"The Disappearance of the Japanese Working Class Movement"

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Orii Hyuga Remembers the Labor Movement at NKK

We may begin with this statement published in 1973 by Orii Hyuga, a personnel manager at Nippon Kokan [NKK], Japan's second largest steel maker. In it he recalls the super-charged atmosphere of the steel mill in the late 1940s. It offers a neat, concrete point of entry to the fundamental concern driving my ongoing inquiry into postwar labor history in Japan.

In May, 1949 I was assigned to head the labor section [of Nippon Kokan]...[During negotiations] large crowds of union members were present, in addition to the union and management committee representatives who sat at the bargaining table. It was a sort of mass bargaining, probably a strategy to intimidate management with the force of the crowd. But on the other hand, the union leaders at the time had not yet built sufficient authority, and the mass of union members would not necessarily accept the results of bargaining carried out [privately] by union and management representatives, so it was common practice for a mass of onlookers to join the negotiations.

Negotiations at our company were typical. The union would even use a PA system to make periodic progress reports to the members, crowded outside, who could not fit into the conference room. On numerous occasions the union leaders would come to understand the management position, but then, influenced by the response of onlookers or union members who heard the report over the PA, they would come back with an even stronger position. In such bargaining, union members would shout at the top of their voices: Take a look at the workers dining hall. We haven't seen a grain of rice in days. Do you think we can do heavy labor to rebuild the nation's industry drinking soup that doesn't even taste of miso, with maybe 4 or 5 dumplings in it? Prices are going up. Even rationed goods have doubled or tripled in price. We want a cup of rice a day! We want the money to buy it!"

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This is clearly a scene of intense confrontation. It reveals an energy among the union's rank and file which its leaders could barely contain. By 1959, one decade later, relations between union and company were, if anything, more antagonistic. After a sharp setback with the Red Purge of 1950, a surge of activism began in 1952 and turned the union into a powerful body. NKK's union became extremely militant in its willingness to confront the company by striking; it became quite radical in its desire, at the local level, to control the workplace and, at the national and international levels, to push for a socialist transformation. While some workers were uncomfortable with both militance and radicalism, as here defined, and others opposed it vociferously, a strong majority of the workforce voted in favor of two extended, major strikes in 1957 and 1959.

Konda Masaharu was Oriii's subordinate in the labor section at NKK. In 1992 his wife laughingly described him as "the last soldier of the Imperial Japanese Army." Konda himself told me that for two weeks at the height of the 49-day strike at NKK in 1959, he had slept on a cot at the company. On the day before a mass bargaining session of the sort very much like that described above by Oriii, the union threatened to bring 120 people but agreed to limit the delegation to 20. Yet at daybreak, 120 union members showed up after all, and Konda's superiors had not yet arrived (Oriii included). "I stood and faced them, resigned to a beating. Besides the 14th of August, 1945, when I was stationed at Atsugi Base awaiting the American arrival, these were the tensest days of my life."2

But surprisingly enough, there has not been a single strike at NKK, or any major steel mill, since this 1959 strike, an action which in any case achieved none of the union's demands. There have been no further confrontations between company and union at NKK that partook of the full flavor of Oriii's memoir or Konda's recollection. In the wake of this disastrous action, a previously minority faction of union members, who advocated a cooperative stance toward the company, won a closely fought election. They took control of the union executive and local committees and never looked back. Oriii's memory of intense confrontations across the bargaining table was published just 14 years after this strike. Yet Oriii began the above account with the following crucial comment: "To be honest, I approached the new position with great trepidation, for the labor-management relationship at the time was one continuous, intense confrontation. First of all, negotiations back then were menacing to an extent impossible to imagine today." This claim brings us to our central problem as we consider the history of labor and management in postwar Japan: how do we explain the transformation of what is "imaginable" to people in a society, a transformation that in this case happened in little more than a decade?

Was Oriii simply exaggerating what he clearly recalled as the "bad old days?" Or is it possible that some great historical conjuncture of factors between the 1950s and early 1970s so changed society and consciousness as to make it plausible to describe such a confrontation, once commonplace, as now unimaginable?
Although Orii and Konda surely engaged in excesses of rhetoric in presenting their versions of the recent past, I basically answer "No, they were not fundamentally exaggerating," and "Yes, something really happened" in the 1950s and 1960s to profoundly transform Japan, to cause—if you will—the disappearance of the Japanese working class movement.

One way of putting the matter is to say that in these postwar decades, a system of institutions and ideology emerged that coalesced into a durable, hegemonic structure and relegated an early postwar labor radicalism to the realm of unimaginable behavior. Taking a cue from Japanese critics of this system, I call it the "enterprise society" (keizyō shakai). I define this as a society that identifies the good of all with the good of the corporation. This is a society whose members by and large accept and value positively an ethos of competition and deserving survival of the fit, as well as a belief that the interests of capital, of management, and of employees are in fundamental accord. These hegemonic ideas are reinforced by institutions of mass media and schooling as well as corporations themselves, and by public policies as well as popular values.

Although I will not provide evidence of the following claim in this paper, I should make clear my comparative understanding of this hegemony. Certainly it is not peculiar to Japan. It strikes me, rather, that in their own somewhat different ways both Japan and the United States are extreme examples in postwar history of the enduring ascendance of an enterprise society that has global reach. In both these two countries, the enterprise society over time came to limit and prescribe for its inhabitants that which seemed possible, natural or imaginable. At the same time, I strongly suspect that the grip of the enterprise society may be tighter and more enduring in Japan than anywhere else in recent decades. Thus, not only are foreign observers who know only the quiescent unions of late 20th century Japan likely to be surprised by Orii's account; as early as the 1970s, most Japanese people, together with Orii, would have had trouble imagining such an "unnatural" scene. They would have agreed that early postwar society was part of "another world," and that militant confrontations of employees against employers were at best relics appropriate to a bygone day, if not foolish acts in any era.

In this paper I will introduce a constellation of five factors, the conjuncture of which is responsible for Japan's postwar transformation. The first four factors are treated briefly, while a fifth factor that may be most particular to the Japanese case is covered at greater length. At this preliminary stage in an ongoing inquiry, I will be doing more in the way of raising questions that must engage our attention than providing answers.

[1] International political economy

The first factor is the international political economy. In the case of labor in Japan, this term quite specifically refers first of all to United States Cold War policy, particularly the American role in promoting what Charles Maier has aptly called "the politics of productivity."
Quite simply, not only during the allied occupation of Japan (1945-52), but also through the 1950s and into the 1960s, the United States played an important role in bringing on the demise of the activist unionism that so troubled Orii and Konda. A variety of American policies first bolstered the prospects of the far more cooperative, if not co-opted, unions that emerged out of numerous bitter strikes in the 1950s, and then helped these unions entrench themselves in the 1960s. A second relevant aspect of international political economy is the impact of domestic and international competition, in particular upon industries and companies fighting to win and expand their share of global export markets. Such competition allowed managers to put forward a powerful plea that employee cooperation was vital to enable the firm to survive or prosper.

But we must also recognize that the American drive to promote the politics of productivity and oppose left-wing unions took place in Europe and Latin America as well as Japan, and that competitive environments faced corporations elsewhere as well. Thus, I am inclined to argue that while these factors certainly helped enable the triumph of the enterprise society, they did not determine the distinctive shape of this society as it evolved in Japan from the 1950s through the 1970s and beyond.


A second element in the conjuncture behind Japan's postwar transformation is surely provided by the Japanese state. There are in fact several ways in which the state figures into the story. The law, and its interpretation by the nation's ruling bureaucrats, has served to inhibit the growth of the sort of union that challenged NKK so vigorously in the 1950s, and to promote the ultra-cooperative unions that emerged in later years.

But again, as with US economic policy toward Japan, I would argue that while the state created a context in which the enterprise could become Japan's hegemonic institution, and so is surely a necessary part of the story, it is not a sufficient factor to explain the particular, even the...
peculiar, totality of the male worker's integration into the world of the company. 

To understand this, we must look inside the corporation and the workplace.


The third element in the conjuncture, which obviously moves us in this direction, is managerial strategy.

I see two main aspects to the management story which are important, and ignored or insufficiently appreciated. One is the achievement of impressive solidarity within and across companies in the face of the 1950s labor offensive. In the steel industry this was especially important during the strikes of 1957 and 1959. As with solidarity of workers, solidarity among managers is something that historians should not assume but must investigate. On one hand, my interviews with NKK managers made it clear to me that as these men dealt with a resurgence of union activism in the 1950s, and unprecedented industry-wide strikes in 1957 and 1959, they were deeply divided among themselves over strategy. In particular, managers of sales and marketing divisions advocated compromise with the union rather than risking a strike that was certain to hurt their sales figures and likely to cost market share, while managers from the personnel and labor divisions felt their long-run control of the organization depended on resisting and then transforming the union. Yet in the event, these representatives of capital arguably had a stronger class consciousness and better ability to forge class solidarity than did workers and unions. I want to know how and why they buried or patched over their differences.

Two factors would seem to have been critical. On one hand, middle-level managers, especially personnel managers, of various companies coordinated their activity to an impressive degree, and they were thus able to present a common argument to other executives. They met regularly to exchange information and ideas. Indeed, one of the most astonishing tidbits to emerge from my interviews was the fact that a practice of weekly strategy meetings begun by three men when they were personnel division chiefs at NKK, Yahata and Fuji Steel in the 1950s continued as these men were promoted and even, in modified form, after they retired. In 1992 these three men were still gathering monthly on the golf course! Also, there is the related fact that several CEO's, including Kawada, president of NKK during the strikes of the 1950s, had risen from the ranks of the personnel section. This experience made the steel company presidents particularly willing to go along with labor managers pleading for the company to take a hard-line, even at considerable short-term cost.

In addition to recognizing managerial solidarity within and across companies, we must appreciate and understand the "total" or "holistic" view of labor control that the managers of major companies developed. This holistic appreciation of the importance of controlling and mobilizing workers on behalf of the company strikes me as a distinctive feature of the Japanese case. As one example, it is critical to understand how and why it was in Japan, but not elsewhere (until the Japanese pattern was seen to be something worth copying) that the technique of statistical quality control, originally developed as the expert provenance of engineers in the US,
come to be promoted as a tool that the entire work force should use, and came to be seen as a part of labor management, not just operations or production management. This was not intended from the outset in Japan either, but was something that developed almost as an afterthought from the 1950s into the 1960s. It was a tremendously important Japanese organizational innovation. Unraveling the dynamics of this managerial initiative is crucial to understand the transformation of the 1950s and 1960s.

[4] Gender and Steel

Another factor behind the transformation that issued in the ascendance of the enterprise society, perhaps unexpected in a study of the man's world of steel making, is the history of women and of gender roles. I am convinced this must be explored and understood to get a full picture of the dynamics of the postwar ascendance of the enterprise society. To explain the ability of management, first so totally to mobilize the energies of male workers on behalf of corporate goals, and second, so effectively to marginalize those who would question such commitments, we need to examine the gender-based thinking and structuring of the workplace and society.

In other words, the role of the housewife was professionalized in the postwar era, especially from the 1950s through the 1960s. The emergence of the ideology and the practice of the full-time housewife was crucial to enable the so-called corporate warrior, even of the blue-collar variety, to make his professional commitment at work. But what fascinates me is the fact that women in postwar Japan were so effectively socialized into this role with significant help from the companies themselves.

NKK was a pioneer in this drive to rationalize the consuming and reproducing functions of the employees' wives, at home, through something called the New Life Movement. This began in the late 1940s (with prewar and wartime roots) as a set of loosely connected initiatives of government offices and women's organizations. It promoted projects to rationalize (gorika) daily life, improve morality and household efficiency, democratize social relations, redesign kitchens, and kill flies. In 1953, NKK became the first private corporation in Japan to join the movement, supported later in the year by the Japan Industrial Club, which organized a nationwide "New Life Movement Association" of companies, and the NKK program became a model copied by dozens of corporations around Japan in the following years.6

Again, Orii Hyuga's memoir neatly sums up the spirit of the New Life Movement at NKK. "Workplace and home are intimately related parts of any person's life....In principle, the housewife is in charge of family life, and we can say that the husband both takes his rest and builds his energy under her leadership. Thus, our goal was to elevate the housewives who played this role, and establish the foundation for a bright, cheerful home, a bright society, and beyond that, a bright, cheerful workplace."7
At NKK and in other cases such as Toshiba and Hitachi, the New Life movement began with a focus on birth control and then expanded its concern. Through the movement companies discouraged abortions and promoted contraception by giving condoms to the wives. Over time, the movement addressed matters of nutrition, shopping and cooking, keeping household accounts, childrearing, and use of leisure time. How? NKK set up a New Life Movement office in the Welfare Section of corporate headquarters, designated a personnel official in each plant to promote the movement, and hired in-house and outside counselors from social work schools, to organize the wives of workers into hundreds of small groups. The parallel with quality circles of later years is striking. In both types of activity, the company organized people into small groups to identify and solve problems of daily life: groups of men at work, and of women at home.

What does this activity mean? I would argue that the New Life Movement and history of gender relations more broadly must be incorporated into our understanding of the ascendance of the enterprise society in two ways. First, the New Life Movement involved leading corporations directly in professionalizing the housewife's role, as a part of a broader corporate drive to "rationalize" society, raise productivity, and expand the economy. This made rationalizing the household, as both a competitive unit in society and a refuge for the husband, an endeavor parallel to rationalizing the firm. The result was to make the enterprise-dominated society dependent upon a particular and (for this reason) enduring structure of gender roles. Second, and related, because the movement was consciously competing with union organizations of worker wives, it worked to preempt the possibility that home and family might become sources of support for radical union values opposed to those of the enterprise.

[5] The disappearing working class:

But finally, to understand the process by which the 1949 and 1959 dramas at NKK became unimaginable by 1973, we need to look within the company at the movement of organized workers at the company's mills. Simply put, the question is how the "class consciousness" of the workers, its presence or absence, figures into our story. I use the term here in E. P. Thompson's "relational" understanding of it. That is, "class happens when working people feel an identity of interests as between themselves and as against their rulers and employers" and act collectively on that feeling.¹ Orii's recollection convinces me that, if he had read E. P. Thompson, he would have added to his memoir "Yes, class was happening" at NKK in those days, and my job was to make it stop happening." Arguably, he succeeded. Thus, his account raises the question of why a working class in some meaningful sense of the term once existed in Japan, but then disappeared.

To be sure, some important intellectual figures tell us not to bother with this question in the first place. They deny that "working-class" movements, consciousness or culture ever existed in Japan. A classic example, but just one of many, is the anthropologist, Nakane Chie.² In a 1970 book, she presented Japan as a "vertical" and "homogeneous" society, both historically and at the time of her writing. She also denied the possibility for significant social action on the basis
even if social classes like those in Europe can be detected in Japan, and even if something vaguely resembling those classes that are illustrated in the textbooks of western sociology can also be found in Japan, the point is that in actual society this stratification is unlikely to function, and that it does not really reflect the social structure. In Japanese society it is really not a matter of workers struggling against capitalists or managers but of Company A ranged against Company B.¹⁰

One way to argue with Nakane would be to rattle off statistics on the frequent strikes, often long and bitter, at a number of points in Japan's modern history from 1919 through the time of her writing in the 1970s, at least. Yet I am unwilling simply to do this. Even scholars in Japan who use the category of the "working-class" in their work recognize that its story is complex. In modern Japanese history, moments when class "happened" are elusive, and the evidence for working-class consciousness as well as social action is ambiguous. The problem that such historians (myself included) face is that although workers in Company A often did struggle against the managers of Company A, the ultimate goal of their struggle was to deny their status as "worker" or to escape it.

In other words, even in moments of great labor union activism, power and legitimacy in the 1940s and 1950s, the thought and behavior of Japanese steel workers, however oppositional, contained within it some aspects that invited the demise of class consciousness and action in Thompson's sense of the term.

We can see this in the following episode from the earliest days of postwar union organizing at NKK, in the fall of 1945, although numerous examples from later years also could be used to make the point.

Our witness here is Kamimura Hideji, born in 1915 to a tenant farming family in the snowy northern prefecture of Niigata. His formal education ended in 6th grade. Childhood memories of his father's humiliation as a tenant farmer powerfully shaped his social conscience. In December each year, his father would take a day off from work in the fields to bring the rent rice to the landlord. Handing it over, he would bow low and thank the landlord. In a 1992 interview, Kamimura remembered watching this little ceremony 65 years earlier and "thinking as a child 'what the hell is going on? Why thank the landlord?' This seemed to me such a contradiction."

Kamimura's first and only industrial employer was NKK. He entered the mill in 1935 and worked as a crane operator. He was a stubborn, proud young man: "I was truly discontent with my place in the company's hierarchy. If we ever complained we were put down. I deeply desired to change this." His discontents were dual. He was unhappy with the domineering foremen, assistant foremen, and crew bosses within the category of "production worker" (kōin), and most of all he detested the high status of "white-collar staff" (shokuin) compared to all production
workers. "There was so much discrimination. I felt extraordinary animosity toward the white-collar staff."

So it is not surprising that in November 1945 Kamimura joined a "Committee to Form a Union," whose members were blue-collar men representing all the workshops in the mill. By mid-December, 1945 the Committee was ready to hold a public meeting and announce plans to found a union. Concurrently, a group of white-collar men was also meeting with the aim of forming a union. They considered forming a separate group, but decided they could be more effective by joining the blue-collar men in a single union. On December 25, they approached Kamimura's group and proposed a meeting to discuss this.

This proposal was controversial. As the Ten-year History of the Kawasaki union recorded, "up until then [1945], the status discrimination of staff and worker was awful. Staff wore yellow stripes on their arms as signs of their supervisory status, and workers were not even allowed to wear the NKK mark on their uniforms. Dining halls were separate. Even utensils were different. The position of worker (koin) was humiliating. They hated the staff." Thus, it is no surprise that a tense debate ensued.

Among blue-collar leaders, the opponents of a unified body argued that (1) with 75% of employees being production workers, they could form a union on their own, (2) the tremendous animosity toward staff over "status discrimination," ruled out common action and (3) letting in staff would allow the company to capture the union. Despite such reservations, expressed vociferously at public meetings, the leading blue-collar organizers nonetheless supported the idea of a joint union. One important young activist recalled that despite his considerable animosity toward the staff, he felt the overwhelming need to work together with staff to overcome it. Another leader looked into the situation at a neighboring plant, where there were separate staff and worker unions, and concluded it was a failure. He felt that staff brains and worker brawn would be a powerful combination.

After two days of intense debate, the blue-collar leaders decided to accept a joint union on the condition that it make "unity of worker and staff statuses" and abolition of status discrimination top priorities. The staff group agreed to this, and the union was born.

This story of the founding of NKK's union is rich and can be mined extensively for a variety of insights. Here, let me make just two summary points. First, the attitudes of men such as Kamimura do reveal, dramatically, an antagonistic consciousness rooted in common experiences of discrimination and difficult, dangerous work conditions. Thus, something like class was happening at NKK. By this I mean that the steel mill's blue-collar men felt an identity of their interests versus both top management and versus a body of employees (the staff) that had long lorded it over them.

But second, this consciousness did not lead NKK employees to draw a clear organizational line between "worker" and "manager." While they debated at length the divisive
issue of admitting white-collar staff to the union, in an open process that does not seem to have been distorted by effective managerial intervention or manipulation, they opted for an inclusive organization. And they hardly discussed problems that might arise from having the union embrace supervisors and supervisees from within the worker category. Rather, in the face of intensive and evidently sincere appeals by the white-collar group, they accepted the proposal for a “joint” union of white and blue collar, so long as the union committed itself to seeking a less discriminatory workplace order. Rather than organize a union that would crystallize a division between positions of “worker” and “manager,” they agreed to use the union to seek to erase this division.

Conclusion

To recapitulate, briefly: I am trying to piece together the history of labor and management at the NKK steel mill, because I believe it is a representative and strategic example of a social transformation in Japan (the disappearance of that country’s working class movement), that has had important consequences in 20th century global history as intellectuals, unions, managers, and governments around the world, even in the former Soviet Union, have in recent years come to consider the possibility of learning from their view of a Japanese model.

I find that from the 1940s through the 1950s, the distinction between "labor" and "management" was palpable. It comes across in documents and interviews. Kamimura, with his visceral antagonism and rage, was typical of many. His very existence makes it impossible to argue that some tendency transcending history, some inclination toward harmony and authoritarian social relations by itself explains the behavior of workers at the time, or subsequently. For over a decade in the case of big steel, his sort of class feeling sustained a militant, rather powerful union. The rank and file challenged the workplace hierarchy and supported strikes; the leaders defined themselves as socialists on a mission to transform Japanese society.

Yet, I also find that by the early 1970s, the confrontations of a bare 15 years earlier were unimaginable to most observers, while the proper and imaginable world, the world of social common sense, was one of close identification of the goals and interests of worker and manager, union and company.

How did this come about? Probably through a conjuncture of factors, including the pressure of America’s foreign economic policy and industry’s competitive position, the initiatives of the Japanese state, the professionalization of the role of housewife, and managerial solidarity and holistic strategy. But ultimately, the kind of involvement and identification that emerged in Japan across this era strikes me as different both from that of prewar or wartime Japanese workplaces and from other Western or Asian cases that may have shared some or many of these
factors. I am thus led to look at the "internal structure" of worker-company antagonism, not meta-historically as Nakane does, but at a particular historical moment. Amidst the desperation and ruin of the late 1940s and early 1950s, when workers and managers alike felt an urgent need to somehow survive and recover, this internal structure did not provide the basis for an oppositional working-class consciousness or movement to flower and endure. Rather, it provided categories that most parties to the contest for the workplace sought to deny or erase.

This was a moment when bombs had demolished homes and whole cities, when extraordinary inflation had levelled differentials of wealth, and the American occupation authorities were demanding stiff war reparations. How unsurprising it is that we find in Japan a particularly intense and widely held belief that "we are all in this together." Is not this sense of common fate a necessary part of explaining the distinctive decision of so many postwar unions, despite misgivings and opposition, to include white-collar workers as members?

From this point of postwar departure within the workplace, among the workers, in conjunction with the other factors I have noted, Japan's "enterprise society," a sort of "labor relations of total mobilization," has gradually emerged to reign ascendant, although not unchanged, for at least 3 decades. And while reports in the late 1980s of impatient youths switching jobs or women workers challenging career discrimination, and reports in the recession of the early 1990s of occasional layoffs, have lead some to speak of a crisis and predict the collapse of this corporate-dominated society, I fear reports of its demise are premature.
Notes:

See pp. i-ii for Orii’s succinct presentation of a modern, scientific philosophy of labor management.


10. Ibid. 87.