection method that gave moderates in the movement an opening to reverse course and reject their communist rivals.

\textsuperscript{153} Another split within the labor movement would occur as labor unions were discussing forming parties to compete in the 1927 election, with a third labor federation, the Nihon Rōdō Kumiai Dōmei being formed.
IV. THE ILO IN A TIME OF CRISIS

After the resolution of the workers’ delegate controversy, the ILO lost much of its immediate significance for organized labor. The Sōdōmei monopolized representation to the International Labor Conferences and drifted increasingly towards accommodation with the government. Japan’s participation in the ILO reflected the new state of Japanese labor relations, which came to be characterized less by conflict between the state and labor and more on confrontations between nations as vertically integrated units.

However, if the ILO no longer had disruptive implications for Japan’s labor policy, it assumed new importance for its foreign relations in response to dual crises of the Great Depression and the Manchurian Incident of 1931. The Great Depression created a global climate of protectionism that was to Japan’s commercial disadvantage. While this drove Japan towards colonial expansion as a means of overcoming its perceived deficiency of land and resources, it also reinforced the need for an international forum where Japan could advance its economic interests in the face of new trade restrictions. Second, following the Kwantung Army’s establishment of the puppet state of Manchukuo in Manchuria, Japan withdrew from the League of Nations over its criticism of Japanese imperialism. By rejecting the centerpiece of the Wilsonian international order, Japan threw its relationship to that order into question. Now faced with the prospect of diplomatic isolation, demonstrating Japan’s continued commitment to international cooperation became imperative.

Both needs found an outlet in the ILO. As an organization dedicated to international cooperation in the economic sphere which was associated with the League yet silent on Japanese imperialism, the ILO emerged as a space where Japan could simultaneously advance its
commercial interests and remain active within the global community. This shift towards the ILO post-League reframed Japanese internationalist discourse in the lead-up to WWII. Different actors used Japan’s exit from the League of Nations to advance radical changes to Japan’s global engagement, but the dominant response was to revise, rather than reject, Wilsonian rhetoric to match Japan’s new international position. This new Wilsonianism was more explicitly reconciled with imperialism, but also placed new emphasis on economic and cultural institutions like the ILO as a basis for global peace rather than political, or “coercive,” organizations like the League of Nations.

Japan at the International Labor Conference, 1924-1933

Just as the revised selection method for the workers’ delegate marked a critical turning point in the development of the labor movement, so too did it open a new stage in Japan’s relationship with the ILO. The controversy, which had since the Washington Conference been the focus of intense criticism from the workers’ delegations, was resolved to the satisfaction of all parties and no longer a matter of debate. Instead, attention shifted to the other major controversy that had emerged at the Washington Conference: Japanese exemptions from and refusal to comply with ILO conventions. Although similarly a focal point for criticism, the issue was subtly different from that of the workers’ delegate’s credentials. As previously mentioned, whereas at the Washington Conference criticism of the Japanese selection method came almost entirely from workers, attempts to force Japan to adopt more rigorous industrial legislation were also supported by government and employer delegates. Not just the fault lines of the debates

154 A protest was actually raised in 1924 by agricultural workers, who were not included in the new selection method, but it was dismissed without controversy by both the Credentials Committee and the general conference. See Record of Proceedings: International Labor Conference, 1924 (Geneva: International Labor Office, 1924):
were different. The stakes were as well. Considering the ILO’s proven inability to force the adoption of specific policies, the surrender of state autonomy over labor legislation was no longer a legitimate concern. Rather, the danger was to Japan’s international image and prestige as a great power committed to social justice. Consequently, the government placed a renewed emphasis on defending and legitimating its industrial conditions at the International Labor Conference.

As always, the government’s harshest critic was the Japanese workers’ representative. Japanese workers, as they had done since 1919, continued to use the space to present their demands before a global audience. In 1924, the first year with Suzuki Bunji as the workers’ representative, the Japanese labor delegation vigorously denounced the government’s failure to improve the conditions of workers. It took particular issue with the Director’s Report, that praised the Japanese government’s new selection method, calling it “a remarkable act of homage rendered by an earnest, thorough and keen people.” Mitsukune Yonekubo, a technical advisor to the workers’ delegation and acting representative, rebuked this assertion by explaining the “unsatisfactory state of labor legislation in Japan” and the government’s refusal to implement conventions. Declaring that “the failure of any nation to adopt humane conditions of labor is an obstacle in the way of other nations who desire to improve conditions in their own country,” he called on the Conference “to use its influence to improve the state of labor legislation in those countries where it is backwards.” As the government was unwilling to independently improve labor conditions, such influence was the “only way left to [Japanese] workers.”

Suzuki himself was perhaps even more critical. He recognized the existence of “progressive elements in the

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155 The Director’s Report was an annual report compiled by the ILO Director, in this case Albert Thomas, to be reviewed by the International Labor Conference. *Report of the Director* (Geneva: International Labor Conference, 1924): 57-60.
Diet,” namely the Kenseikai, but he depicted Japanese society as infected with the remnants of feudalism. Capitalists acted like “feudal lords of earlier days,” demanding the worker practice “inherited Japanese virtues” in devoting “his soul and body to the interests and benefit of his master,” while condemning new ideas as “importations from the Western countries.” In light of these obstacles, Suzuki proposed a resolution to the Selection Committee calling for an investigation “regarding liberty of association” and “its actual application in different countries.”

However, on its own, workers’ criticism posed little threat. Japanese workers had used the International Labor Conference to denounce the government since Washington, but without the support of other delegations, nothing substantive could come of it. After 1923, no such support emerged. No other workers’ representatives joined their Japanese peers in denouncing Japan’s insufficient labor legislation. Instead, international anti-Japanese criticism emerged from a new source largely independent of working-class interests: India.

Beginning in 1925, India established itself as Japan’s harshest critic in the International Labor Conference. All of its delegates, workers’, employers’, and government, called out Japan for its failure to adopt ILO conventions, albeit for different reasons. The workers’ representative and General-Secretary of the All India Trade Union Congress, Narayan Malhar Joshi, claimed that Japan’s inadequate industrial legislation was holding back working conditions in India and said it was “greatly disappointing” that Japan was not “[guiding] the way of progress” as a “leader of Asia.” Thomas Smith, the Employer’s Delegate, put it in more strictly economic

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157 Ibid., 151.
158 Ibid., 538.
159 While as an intestate organization, the ILO did not include colonies, India and other British dominions participated as full states. Other than Japan, India was the only Asian country to send a full delegation to the International Labor Conferences, as China only dispatched a government delegate. See N.K. Kakkar, India and the ILO: The Story of Fifty Years (Delhi: Sultan Chand, 1970)
terms, arguing that Japan’s cheap labor allowed it to undersell India’s textile industry and warning that India might similarly refuse to adopt ILO conventions should Japan fail to improve its conditions. He also framed the issue in terms of Asia’s progress by stating: “On the decision of Japan rests the fate of countless laboring thousands in the Far East.”  

Lastly, one of India’s government delegates, Atul Chandra Chatterjee, stated that Japan was “lagging behind” in terms of industrial legislation and needed to join India in “[leading] the Asiatic countries.” He specifically appealed to Japan as a fellow eastern power to “demonstrate to the world that we are in no way behind the Western countries in matters of social and economic progress.”

India repeated these criticisms at subsequent Conferences and was at times backed up by delegates from other countries. Similar to the Japanese workers’ delegate, on its own India’s denunciation of Japan had little chance of effecting change. The Indian delegation never proposed concrete measures to pressure Japan to adopt specific conventions, nor would such efforts have succeeded. Still, the new focus on conflict with India reflected two changes in Japan’s participation in the ILO. The first was a shift in the contours of debate at the International Labor Conferences. Previously, criticism had come from workers’ representatives as a block. Now, it came primarily from a single nation united across class lines. The second was the new emphasis on Asia and Japan’s role as an industrialized “Far Eastern” power. While the ambiguities in Japan’s unique role as a modern Asian empire informed its relationship to the ILO since Washington, it was only in the mid-1920s that they were directly addressed, by Japan’s critics and its own delegates. All of Japan’s representatives increasingly began speaking from the position of Japan as an Asian country.

161 Ibid., 107-109.
162 Ibid., 112-115.
163 In 1926 for example, an advisor to the workers’ delegation Margaret Grace Bondfield, agreed that Japan’s industrial legislation was poorer than India’s and expressed regret that she had once “went all over [Britain] praising Japan.” Record of Proceedings: International Labor Conference, 1926 (Geneva: International Labor Office, 1926): 120.
Both contributed to a renewed emphasis on Japan as a cohesive national unit. Gradually, the International Labor Conference transformed from a space where internal conflicts between the state and labor were played out in a global arena to one where Japan defended itself from and articulated its relationship to external actors. This shift is particularly dramatic in the case of the employers’ delegates. Japanese employers’ delegates had previously been relatively silent at International Labor Conferences, but became increasingly vocal in explaining the position of Japanese capital in the late 1920s. Often unprompted by any criticism, employers’ delegates repeatedly emphasized the need for the ILO to forsake its European perspective and pay more attention to the “historic and geographic elements” or non-western countries.\textsuperscript{164} “Historic and geographic elements” generally referred to a uniquely Asian character which resisted the uniform application of western-derived standards. This character, embodied in the “family system,”\textsuperscript{165} supposedly mitigated worst effects of capitalism by maintaining a paternalistic relationship between employer and employee. However, as seen by “geographic elements,” also included were material conditions such as Japan’s lack of resources or space that served as constraints on Japan’s industrial growth.\textsuperscript{166}

Japanese delegates’ new emphasis on Japan’s unique circumstances provided a far more sophisticated justification for Japan’s poor industrial legislation. Whereas in the Washington Conference and its aftermath, Japanese delegates simply pleaded industrial immaturity in seeking exemptions, by the late 1920s such arguments were grounded in a combination of Japan’s unique characteristics as an “Oriental power” and specific economic conditions, many of which were outside of Japan’s control. Unlike earlier justifications which were marked by an uncomfortable

\textsuperscript{165} Government and employer delegate’s often invoked the idea that Japan had a unique “family system” characterized by a paternalistic relationship between employer and employee that mitigated the worst aspects of capitalist exploitation.  
\textsuperscript{166} For example, see Record of Proceedings: International Labor Conference, 1930 (Geneva: International Labor Office, 1930): 144-145.
ambiguity about whether Japan was a “State of Chief Industrial Importance” or a still developing country, Japan’s new tactic partially transcended such contradictions. By placing emphasis on Japan’s unique characteristics, and in fact taking pride in them, Japanese delegates could stress differences with the West without necessarily implying inferiority. In doing so, they implicitly critiqued the core values of the ILO itself by suggesting that it enforced Western derived standards on countries where they were not applicable. This hinted at a different idea of “universality,” based on consideration of nations’ special circumstances rather than uniform and equal treatment.

Workers underwent a similar development. Suzuki and the Sōdōmei never stopped using the International Labor Conferences to criticize the Japanese government and push for a stronger commitment to the right of association, but they began focusing more on the same issues addressed by employer delegates, often invoking the same rhetoric. Starting in 1927, Suzuki regularly pushed the ILO to pay more attention to the specific conditions of East Asia and even proposed on multiple occasions that an International Labor Conference be held there.\textsuperscript{167} Of course, in stressing the need to pay more attention to the East, they often made opposite points. Whereas employers’ claimed that Japan had unique conditions that made the uniform application of labor conditions impossible, workers’ delegates sought to disprove such assertions and deny that any uniquely Asian “family system” existed to mitigate the worst effects of industrial capitalism. In fact, they argued, if it existed at all, the “family system” represented a feudal remnant that demanded more, not less, attention from the ILO. Nonetheless, more and more distinctions between the government, employers, and workers declined as they began addressing the same problems with the same rhetoric. Often as not, these problems were not bifurcated.

across class-lines as had previously been the case, but along national or cultural lines such as Japan vs. India, West vs. East, or increasingly resource-poor vs. resource-rich.

In part, this transition was reflective of the ILO’s turn away from activism. By the mid-1920s, the organization’s inability to achieve concrete improvements in working conditions, along with its passage of the most significant labor conventions, led to a shift in emphasis to research and ILO activities. Discussions increasingly focused less on important industrial regulations and more on questions of staffing, international economic conditions, and ILO studies. Criticism of Euro-centrism within these areas was endemic from India, South Africa, and other non-western member-states. Japan simply followed the border trend. However, changes in Japan’s relationship to the ILO undoubtedly also emerged from the moderation of the Japanese labor movement. As we have seen, following the resolution of the workers’ delegate question, the right-wing of the movement that participated in the International Labor Conferences became more open to cooperation with the state. Its activities at the International Labor Conference reflected that.

**The Great Depression and the Manchurian Incident**

Japan’s new relationship with the ILO, centering national rather than class divisions, had the potential to reduce the organization to irrelevance. Japan’s international reputation at International Labor Conferences may have been a concern of delegates, but isolated from outside circumstances, it had few practical implications for broader political or economic questions. Indeed, the activities of the International Labor Conference were steadily becoming more and more insular. Focus shifted towards annual Director’s reports and questions of staffing and
research instead of drafting new labor conventions. The only ILO-related incident that drew much attention from the Japanese public was ILO Director Albert Thomas’s visit to Japan in 1928 and his subsequent report on Japanese labor conditions.  

Two contemporaneous crises reversed the ILO’s slide into irrelevance. The first was the Great Depression. The Great Depression impact on Japan was less severe than in the West. The initial shock was less dramatic and the recovery more rapid. Nonetheless, both domestically and internationally, the depression had important implications for Japan. Domestically, it exacerbated a sense of resource scarcity and overpopulation. While many Japanese believed that Japan faced unique problems as a poor, overcrowded island country prior to the depression, those problems assumed greater urgency in response to the global economic crisis. In particular, the perceived distress of the countryside drew increasing attention and elicited efforts to revitalize the rural areas. Internationally meanwhile, Japan’s comparative success during the Depression did no favors to its reputation. As Japanese exports expanded, they were met with high tariff barriers and accusations of “social dumping.” “Social dumping” refers to the practice of employers’ hiring cheaper labor than is available in the market where they are selling their product, allowing them to undercut their competition. Westerners, and also Indians, claimed that because Japanese labor costs were low, Japanese employers were practicing “social dumping” by

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170 For example, justifications of Japanese imperialism were often framed in terms of Japan’s resource scarcity and the consequent need to acquire new resources. In actuality however, it is doubtful such a scarcity ever existed. See Yasukichi Yasuba, “Did Japan Ever Suffer from a Shortage of Natural Resources Before World War II?” The Journal of Economic History 56, no. 3 (Sep., 1996): 543-560.
171 See Kerry Smith, A Time of Crisis: Japan, the Great Depression, and Rural Revitalization (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2001).
exporting their goods to higher wage countries. According to these accusations, the increasing penetration of Japanese products into Western and South Asian markets was solely attributable to an unfair advantage derived from poor working conditions. From a policy standpoint, it is questionable how important accusations of “social dumping” were in impelling higher tariffs, but they provided justification for anti-Japanese trade barriers and the two were strongly associated in the Japanese press.  

The second crisis was the Manchurian Incident. In September, 1931, officers in the Japanese Kwantung Army in Manchuria fabricated a Chinese attack on a railway line near Mukden as an excuse to launch a full takeover of the region. Japanese forces rapidly expelled warlord Zhang Xueling’s troops from the three Manchurian provinces and established a new, ostensibly independent, state separate from the Chinese nationalist government. This state, named Manchukuo, was put under a puppet regime dominated by the Kwantung Army and turned into the centerpiece for a new phase in Japan’s colonial expansion.

Japan’s action had massive repercussions. The metropolitan government had not given prior approval for the creation of Manchukuo, but it was nonetheless presented as a fait accompli. The growing influence and independence of the army came with a consequent decline of parliamentary politics. By the early 1930s, the appointment of the Prime Minister from the dominant party in the House of Representatives had become a political norm. That ended on May 15th, 1932 when a group of radical naval students assassinated Prime Minister Inukai Tsuyoshi, President of the Seiyukai Party. His successor, admiral and former Governor-General of Korea

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Saito Makoto, was not associated with any party, and each subsequent Prime Minister would similarly be chosen without regard to the Diet.  

At the same time, as the first significant act of colonial expansion since WWI and a clear violation of China’s territorial integrity, Japan’s claim that Manchukuo was a legitimate and independent nation-state garnered little sympathy internationally. In 1932, the League of Nations sent a commission under Lord Victor Bulwer-Lytton to investigate the Manchurian Incident. The resulting Lytton Report, while hardly scathing, ultimately proposed non-recognition of Manchukuo and Manchuria’s return to Chinese sovereignty. When the League of Nations General Assembly adopted the report in February 1933, the Japanese delegation under Matsuoka Yosuke walked out of the assembly hall. Japan’s official withdrawal from the League followed soon after.

The destabilization of the post-war international order instigated by these two events had the potential of making the ILO even more irrelevant for Japan. In fact the opposite occurred: Japanese participation and interest in the ILO did not appreciably decrease during the 1930s and in certain respects increased. On one hand, the sense of resource scarcity exacerbated by the Depression pushed Japan to expand its exports, but because its commercial opportunities were limited by tariff barriers erected in response to the perceived threat of Japanese products, in order to do that Japan needed assuage suspicions that it was an irresponsible actor in the global economy. The ILO emerged as such a space where Japan could clarify its economic interests and

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179 See Burkman, Japan and the League of Nations, 165-193.
180 For example the 1935 Employer’s Delegate Fukuo Watanabe stated that the ILO became more important to Japan following its exit from the League both because it was the “only international institution with which Japan could collaborate internationally” and because “it dealt with all kinds of economic questions” relevant to the global crisis. Record of Proceedings: International Labor Conference, 1935 (Geneva: International Labor Office, 1935): 278-280.
disprove the accusations of “social dumping” leveled against it. Moreover, by appealing to Wilsonian notions of free trade, Japan could launch its own attacks on the Western powers for their high tariffs and restrictive immigration laws which restrained its commercial opportunities and heightened its perceived deficiencies in land and resources. At the same time, exiting the League put Japan at risk of being diplomatically isolated. Japan had only left the organization due to its non-recognition of Manchukuo, not because of a total rejection of the international system it represented. Some factions may have been prepared for such a rejection, but the government and the broader public were unwilling to commit to a dramatic break with the global community. 181 By continuing to participate in the ILO then, the government could demonstrate its commitment to “world peace” and international cooperation despite its turn to aggressive militarism in theory at odds with those principles.

The ILO’s new utility is evident in the heightened participation of Japanese delegates at the International Labor Conference during the 1930s. Representatives not only started to speak more assertively than before, but the issues they addressed also changed to reflect Japan’s new global position. Most significantly, in order to counter accusations of Japanese “social dumping,” Japanese delegates began marshaling extensive trade and industrial statistics to demonstrate that Japanese exports were not the threat perceived by western countries. In 1934, for example, government delegate Yoshisaka argued that Japanese exports made up only 3.13% of the global trade, a share smaller than the Netherlands and Belgium, that it was increasing only by around .20% annually, that Japanese imports, especially from western countries, far exceeded exports, and that Japanese working conditions were not appreciably worse than in Italy or Poland. 182 A year later, the Japanese employers delegate made similar arguments, again minimizing the threat

181 See Abel, The International Minimum, 23-40.
of Japanese exports and attributing Japan’s economic recovery to its unique “family system” and the successes of Finance Minister Takahashi Korekiyo’s fiscal policies rather than the over-exploitation of labor.\textsuperscript{183}

Such attempts to use the International Labor Conference to disprove western accusations of “social dumping” were repeated in similar terms each year. These debates were not just confined to the International Labor Conference. They also drew widespread interest from the Japanese press. For example, newspapers widely reported on Assistant Director of the ILO Fernand Maurette’s inspection of Japanese labor conditions in 1934. The public was particularly enthused when he eventually concluded that the success of Japanese exports was primarily due to industrial rationalization and technological advances rather than the exploitation of labor.\textsuperscript{184}

The International Labor Conference also provided the opportunity for Japan to go on the offensive in calling out the practices of the Western powers, most notably in the realm of tariffs and immigration restrictions. This began in 1930, when Kurimoto Yunosuke, the Japanese employers’ representative, used the Conference as an opportunity to highlight the economic effects of restrictive tariffs. Declaring them “selfish acts of the advanced countries” that impeded “the true interests of the working class,” he called for an investigation into the “several influences upon the social and labour problems arising out of the severity of the tariff war.” He framed his proposal in unmistakably Wilsonian terms, describing the lowering of tariffs as a form of “disarmament in the economic sphere” that was more effective as a “measure for promoting world peace” than limitations on military capacity.\textsuperscript{185} Another target of Japanese criticism was restrictive immigration laws. A year later in 1931, the employers’ delegate once


\textsuperscript{185} Record of Proceedings: International Labor Conference, 1930, 144-145.
more drew attention to tariffs as a potential cause of unemployment and stressed in particular restrictions on “the free movement of capital, emigration and immigration.” If nations “favoured with abundant resources or accumulations of capital” allowed people from less favored nations to exploit said resources and capital, it “would materially help to relieve unemployment throughout the world.”\(^{186}\) This was a not-so-subtle criticism of the American 1924 National Origins Act, which was heavily criticized in Japan for effectively banning Japanese immigration.\(^{187}\)

The government, likely due to diplomatic considerations, rarely joined employers’ representatives in criticizing other nations. Still, government representatives occasionally hinted at similar critiques. In 1934 for instance, government representative Yoshisaka, in pointing out the contrast between the growing progress of industry and continuing poverty, stated “the impoverished peoples of the world cannot be relieved from their distress by the extreme nationalistic economy of the various countries.”\(^{188}\) Interestingly, workers’ representatives were far more likely to mimic employers in criticizing western countries at the International Labor Conference. In 1930 for instance, Suzuki Bunji argued that the division between resource-scarce countries with “limited land and overpopulation” and countries with “unlimited resources” that closed their borders was “absurd.” He demanded specifically that the ILO shift attention away from “statistics and documentary information” to the “international control of migration policy.”\(^{189}\) At the 1937 Conference the same sentiment is evident. There, the workers’ delegate Koizumi Hidekichi criticized the role of “economic nationalism” in not only pushing the world towards war, but harming working conditions internationally. He stated that this was especially

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\(^{187}\) For example, Nitobe Inazo, a famous internationalist who had been educated in the US and was married to an American woman, stated that he would refuse to step foot in the United States until the National Origins Act was repealed.


true for Japan, which as a country “where the area is small, the population over-abundant and the natural resources poor,” “freedom of migration and liberty of trade are essential.”

In making these arguments, Japanese representatives repeatedly invoked Wilsonian values. Although the bulk of their case relied on substantive data, they went out of their way to process their claims through the rhetoric of post-war internationalism. In 1934 for instance, Yoshisaka Shunzo, a government delegate, reaffirmed Japan’s belief that “the structure of world peace must have equilibrium and be based upon a foundation of social justice” and he was fully committed to “cooperate with the International Labor Organization for the betterment of conditions of labor and for the prosperity of the world.” Two years later he sounded much the same. In 1936 he stated that although a strong national defense was necessary during a time of “insecurity,” “excessive armaments are a threat to the peace of the world.” True peace could only be established by “proclaiming social justice between nations as well as between individuals” by removing barriers of trade and immigration. He even specifically rejected the introduction of “the regional principle” by holding exclusively Asian conferences, saying that a truly global ILO was not only necessary, but “the only hope of the world” in light of the failings of other “international bodies.” Workers were as always just as passionate about “social justice,” while as we have seen employers’ delegates strategically invoked Wilsonian rhetoric to ground their arguments.

Whether Japanese delegates’ commitment to “world peace” or “social justice” was sincere is irrelevant. Clearly Wilsonian rhetoric retained some salience or at least utility. As the

\[190\] Record of Proceedings: International Labor Conference, 1934: 140.
\[193\] For example, in 1936 the employers’ delegate also expressed support for disarmament and stated “we are ready to participate heartily in all work of international collaboration, and we are convinced that the International Labour Organisation will continue to develop along these lines.” Record of Proceedings: International Labor Conference, 1936, 148.
above examples demonstrate, internationalist rhetoric was made to serve Japan’s broader goal of advancing its commercial interests in face of economic nationalism. By couching its arguments in a Wilsonian belief in free trade and international equality, Japan could imbue its attacks on immigration and tariff barriers with a detached moral imperative. It also allowed Japan to distance itself from the aggressive and militaristic image it had acquired following the Manchurian Incident. Actively declaring Japan’s continuing support for international cooperation and world peace at International Labor Conferences was one way of maintaining a positive image without having to address the root of the problem: Japanese imperialism in mainland China.

The New Internationalism

Japan’s activities at International Labor Conferences during the 1930s constitute only half the picture. In order to fully understand the ILO’s new significance, we must also turn to its role in Japanese internationalist discourse following its exit from the League of Nations. Japan may have continued to participate in the International Labor Conference because doing so served a clear utility, but that decision did not go without challenge nor could it be made without reconsidering the meaning of Japan’s relationship with the organization post-League. Even if exiting the League did not require rejecting the system it represented, it did require articulating a new relationship to that system. To what extent and in what way would Japan continue to participate in it? Would Japan continue to invoke Wilsonian ideals and rhetoric, and how would they be squared with its renewed militarism? In discussing whether to remain in subsidiary
organizations like the ILO, Japan was forced to confront these questions in negotiating its place in the world post-League.

Exiting the League itself was a subject of little controversy in Japan. Support for the acquisition of Manchuria was almost universal, and whether to subject colonial expansion to the purely moral authority of the League was never seriously considered. Even the League’s more ardent supporters refused, or were incapable of, making it an issue. For example, former Under-Secretary-General of the League Nitobe Inazo acquiesced to the decision with barely any protest.\textsuperscript{194} He still publicly stated support for the League’s values, but he criticized its stance on Manchuria and even went on a US speaking tour to defend Japan’s actions.\textsuperscript{195}

However, if Japanese membership in the League became a non-issue post-Lytton Report, the question of its participation in the ILO remained. Japan was not required to leave the League’s subsidiary organizations, nor was that the logical conclusion of its turn towards a more muscular imperial policy. After all, far from being fundamentally hostile to it, since Versailles the League had been indelibly intertwined with imperialism. All four of the countries with permanent seats on the League’s Council were great empires and one of the League’s functions was to reconstitute and stabilize the global imperialist order following WWI. This purpose was made manifest by its Mandate’s Commission which granted German and Ottoman territories as \textit{de facto} colonies.\textsuperscript{196} Indeed, membership in the League had never been a barrier to Japan pursuing its imperial interests. While Japan was committing itself to Wilsonian values at Versailles, it was also massacring Korean protesters appealing to those same values in advocating

\textsuperscript{195} Ibid., 262-270.
\textsuperscript{196} For example, see Susan Pedersen, \textit{The Guardians: The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).
independence during the March First Movement.\(^{197}\) Even during the 1920s, military adventurism was hardly uncommon, especially later in the decade as Japan aggressively responded to the Northern Expedition. In a manner not dissimilar to the Manchurian Incident, Japanese soldiers occupied the city of Jinan in May 1928 and later assassinated Manchurian warlord Zhang Zoulin in June.\(^{198}\)

Still, if internationalism and imperialism were compatible, Japan’s withdrawal from the League threw the two into tension. In debating whether to continue participating in League-affiliated organizations like the ILO, the Japanese government and other interested organizations were deciding how to resolve that tension. Broadly speaking, in domestic discussions of whether to remain in the ILO, three distinct responses emerged, each advocating a different position on ILO and each grounding their position in a different vision of Japan’s place in the international order. The first can be best characterized as the social democratic response. Generally, those associated with socialist parties and unions were the most open to remaining in not only the ILO, but the League as well, and were the most critical of Japanese militarism. The Social Masses Party (Shakai Taishūtō), a social democratic party founded by the Sōdōmei, was one of the few actors that openly supported both the League and the ILO. In its statement in support of the ILO, it denounced the “aimless diplomacy of the bureaucracy and military (muhōshin naru kanryō gunkan gaikō)” and warned of the potential for another world war now that Japan had withdrawn from the League. In the place of military and capitalist rule, it advocated the establishment of a “people’s diplomacy (kokumin gaikō)” based on cooperation.


with the Chinese people and a non-aggression pact with China. The Japan Labor Conference
(Nihon Rōdō Kumiai Kaigi), an umbrella organization composed of “right” and “centrists”
unions, echoed the same sentiment. Like the Social Masses’ Party, it advocated a “people’s
diplomacy” and warned against withdrawing from the League. It was particularly insistent that
Japan remain in the ILO. To not do so would be a “great disappointment to the working class
(rōdō kaikyū ni ichidai shitsupō wo atae)” considering the ILO’s crucial role in the improvement
of Japanese labor conditions. It concluded by stating in no uncertain terms that “there is no other
way to present the essence and demands of Japan to the people of the world than our
international labor movement.”

In contrast with the Social Democratic response with its full affirmation of the League
and its emphasis on an anti-militarist “people’s diplomacy,” right-wing organizations made the
opposite argument. The early 1930s witnessed the growing prominence of so-called “patriotic
unions” and right-wing political parties that rejected mainstream liberalism and social democracy
in favor of ultranationalism. Emphasizing Japan’s national essence, pan-Asianism, and the
unification of society under the Emperor, these organizations were the most resolutely opposed
to both the ILO and the League. In their place they proposed an alliance of Asian countries
united against the Western, capitalist imperialism upheld by the League. Perhaps the ILO’s most
vociferous critic was Koike Shirō, a leader in the patriotic labor movement and future Diet
member, who associated the League and the ILO with socialism, the IFTU, and western
exploitation. Just as the League was designed to secure western hegemony at the expense of

“Eastern peace,” the ILO was a tool of the Amsterdam International aimed at maintaining the

199 “Nihon no jisshitsu oyobi yōkyū wo sekai kakukuni no minshū ni shōkaisuru no ha kono warera no kokusaiteki
undō igai ni ha danjite sonzai shinai.” Kokusai rōdō kaigi dattai mondai kankei shiryō (Tokyo: Shakai-kyoku, 1933):
47-8.
200 Ibid., 48-9.
201 See Gordon, Labor and Imperial Democracy in Prewar Japan, 255-261 and Garon, The State and Labor in
Modern Japan, 192-8.
competitiveness of western industries. Other nationalist actors made similar points. The Nihon Rōdō Dōmei, a nationalist labor federation, rejected continuing participation of the ILO as “an outrage (bōkyo).” Instead, it advocated workers unite under a total war mentality: “we are convinced that in this time of national emergency the mission of manufacturing workers is the same as soldiers and sailors and that we should stand at the front lines of the nation as a productive army devoted to national self-strengthening.” Meanwhile, the Osaka-Kobe Japanese Labor Federation (Nihon Rōdō Dōmei Hanshin Rengōkai), another patriotic labor organization, called the League a “bourgeois imperialist international focused on European politics with the aim of stabilizing British, French, and American imperialism.” In the place of the League and the ILO it advocated an “Asian socialist international (ajia shakaishugi intaanashonaru)” between Japan, China, Manchuria, and India to establish “human equality and a balance of resource (jinrui byōdō shigen kōhei).” The Japanese National Socialist Party made many of the same points in rejecting the ILO, denouncing the League, calling for the establishment of an “Asian league” and “carrying out internal improvements under the spirit of ‘one sovereign, one nation’ to prepare for national emergency.”

Both of these responses essentially attempted to resolve the tension between imperialism and internationalism by advocating a radical reconfiguration of Japan’s place in the world. Social democrats sought to reject imperialism in favor of popular cooperation between different nations, while nationalists argued for a full embrace of a military mindset and subordinating Japan’s international activities to the expansion of its influence in Asia. Ultimately, however, neither the

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202 Koike Shirō, Kokusai rōdō kikan wo dattai subeshi (1933).
203 “WARERA HA HIJOJI NIHON NI OKERU SAISAN RÖDÔSHA NO SHIMEI HA RIKU, KAIGUNJIN TO HITOSHIKU KOKURYOKU KYÔKA NO SEISAN GUNTAI TOSHITE KOKKA NO SAIZSEN NI TATSU BEKI MONO NARI TO KAKUSHIN.” Kokusai rōdô kaigi dattai mondai kankei shiryô, 52-3.
204 Ibid., 50-1.
205 “‘Ajia’ renmei no kakuritsu wo hakari issai no shihonshugiteki sonritsuwo bunsaisuru to doujini sokuryoku ni ikkunbanmin no kokumin seishin ni teshhitaru kokunaiteki kaizen wo dankô motte hijô nihon ni sonaeyo.” Ibid.m 53-4.
social democrats nor nationalists triumphed in the short-term. There was no “people’s diplomacy” nor did Japan reject the global western order in favor of an “Asian League.” Instead, the dominant response from the government and the press was to stress continuity rather than rupture. In simplest terms, withdrawing from the League had been solely due to its non-recognition of Manchukuo and not out of any rejection of its values. As such, Japan would continue to participate in the ILO to demonstrate its continued belief in the post-war international order. In its formal statement announcing Japan’s continued participation in the ILO, the government stated that Japan’s “belief in the establishment of world peace and love of human justice has not in the least diminished, but instead become more and more strong.” Japan remained committed to cooperating with other nations and the ILO in order to achieve the “noble national purpose” of “establishing lasting peace on the basis of social justice and humanitarian principles,” and as such would continue to send representatives to the International Labor Conference.206

Liberal newspapers like the Asahi Shimbun followed the government’s example. The Osaka Asahi Shimbun for example defended Japan’s continuing participation in the ILO, arguing that the government only withdrew from the League due the Manchurian question and not because it disagreed with its “ideological spirit (shugi seishin).” There was no reason Japan was unable continue to participate in international “organizations related to peace and cultural activities rather than political problems (seijimondai wo hanareta heiwa jigyō ya bunkashisetsu ni kansuru mono).” The article claimed that the ILO was one such institution, having a “humanitarian and social policy character (jindōteki moshikuwa shakai seisakuteki seishitsu)” instead of a “political hue (seiji kōdōteki na shikisai).”207 In another article, the Tokyo Asahi

206 Kokusai rōdō kaigi dattai mondai kankei shiryō, 55-56.
Shimbun denounced the “short-sighted view (kinshiganteki kenkai)” of those who advocated withdrawing from the ILO. Citing the Imperial Rescript on Japan’s withdrawal from the League which said “from here on we will continue to cooperate with plans for peace (heitwa kakuhan no kito wa kyōkō mata kyōryoku shite kawarunaku)” and claiming that “international cooperation starts first from economy and culture (kokusai kyōchō wa mazu keizai to bunka to kara hajimari),” it argued that Japan should redouble its efforts at such cooperation to “declare at home and abroad its sincerity (seii wo chūgai ni nobuaki suru tame ni).”

Despite attempts by socialist and right-wing organizations to advocate a radical restructuring of Japan’s relationship with the world post-League then, that demand failed to garner widespread support amongst the public or government circles. The dominant response was to minimize its significance and contextualize Japan’s actions within pre-existing internationalist rhetoric. Still, as much as the official line was to emphasize continuity, withdrawing from the League mandated some reconceptualization of post-war internationalism to reflect Japan’s new position. How this reconceptualization occurred was already hinted at in the liberal press, but was more clearly articulated by internationalist intellectuals.

Two essays by Ayusawa Iwao in the aftermath of the Manchurian Incident reveal the contours of this new internationalism. Ayusawa Iwao was a Quaker Haverford-graduate and expert in labor policy who worked throughout the 1920s as a staff-member at the ILO in Geneva and later as head of the organization’s branch office in Tokyo. Few in Japan were more devoted to the League and the ILO than Ayusawa, and following Japan’s exit from the League, he was forced to reconsider that commitment. The essays, both published in America, attempted to explain Japan’s new position to a global audience. In the first, titled “The World Order and

208 "Kokusai rōdō kaigi dattairon no futō," Tokyo asahi shimbun, April 8, 1933.
209 It is important to note that in those capacities he was an employee of the ILO rather than the Japanese government.
Tolerance,” Ayusawa attempts to redefine the purpose of international organizations and their role in securing world peace. In particular, he re-examines the League’s commitment to “coercive justice” and application of “sanctions.” While perhaps a logical extension of the rationality of domestic law to the international stage, such an approach was ineffective and failed to address existing “political, social, racial, and economic injustice.” In order to address these shortcomings, Ayusawa advocated “tolerance,” by which he meant international cooperation based on “voluntary concessions and mutual goodwill on all sides” rather than sanctions. In the second essay, written in response to American criticisms of Manchukuo, he vehemently defended the legitimacy of Japan’s actions in Manchuria. Specifically, he cited the country’s need for natural resources and called out western hypocrisy, stating that Asians were conscious that it was only by “conquest” that the “white races of Europe” had come to dominate a “third of mankind.” He concluded by once again cautioning against the application of “sanctions” both as a principle and an effective means of political pressure.

Together, Ayusawa’s two essays depict an internationalism more explicitly reconciled with imperialism and less reliant on the “coercive justice” embodied by the League of Nations. It was an internationalism which could contextualize Japan’s actions in Manchuria and its withdrawal from the League as not only legitimate, but ostensibly fully compatible with a desire for global peace. Expansion in Manchuria was fully consistent with the already established norm of global, Western-led imperialism and Japan’s exit from the League was only a rejection of futile attempts at “coercive justice,” not international cooperation writ-large. A similar

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210 Ayusawa Iwao, World Order and Tolerance, MC 969, Box 1, Correspondences 1932, Frederick Ayusawa Iwao Papers, Haverford Special Collections, Haverford, Pennsylvania, USA.

211 Ayusawa Iwao, Typescript of response to American criticism of Manchurian situation, MC 969, Box 1, Correspondences 1932, Frederick Ayusawa Iwao Papers, Haverford Special Collections, Haverford, Pennsylvania, USA.

212 For a discussion of these discourses, see Jessamyn R. Abel, The International Minimum: Creativity and Contradiction in Japan’s Global Engagement, 1933-1964 (Hawai‘i: University of Hawaii Press, 2015): 63-70.
ideology is evident in the press, albeit in a less sophisticated form. Ayusawa’s disparagement of “sanctions” in particular can also be seen in the press’s distinction between “political” and “economic and cultural” international organizations. Under this dichotomy, the ILO assumed newfound importance as one of the non-coercive, economic organizations meaningful international cooperation was supposedly based on, while the League, and Japan’s withdrawal from it, was deemed irrelevant due to its misguided political orientation.

This new internationalism, based on a revision of Wilsonian principles as articulated by intellectuals like Ayusawa and the liberal press, ultimately came to triumph. The state continued to participate in the ILO and as we have seen continue to invoke Wilsonian rhetoric even after it left the League. In fact, even as they tried to distinguish themselves from it, neither the socialists nor the nationalists operated completely outside the new consensus in discussing international affairs. Social democratic unions had at times an ambiguous stance on the Manchurian issue. Some denounced Japanese aggression, but others displayed more enthusiasm for Japanese militarism. An example of this as relates to the ILO is an account written by Minagawa Toshikichi, a labor advisor to the 1932 International Labor Conference. A member of the Sōdōmei and Shakai Taishūtō, Minagawa was nonetheless very critical of the Chinese delegation’s criticism of Japanese actions during the Conference. He even invoked socialist rhetoric to delegitimize the Chinese claim, calling the Chinese government a “mutual enemy of the working class (rōdō kaikyū no kyōtsū no teki)” and arguing that fighting against capitalism was the “greatest cooperation for the sake of world peace and working-class interests (mottomo idai naru sekai heiwa to rōdōsha no reiki no tame no kyōryoku).”

Just as many workers were not resolute in denouncing the follies of bureaucratic politics, so too were nationalists more ambiguous about the League than might initially appear. In certain

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respects the nationalist response did not entail a complete rejection of the post-war so much as its reappropriation. As we have seen, in advocating Asian unity right-wing political actors often spoke of an “Asian league” or “Asian international,” effectively arguing for regional versions of existing global institutions. Some even supported staying in the ILO. The New Japan People’s Alliance (Shin Nihon Kokumin Dōmei), a right-wing political organization, echoed the right’s criticism of white imperialism and need for Asian unity, but still argued that Japanese representatives should “energetically participate (sekyokuteki ni sanka shusseki)” in the International Labor Conference. Doing so, it claimed, would provide an opportunity to explain “the Japanese race’s historic mission (nihon minzoku no rekishi teki shimei)” and emphasize the Japanese people were “true lovers of peace and opposed to war.”

As a result, it would be fair to say that simultaneous belief in post-war internationalism and Japanese colonial expansion was universal in the early 1930s. Differences arose primarily as regards to how to reconcile the emerging conflict between those commitments. Social democrats largely tried to transcend the conflict through an appeal to popular international cooperation and anti-capitalism, nationalists tried reconfigure international organizations on a regional, Asian basis, while the government attempted to shift focus away from coercive political institutions like the League to ostensibly social, cultural, and economic institutions like the ILO.

Of course, as the decade progressed, Japanese political discourse shifted further right, even though somewhat ironically, social democratic and nationalist organizations experienced institutional growth inversely proportional to their ideological influence. The Japanese labor movement actually reached its pre-war height during the period After the effective elimination of the communists due to state suppression, the movement once more united under a single labor

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214 Kokusai rōdō kaigi datte mondai kankei shiryō, 55.
215 Japan’s pre-war peak was 993 unions with 408,662 members in 1935. Rōdōsho, Rōdō gyōsei shi, 2 vols. (Tōkyō: Rōdō hōrei kyōkai, 1961-1969): 1:1306-7 in Garon, The State and Labor in Modern Japan,
federation, the Zen Nihon Rōdō Sōdōmei and a single political party, the Shakai Tashūtō. Now free of divisions, the Shakai Tashūtō managed to become the third largest party in the Diet with 37 members after the election of 1937. By contrast, patriotic unions and national socialist parties never archived the same level of success. Patriotic unions remained a small minority of the labor movement and failed to effectively challenge the dominance of the bourgeois parties in the Diet. Similarly, the radical nationalist faction of the military was suppressed following its failed coup attempt on February 26th, 1936. However, there was no mistaking that the ideological influence of the right only increased as the decade progressed. The right’s dream of an “Asian League” eventually manifested in the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere in 1940 while domestically the creation of the Imperial Rule Assistance Association the same year effectively abolished independent political parties and unions in favor of a single, quasi-fascistic party under the Emperor. Even social democratic organizations were swept up in this turn towards hyper-nationalism and became increasingly aligned with the state, eventually accepting their dissolution in 1940.

Still, if the nationalists would ultimately become predominant in the long-term, their victory was slow to develop and only fully triumphed after Japan had entered extraordinary wartime conditions. Japan’s commitment in practice and rhetoric to the post-war Wilsonian order as seen through the ILO is interesting in contrast to both Germany and Italy. Germany left the ILO in 1933 the same time it left the League. Italy did the same in 1937. Even before that, ever since Mussolini’s rise to power, the selection method of the Italian workers’ delegate had been regularly criticized for privileging fascist unions. The appointment of Edmondo Rososni, a leader

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216 Large, Organized Workers and Socialist Politics in Interwar Japan, 198-201.
217 See Berger, “Politics and Mobilization in Japan, 1931-1945.”
of the fascist syndicalist movement, in 1923 was met with workers’ protest at the International Labor Conference, and the controversy re-emerged at each subsequent conference over the next decade.\textsuperscript{219} By contrast, Japan not only continued participating in the ILO post-League, but its relationship with the organization changed very little. The Sōdōmei continued to appoint the Japanese workers’ representatives and they continued to criticize the state’s repressive attitude towards unions at International Labor Conferences.\textsuperscript{220}

These differences demonstrate that Japan’s turn to militancy and ultranationalism was a more fractured and gradual process than in Italy or Germany. There was more room for continued commitment to liberal internationalism even after Japan had embarked on its path to war. In the early and mid-1930s especially, nationalist ideologues were unable to effectively challenge the continued salience of liberal internationalist ideas. That continued salience has significant implications for Japan’s foreign policy in the 1930s. In revising the dominant image of Japan as a country devoted wholly to foreign expansion and colonialism, many scholars have argued that Japan did not so much reject internationalism after the Manchurian Incident as shift its focus from globalism to regionalism.\textsuperscript{221} While certainly this argument has its merits, less attention has been paid to the many ways in which Japan continued to engage in international cooperation on a global scale. Especially in light of the world-wide economic crisis of the time and the unfair barriers it felt itself to face, Japan had no choice but to vigorously participate in international organizations like the ILO to defend its interests. This participation was grounded in an internationalist ideology which far from rejecting Wilsonian principles only attempted to

\textsuperscript{220} For example, in the 1937 Conference the workers delegate said it was “extremely regrettable” that the ILO had yet to address the problem of freedom of association and criticized the government’s failure to pass a union law and its excuses for failing to improve the conditions of work in the munitions industries. Record of Proceedings: International Labor Conference, 1937 (Geneva: International Labor Office, 1937): 142.
\textsuperscript{221} See, Jessamyn R Abel, The International Minimum, Burkman, Japan and the League of Nations, 2013 and Takami Akami, Internationalizing the Pacific, all of which argue the 1930s marked less a rejection of internationalism than a shift from globalism to regionalism.
modify them to reflect Japan’s withdrawal from the League and the newfound emphasis on economic rather than political concerns.
CONCLUSION

Japan ultimately withdrew from the ILO in 1938 in response to renewed criticism from the League of Nations over Japanese aggression in China. Even before that, Japan’s invasion of the mainland in 1937 and the protracted war that followed shifted attention away from the organization. Japan dispatched no delegates to the 1938 International Labor Conference, the last it participated in before its withdrawal. The only Japanese representative in attendance was Kitaoka Juitsu, who was already stationed in Geneva as the permanent representative to the ILO. To a country embroiled in total war, debating the finer points of labor policy was no longer a worthwhile endeavor, and with the outbreak of hostilities in Europe only a year later, the ILO ceased many of its activities regardless.

When Japan finally rejoined the ILO in 1951, it looked very different. Eight years of war and the subsequent American occupation radically transformed Japanese society and politics, particularly in the area of labor relations. Suzuki Bunji’s prediction that the right of association for Japanese workers would eventually be secured by the intervention of outside forces proved true, only it was the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP), and not the ILO, that achieved it. One of the first acts passed by the Imperial Diet under SCAP order was a labor law modeled on the American Wagner Act of 1935. Also enacted were the Labor Relations Adjustment Law of 1946 and the Labor Standards Law of 1947. Partially as a result of labor’s new legal protections, union membership increased dramatically during the occupation. Prewar union membership never surpassed half-a-million workers, or 10% of the labor force. By July

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1946, there were nearly 4 million unionized workers and in 1948 over half the labor force, around 6 and half million workers, were union members.  

However, the radical transformation brought about by the Occupation should not distract us from the important continuities between the pre- and post-war era. No matter how radical the changes it enacted, SCAP could only go so far in reshaping Japan’s political system. Japanese labor relations were no exception. Especially after the Reverse Course of 1948 made suppression of left-wing movements a priority, the same carrot and stick approach pioneered by Kato Takaaki’s Cabinet came to characterize the state’s stance towards unions. In response to the abortive attempt by communist leaders in the movement to organize a general strike, SCAP and the Japanese government launched an anti-communist purge while also cooperating more closely with moderate unions. Just as the state’s labor policy was not totally reinvented, neither were the tactics employed by unions. In particular, Japanese unions continued to appeal to the ILO as a means of exerting pressure on the Japanese government. A protest lodged by the General Council of Japan’s Trade Unions and the Locomotive Engineer’s Union in 1957 regarding the eligibility of public employees for union membership and police interference in union affairs became one of the largest, longest, and most complex issues ever addressed by the ILO. It lasted until 1965, involved all of the organization’s supervisory mechanisms, and ultimately resulted in a compromise wherein the government agreed to operate in greater conformity with ILO conventions.  

As I have examined in my thesis, Japan having an unusually active and contentious relationship with the ILO was nothing new. Ever since 1919, Japan’s ambiguous position in the modern world both motivated and problematized its engagement in the organization. If the

224 Ibid., 69-71.
225 Ibid., 3-5.
modern world is often understood in terms of a binary opposition between the advanced, imperialist, capitalist, and industrialized west on one side and the backwards, stagnant, and traditional east on the other, Japan occupied a liminal space between the two. It was a non-white empire undergoing a process of industrial, capitalist development but yet to achieve parity with its western peers. The result was tensions that could only be resolved in an international context. By participating in organizations like the ILO, even if their activities were irrelevant or even detrimental to its material interests, Japan could assert that it was a responsible and progressive leader in the international community and negotiate the ambiguities of its economic, political, and at times cultural circumstances. However, in attempting to articulate its relationship to a global order whose norms were largely outside of its control, Japan exposed itself to criticism from not only other nations, but also disenfranchised groups within its own borders, most notably labor unions. They could contest the state’s self-presentation with different readings of Japanese conditions that had different implications for domestic policy. Since the Washington Conference of 1919, such conflicts between the state, workers, and representatives of other nations over the international understanding of Japan’s industrial circumstances and legislation characterized Japan’s relationship with the International Labor Organization.

Primarily, these conflicts manifested themselves in the twin controversies of the selection method for the labor delegate and Japanese non-compliance with ILO conventions. As we have seen, both had significant consequences. For still immature Japanese labor unions, securing the right to appoint the Japanese workers’ representative promised de facto recognition of the right to organize and became one of the movement's core demands. In many ways, the ILO’s willingness to actively intervene in response to their protests determined the appeal of moderate reformism and shaped not only the internal development of the labor movement, but state policy
as well. The issue of Japanese compliance with ILO conventions meanwhile opened up a debate on Japanese labor conditions with implications for Japan’s reputation as both a leader in the post-war international community and a responsible industrial power. This debate became of critical importance after the onset of the Great Depression and the rise of economic nationalism made international cooperation vital to Japanese commercial interests.

The dispute of 1957-1965 was simply a continuation of such conflicts. In petitioning the ILO, unions were drawing on a long established tactic stretching back to 1919. Furthermore, during the immediate aftermath of WWII, Japan was still unusually vulnerable to the weight of international opinion. Although the contradictions arising from the dissonance between its status as a great power and its undeveloped social legislation no longer existed in a defeated Japan, Japan’s need to restore its international reputation following the war and its continuing immaturity in many areas served a similar function. This history, stretching from the Versailles Conference and into the post-war era, demonstrates the unique role of international organizations like ILO in shaping modern Japan. Operating outside the paradigms of great power diplomacy, imperialism, or western-derived world trends that often define Japan’s international history, the ILO was a space where state and non-state actors could collaborate and come into conflict. It facilitated the exchange of ideas and information about labor policy and the states’ responsibility to social justice, provided an institutional mechanism for workers to bring their demands to the world, and had the capacity to directly intervene in and interact with members’ internal politics. It was a dynamic site for global connections that transcended purely national, or even international, frameworks.
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