**Review: Workers’ anti-war resistance in Japan**

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Masao Sugiura, *Against the Storm: How Japanese Printworkers Fought the Military Regime, 1935-1945* (trans. Kaye Broadbent and Mana Sato). Interventions, Melbourne, 2019.

*Against the Storm* is a compelling memoir of the struggles of printworkers’ leader Masao Sugiura, active at the height of Japanese militarism during the Pacific War. Sugiura recounts his experiences in the *Shuppankō Kurabu* (The Print and Publishing Workers Club), demonstrating how Japanese workers struggled against the imperial state, and pushed to defend the rights of workers and the unemployed.

Few readers – Japanese or non-Japanese – will be familiar with this history of Japanese anti-war resistance. The dominant narrative asserts that every Japanese worker was sycophantically loyal to the emperor and the war effort. This myth was one of the main motivations for Sugiura to write his memoir of resistance. He wanted to preserve a record of workers’ war-time resistance to show that “the print and publishing industry union movement continued, preventing the organisation of workers from completely disappearing”. Translators Kaye Broadbent and Mana Sato bring this history to English readers for the first time.

*Against the Storm* gives a rich and detailed history of how workers organised against the war and for their own interests in one of modern Japan’s darkest times. Sugiura incorporates diverse sources ranging from personal memoir, quotes from activists and even Special Police archives.

For activists and socialists today this memoir contributes a number of invaluable lessons.

Firstly, a political group’s organisational structures must be flexible and adaptable to changing political circumstances. The Club started out as a Society, which operated as a trade union. Sugiura’s own politicisation came while being on the strike committee at Tokyo Printing in 1935. Club leader and covert Japanese Communist Party (JCP) member Shibata Ryūichirō led the committee. The strike ended in defeat but drew in new layers of activists to organised industrial politics. Shortly after this, the anti-war JCP was effectively smashed by the state. One CP member describes it as the “period when our lives were advancing into darkness”. Leaders Iwata Yoshimichi and Kobayashi Takiji were tortured to death by the police, and state violence broke the party.

Increased state repression prompted Shibata to argue for a different approach for the Society, focusing on social activities for workers instead of open politics. He was adamant that they would be “destroyed if it took a more militant approach”. Shibata insisted that they should become a social club to avoid detection by the Special Police and be able to reach a mass audience: “whatever small and routine thing we do, we are assisting workers, gathering members, and developing them and raising their class consciousness”.

The Club began to organise cultural and sporting activities and events; raise train fares and funds for unemployed members; it put on theatre performances and established book clubs, tramping clubs, even haiku clubs.

The Club never reached that mass base Sugiura hoped for, peaking at around 1,500 members. Nevertheless growing from 200 during the period of the most intense state repression was an admirable achievement, and required courage and tenacity from activists. The 1930s were a bleak time for youth. Sugiura describes a cartoon where a young person faces three roads: “one was the road to suicide, another was the road to decadence and the third was the road to Marxism”. The Club nurtured and developed new layers of activists who had no other outlet towards a political direction.

The second lesson Sugiura impresses on readers is the old leftist adage that workers will always resist. “Even during the darkness of wartime”, Sugiura recalls, “no matter how much the government increased the repression, the dissatisfaction with the war spread among those living at the bottom of society. There were endless instances of people making anti-war remarks at meetings or distributing dangerous literature…”. Sugiura quotes anti-war comments scribbled on the 1942 election ballot papers, such as “You cannot fight on an empty stomach”, or “The government is our enemy, what are small business owners to do?” Resistance was not always open. Some expressed discontent by turning up to work late or leaving early, moving from factory to factory illegally, working only when the supervisor was present, or even behaving violently towards supervisors and managers.

The Club attempted to connect these frustrations and demands covertly through social activities. Activists were schooled on how to evade the police by avoiding police boxes (small booths acting as mini-police stations on the side of major streets), learning to memorise addresses, keeping safe in political settings, and how to talk to potential recruits. Sugiura details methods for meeting new recruits in the factories, such as by conducting surveys on the cultural interests of the workplace – this could be used to invite potential recruits to a film appreciation group or hiking club.

When state repression intensified, it was only a matter of time before the Club leaders were arrested: Sugiura, Shibata and Shiraishi were all arrested in 1942, and remained imprisoned until the end of the war. Shibata tragically died in prison six months before the war finished, just 38 years old. Sugiura recounts the anguish and grief of losing his comrade and mentor. Sugiura’s wife was also killed during the US mass bombing of Tokyo.

The third and final lesson Sugiura offers is the necessity of continuing to build an organisation even though the political situation seems futile. As soon as the war concluded, there was a flourishing of democratic movements from below. Comrades active in the Club threw themselves into the democracy movement. Union membership in late 1945 was 600,000, rising to 6.7 million by June 1948. A May Day demonstration attracted 2 million workers nationwide in 1946. As the translators note, the Club could remain relevant precisely because “the overwhelming determination of Sugiura and many other activists to keep union traditions alive in Japan during the period of militarism bore fruit very early in the post-war period and many Club members were at the centre of this activity”. After the war, club members helped print the JCP newspaper *Akahata* (Red Flag), and build the “foundation for democratic print works throughout the country”. As a Club commemorative event noted, “because Club members …kept the flame of the print and publishing workers’ struggle, despite all the repression they had to endure [they] passed on their revolutionary tradition and noble spirit of self-sacrifice.”

*Against the Storm* is a valuable memoir told from the experiences of a rank and file print worker. It helps us to understand the mindset of an activist in the most difficult of times, reflect on organisational structures, and explore the different debates among print workers during military rule in Japan. Masao Sugiura’s memoir is an essential record and historical monument.