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Labor issues as international affairs: Japan and the International Labour Organization from 1919 to 1938

Prewar Japanese labor policies were not only shaped by industrial mutations, the development of labor unions, and domestic political changes, but also inspired by ideas that circulated from one continent to the other through international contacts among labor unionist and social reformist. However, there has been no detailed, long-run historical analysis systematically drawing on first-hand data as to how Japan's membership in the International Labour Organization changed the course of its labor governance strategy in the interwar period. This article draws on the rich, hitherto unused ILO archives in Geneva to focus on the developments in relations between the ILO and Japan from the organization's creation in 1919 through to the country's departure in 1938. It shows that the reasons that made the ILO an important partner for Japan throughout this period changed over time, but that liberal social reformists played all along a very important role. Also, ILO membership compelled the Japanese governing elites to face up to important questions regarding the nation's economic development. Which was the better strategy to enrich and strengthen the nation: cheap, submissive labor or collective bargaining, better working conditions and higher productivity? Which was the more realistic option in view of the way the international situation was developing: free trade by means of diplomatic cooperation or expanding the country's economic bloc by means of territorial conquest?

Keys words: Japan, Labor, Social policy, Liberalism, International Labour Organization

The attitude of Japan's rulers to labor relations did not develop as an endogenous process, but was closely associated with Japan's integration into the dominant international system. Following the country's opening up at the end of the Tokugawa period and its integration into a competitive capitalist, Westphalian world, whose biopolitical implications have been analyzed in depth by Michel Foucault (2004: 366), Japan's rulers needed to introduce new governing technologies to strengthen the domestic force embodied by its population. The health and social policies the country consequently took up, based mainly on hygienism², were part of a drive to strengthen its national defense forces to make its own mark as a colonial player and find its own

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² Hygienism is a current of thought that appeared in the middle of the 19th century, linked in part to Louis Pasteur research, and that advocates an improvement in the living conditions and environment for the elevation of population's health.

place in the balance of power. Following the First World War, however, Japanese leaders had to face a different situation. The Treaty of Versailles and the creation of the League of Nations changed the workings of international relations by setting up a collective security mechanism based largely on the promotion of free trade whose sustainability was to be guaranteed by aligning working conditions and the spread of industrial democracy. The International Labour Organization (ILO), created at the same time as the League of Nations, was in charge of this process (Cayet 2009: 39).

Labor historians specializing in Japan have extensively analyzed advances in social and labor legislation and the relative democratization of labor relations during the 'Taishō democracy'. The main factors behind these developments have been identified as industrial mutations, the development of labor unions, and domestic political changes. Yet there has been no detailed, long-run historical analysis systematically drawing on first-hand data as to how Japan's membership in the ILO changed the course of its labor governance strategy in the interwar period, by forcing it to shift away from a top-heavy 'biopolitical' position to bring the country more in line with the international community's social standards. In fact, historiography has been faced with a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, some studies have demonstrated how the new international order emerging from the First World War changed Japanese diplomacy, stimulated international scientific cooperation helping Japan to strengthen its position in the international order and ultimately contributed to modernizing domestic policies. One of the most recent and remarkable works is Yasuda Kayo's study on the importance of the pre-World War Two League of Nations Health Organization in shaping contemporary transnational sanitary policies and how Japan used it to become 'the leading nation state in East Asia' (Yasuda 2014). On the other hand, however, studies on relations between the International Labour Organization and Japan have focused solely on specific diplomatic thrusts, such as the Paris conference and the first International labour conference in Washington in 1919 (Kudō 1988 ; Yoshioka 2009), and on the post-World War Two history. Prewar developments have been skimmed over as mere background by 'official histories' and former members' autobiographies (Nihon ILO kyōkai 1999 ; Kudō 1999) or viewed as a preliminary vain attempt at international labor policy cooperation (Hanami 1963 ; Harari 1973).

This article draws on the rich, hitherto unused ILO archives in Geneva to focus on the developments in relations between the ILO and Japan from the organization's creation in 1919 through to the country's departure in 1938. It sets out to defend two main hypotheses concerning the historical impact of these relations on interwar Japanese labor policy. First, the reasons that made the ILO an important partner for Japan throughout this period changed over time. Prior to the Manchurian incident, Japan endeavored to demonstrate its commitment to the organization not only because it saw its membership as an opportunity to strengthen its position in the new international system, but also because the ILO offered viable, albeit disputed solutions to the challenges it faced modernizing its industrial relations and integrating the labor class into the Imperial social and political order. In the early 1930s, despite the weakening of liberal social policies, the governing elites still saw ILO membership as important, although for different reasons: they viewed it as the arena in which to defend the Japanese export industry against social dumping accusations. ILO membership also compelled the Japanese governing elites to face up to important questions regarding the nation's economic development. Which was the better strategy to enrich and strengthen the nation: cheap, submissive labor or collective bargaining, better working conditions and higher productivity? Which was the more realistic option in view

of the way the international situation was developing: free trade by means of diplomatic cooperation or expanding the country's economic bloc by means of territorial conquest?

Japan's membership of the ILO and the union movement

Japan's participation in the ILO was a Japanese government decision, but labor union leaders were active players from the outset. As the ILO was a tripartite organization, Japan membership of the organization was inextricably linked with the development of industrial democracy. It helped the *Yūaikai*, set up in 1912 to embody the rebirth of labor unionism following the years of persecution in the wake of the 1900 Peace Police Law, to gain a certain legitimacy.

Suzuki Bunji, President of *Yūaikai*, forged contacts with the American Federation of Labor on a trip to the United States in 1915 to discuss the problem of Japanese migrant workers whose working conditions were well below American workers' conditions and who were consequently often accused of constituting unfair competition (Matsuo and Ōkōchi 1965: 48-53). Suzuki Bunji was hence the first to understand the opportunity created by elevating labor issues to the status of international affairs. In January 1919, in an article in the union journal entitled 'The Labor Problem and International Relations', he stated, 'The urgent task of solving the labor problem in our country is not simply a domestic matter. The backward state of Japan's labor standards could prevent Japan from having a voice in the community of nations' (Suzuki 1919a: 1-4). Nevertheless, the unions were initially disappointed by the lack of action taken by the International Labour Office over the Japanese government's appointment of labor representatives. The government was opposed to the free participation of labor in the international negotiating process at the ILO, considering the labor movement to be too immature for such a role. Japanese government delegates to the Paris Peace Conference had secured the inclusion of a clause in Article 389 whereby governments of countries without any real labor organizations could appoint the representatives themselves. Yet at the time, there were two unions of a certain importance: *Yūaikai* and *Shinyūkai*. The government argued nonetheless that the labor delegate had to represent all the workers and not just union members. It developed a process that culminated in the selection of a chief engineer from the Kawasaki shipyards, Masumoto Uhei, as workers' delegate for the first International Labour Conference held in Washington in 1919 (Hanami 1963: 64-69).

In response, Suzuki Bunji launched into a lobbying campaign against his country's government. In *Yūaikai's* journal, *Labor and Industry (Rōdō to sangyō)*, Suzuki wrote that the government's selection process was not only at odds with the spirit and the letter of the ILO's rules, but that it would also 'undermine the development of the labor movement' and that it was important to choose a representative of a workers' organization who would represent 'a healthy movement' (*kenzen naru undō*) (Suzuki 1919b: 3-14). Yet in 1921, the appointment went not to a member of the union world, but to a member of the social work circles, Matsumoto Keiichi, Director of an orphanage in Okayama. In 1922, the ILO was even reluctant to accept the credentials of the delegate chosen by the Japanese government, Tazawa Yoshiharu, director of *Kyōchōkai*. The Credentials Committee's 1923 report warned that rejection would now be inevitable if the Japanese government did not change its practices. Maeda Tamon, the Japanese government's

Permanent Government Delegate to Geneva, urged Home Minister Mizuno Rentarō to finally comply with ILO procedures and even verged on resigning. In 1924, the procedures eventually changed and Suzuki Bunji was elected (Hanami 1963: 64-69).

Aware of the historic opportunity that the ILO's birth afforded the Japanese union movement, the movement promptly drew its inspiration from ILO work to develop its own agenda. *Yūaikai* followed the lead of the placing of the eight-hour day on the agenda of the International Labour Conference in Washington, placing this same issue on the list of demands it adopted at its annual congress in 1919. However, with the split of the workers' movement into a reformist wing and a revolutionary wing, which clearly established itself in the 1920s, working with the ILO also became a contributing factor to the division of the labor movement. Even though none of the members of the workers' movement's right wing – made up mainly of *Sōdōmei* and the seamen's union – was officially affiliated with the reformist international of labor unions embodied by the International Federation of Trade Unions, the wing continued to actively cooperate with the ILO even as it became an integral part of the social reformist circles close to certain circles of power. Its aim was to drive the Japanese government to adopt legislation to protect the unions and put into full effect the tripartism required of it by its participation in the ILO. The left wing, however, was strongly influenced by the Communist International, adhering to the Profintern and the Pan-Pacific Trade Union Conference, and was consequently highly opposed to working with the ILO, which it saw as an instrument designed to counter the spread of the class struggle ideology.

The Japanese government and the International Labour Organization

Where the reformist wing of the Japanese workers' movement was the best proponent of working with the ILO from the start, seeing it as a guarantee of the legitimacy of its action nationwide, the government's attitude was somewhat ambiguous initially. The representative to the conference, Ochiai Kentarō, asked not only for the Japanese government to be entitled to appoint its labor representatives itself, but also for a special convention application status for Japan. He asserted that although certain measures were necessary for those member countries with the most advanced industrial development, in the case of Japan, these measures would be contrary not only to the interests of industry, but also to the workers' interests. The Japanese government effectively managed to get a special clause incorporated into Article 405, Paragraph 3 of the ILO Constitution wherein the organization would give due regard to the case of 'those countries in which climatic conditions, the imperfect development of industrial organization or other special circumstances make the industrial conditions substantially different.' (Burkman 2008 : 90-91).

Yet despite these initial reservations, Japan's participation in the ILO clearly gave it a place alongside the leading powers. Japan's eminent position took the form of a seat as a permanent member of the Governing Body, reserved for the world's eight most industrialized nations. It also immediately became a member of the international organizing committee for the first session of the International Labour Conference in Washington in 1919, made up of seven people nominated by the governments of the United States, United Kingdom, France, Italy, Japan, Belgium and Switzerland. This participation was seen in an especially positive light in that

alignment with the standards set by the ILO was optional. The importance the Japanese government placed on its membership can be seen from the fact that Japan sent the largest delegation to the international conference in Geneva in 1920. It did not miss a single conference up until it left the organization in 1938. In 1928, the Director of the International Labour Office, Albert Thomas, remarked that 275 Japanese representatives had already visited the ILO in Geneva since the start of the organization (ILOA³ Cat 1/29/12/1).

Japan was also the first country to appoint a Permanent Delegation of the Japanese Government to the ILO (*Kokusai rōdō kikan teikoku jimusho*). This delegation, created by imperial decree in 1920, had a two-sided brief. On the one hand, it studied labor legislation and industrial conditions in Europe and sent the information to the Japanese government. In return, it provided information on Japan's labor and industry to the International Labour Office and any other organization or person who requested it. The head of the delegation was also the Permanent Government Representative to the Governing Body of the International Labour Office. Its successive heads came from the Home Ministry, such as Maeda Tamon who served from 1923 to 1926 and Yoshisawa Shunzo, Inspector-in-Chief of Labor at the Home Ministry's Bureau of Social Affairs for many years, who was appointed to Geneva from 1929 to 1937.

The International Labour Office's Tokyo Branch Office set up in 1924, in return for the creation of a permanent representation of the Japanese government to Geneva, was the second most highly funded representative office after Berlin and ahead of London, Paris, Rome and Washington. It was managed by Asari Junshirō, a former labor inspector, and then Ayusawa Iwao who, along with Maeda Tamon, was particularly representative of the internationalist social reformists that took up the defense of the cause of international labor legislation in Japan (Kuboniwa 1998). He formed an extremely important link between the Japanese government and the International Labour Office and an important gateway for reformist ideas to enter the country's corridors of power in the interwar period. He had many documents translated into Japanese, including the Director's annual reports. The Tokyo Branch Office also contributed to the 1925 creation of the Association for International Labor (*Kokusai rōdō kyōkai*) with a few other social reformers such as Takano Iwasaburō, Director of the Ōhara Institute for Social Research. The association's brief was to support the work of the International Labour Organization, particularly by promoting the ratification and enforcement of the international labor conventions. It benefited from cooperation from the government, employer and worker delegates and technical advisers who had attended the different sessions of the International Labour Conference. Employers saw it in particular as a strategic forum where they needed to be present if they wanted to influence the developing labor relations debate. Support came, for example, from Mutō Sanji, President of *Kanegafuchi bōseki*, who had been the first employers' delegate to the Washington Conference in 1919. The Executive Council had 40 members: employers, workers' leaders and scholars.

The ILO and Japanese labor policy

³ ILOA: International Labour Office Archives

The Japanese government understood that the political legitimization of the reformist wing of the labor movement was an acceptable price to pay to gain influence on the international stage. However, ILO membership was more than a cold calculation as to how much industrial democracy was needed to meet basic global standards. The ILO agenda of promoting international labor legislation to align working conditions worldwide found an echo in the need, felt by Japanese social reformers and Home Ministry bureaucrats, to come up with lasting institutional solutions to the social question.

Although Japan was not exactly the most model of nations when it came to ratifying the conventions, it did sign a not-inconsiderable number, especially considering that its labor legislation started out way behind the Europeans. In December 1928, at a conference in Tokyo during his one-month visit, International Labour Office Director Albert Thomas observed that, 'With 332 ratifications obtained from the different countries, Japan is all things considered not in a dishonorable state.' Of the 25 conventions, Japan had ratified nine: unemployment, minimum age for industrial employment, placement of seamen, minimum age for agricultural employment, compulsory medical examination of children, workmen's compensation for occupational diseases, equality of treatment, and simplification of the inspection of emigrants. This compares with the fact that just 27% of the 1,798 potential ratifications (for 25 conventions) had been secured and that 22 of the 58 Member States had not ratified one single convention. Germany, like Japan, had only ratified nine conventions, France 12, Holland 11, Italy 12 and the United Kingdom 13 (ILOA Cat 1/29/12/1). A not-inconsiderable number of acts and decrees passed by Japan in the years it was member of the ILO were the direct result of ratifications, such as the Employment Exchange Act enacted in 1921 in response to the 1919 Unemployment Convention and the Act on the Minimum Age for Industrial Employment enacted in 1923 in keeping with the 1919 Minimum Age (Industry) Convention.

Yet the ILO's influence on Japan's labor policy cannot be gauged on the basis of ratifications alone. It was often indirect. The establishment of *Kyōchōkai* (Society for cooperation)⁴, long stigmatized by historian as out to quash the labor unions and whose role in labor policy design in the interwar period has been reassessed by a number of studies (Kinzley 1991 ; Takahashi 2001), can also be viewed as an instrument to lend legitimacy, especially in the eyes of the employers, to the collective bargaining that membership of the ILO made inevitable. The creation of the Home Ministry's Bureau of Social Affairs (*Naimushō shakai kyoku*) in 1922 can also be interpreted as being in part due to this membership. It was tasked with relations with the International Labour Office and the senior officials who worked there were very often government representatives at the annual international labour conferences. Bureau Director Nagaoka Ryūichirō was, for example, government delegate in 1927; division heads Moriya Sakau and Kawarada Kakichi took on the role respectively in 1925 and 1928; Labor Section Head Amanoya Kenji was technical adviser to the 1925 conference; and Labor Inspection Section Head Yoshizaka Shunzō was technical adviser to the conferences in 1919, 1921, 1922 and 1923 (ILOA Cat 5 45 2 5).

The ILO's work indirectly influenced certain legislative developments such as the 1923 revision of the Factory Act, which can be seen as a response to the 1919 conventions on hours of work in industry and night work by women and children. The Social Bureau's attempts to pass a law on

⁴ The *Kyōchōkai*, created in 1919 by influential businessman Shibuzawa Eiichi and the Home Ministry, was set up to cultivate cooperation between labor and capital and the advancement of social policy.

the unions were no doubt largely driven by Japan's obligation to send a workers' representative to the international labour conferences. Mere membership made tripartism, which had no currency in Japan at the time, an obligation.

Although relations with the ILO were no doubt an important driving force for labor reform, they nonetheless remained dependent on a Japanese government still reluctant to make all the progress with the country's civil and political citizenship inferred by its stated volition to become part of the international social reform movement. Soeda Keiichirō, Director of the *Kyōchōkai*, one of the correspondents for the labor reform promoted by the ILO in Japan in the 1920s, made this remark in the late 1920s:

'When you look at the number of labor laws drafted and revised in such a short space of time, you can see one main reason for it: our country's participation in the International Labour Organization ... When you see, on the one hand, the debate on a law on the unions, particularly urgently needed to promote industrial peace, and the reactionary laws on the other, you cannot help but get the impression of a contradiction there' (Soeda 1929: 3).

He was referring, in particular, to the 1925 Maintenance of the Public Order Act (*Chian jiji hō*), which quite restrictively set the bounds of what Andrew Gordon (1991) calls 'Imperial democracy', punishing any challenge to the system of private property and the essence of the imperial regime (*kokutai*) with ten years' imprisonment and, as of 1928, the death penalty. In fact, for most of the partisans of the left wing of Japan's labor movement in the interwar period, the Japanese government's favorable disposition towards the ILO was also a way to crush the socialist movement and establish the global domination of capitalism. The political and international stakes, but also the ambiguity of the cooperation between reformist circles close to the seat of power and the ILO, come into full view when considering the extremely important visit by Albert Thomas to Japan in 1928.

Albert Thomas' visit to Japan

Thanks in part to Maeda Tamon's efforts, the Japanese press gave the visit considerable publicity, even going so far as to headline it the visit by 'one of the most popular men on Earth' (*sekai no ninki otoko*) (*Miyako*: 02/09/1928). The different speeches that Albert Thomas gave showed just how many motives there were for his visit and just how closely national labor issues were associated with the international situation. His first purpose was to reaffirm the International Labour Office's interest in Japan, since Albert Thomas saw the International Labour Organization's place as a truly universal organization. In a conference given at *Gakushi Kaikan-Seiyoken* in Tokyo on 8 December 1928, he set out to convince his audience of the Japan's importance in the post-WWI international order.

'And it was Léon Bourgeois who said, 'The League of Nations will be universal or it will not be.'...It is vital that we have a set point in the Far East where we are sure to be heard, from where we are sure to get answers ..., to build and shore up the LN in this region of the world. We should look first and foremost to Japan for this' (ILOA Cat 1/29/11/1).

He also wanted to convince Japan to ratify more conventions to support the delicate momentum of the joint advance of labor progress and free trade. In another passage in the same speech, then, he looked back over the problems posed by Japan's tendency to give its particular situation as grounds for not ratifying the convention on daily working hours that India, its direct competitor in the textile industry, had itself ratified (ILOA Cat 1/29/11/1).

One of the problems the International Labour Office was up against was that, in Japan, the Diet had little power to ratify conventions. This was mainly the prerogative of a Privy Council, the *Sûmitsuin*, whose members were appointed by the Emperor and which was extremely wary of the ILO. In reckoning with this particular institutional situation, Albert Thomas received support from Gotô Shinpei, who held a reception to which he invited members of the Privy Council. When the Privy Council members did not take up the invitation, Albert Thomas wrote a letter to Gotô on 31 December 1928 in which he thanked him for the initiative and asked him to continue to work to convince them to ratify further conventions (ILOA Cat 1/29/11/2).

During his visit, a constant line of 'Thomas' reasoning was also to try to overturn Japan's political and business leaders' cultural exception claim made alongside their assertion of particular economic conditions to hold back progress with labor legislation. At a conference at the Osaka Public Hall organized by the city's press on 26 December 1928, Albert Thomas made the claim of 'Japanese family traditions' one of his main targets:

'Every time I have talked about the need to introduce one of these protection measures, I've been told ten to twenty times a day for the last three weeks, 'There is the family system.' I have therefore tried to understand what the family system is.

'When I put the question to some Japanese correspondents, they told me, 'The family system is this widespread legacy of homespun production in Japanese industry.' I answered that cottage industry existed in many countries, but that it should not get in the way of the industrial legislation needed for all large firms. Yet when I pressed the point with another correspondent, he told me, 'In the family system, workers organize their work in a way how they see fit.' ... I have been to a few Japanese factories. These factories had modern mechanization where the workers had to keep up with the pace of the machine. It is my impression that the work pace in the Japanese factories I have seen is no slower than the pace in the European factories run in the same way.

'And then I was told, 'No, the family system is the spirit of the family head's protection.' ... Alright, I would personally be delighted to see this spirit reign in every country and justice served solely on the basis of the employer's good will. Unfortunately, however, I'm afraid that whatever the good will of the employers, some of the fatal consequences of industry also reign in Japan... And nearly everywhere, those who seek harmony, those who want to achieve justice by peaceful means are forced to resort to other methods: that of arbitration on an equal footing and the spirit of justice between the employers' representatives and the employees' representatives. This is the very basis of our International Labour Organization' (ILOA Cat 1/29/11/2).

So at his meetings with Japan's political and business leaders, Albert Thomas relentlessly promoted the cause of reformist unionism and social democracy. He had to contend with paternalistic rhetoric from employers about the unions' immaturity, but made a point of responding to such arguments on a number of occasions, including at a reception held by the Industrial Club of Japan and the Business Federation of Japan on 9 December 1928. Albert

Thomas said, 'To treat union heads, even those who are somewhat strident and impudent, as men capable of understanding industrial interests is to pave the way for a new system that all leading industrial nations have right now in this era of new development.' He also endeavored to disprove the idea put forward by Dan Takuma, President of the Industrial Club of Japan, that the union movement was nothing more than a show of subversive politics, an upshot of the Russian Revolution, '... The Russian Revolution alone cannot explain the development of the union movement in your country. Whatever the influence of the Russian Revolution may have been, the union movement, whether we like it or not, is a well-nigh essential outcome of the development of industry in any community...' (ILOA Cat 1/29/11/1).

Despite Albert Thomas' clear-cut commitment to unionism, the left wing of the Japan union movement was very hostile to him. He was also the doubtless-unwitting protagonist of a Japanese government policy introduced in the mid-1920s and clearly designed to broaden the divide between what was seen as an acceptable, even co-optable, reformist social movement and a workers' movement driven by communist, revolutionary ideology to be quashed by police measures at all costs. Organizations on the right wing of the union movement such as the League of Shipyard Unions (*Kaigun dōmei*), the Japanese Federation of Labor (*Sōdōmei*) and the Public Workers' Federation of Labor (*Kangyō rōdō sōdōmei*) took advantage of the prospect of Albert Thomas' visit to Japan and a massive wave of arrests of communist union activists to move to align with Yonekubo Mitsusuke, labor representative to the 11th session of the International Labour Conference, mainly at the initiative of the President of the Japan Seamen's Union (*Nihon kaiin kumiai*). The idea was to present a united front of 150,000 workers supporting a single social democratic political party *Shakai Minshūtō* (*Ōsaka mainichi*: 22/02/1928). Albert Thomas supported this initiative and became the defender of a social democracy styled as the natural extension of the tripartism advocated by the ILO. This nevertheless proved a tricky exercise as a large part of the ruling class were averse to anything that might remotely resemble socialism. In a handwritten note to Albert Thomas, Maeda Tamon indeed advised that he take the greatest care with his choice of words, 'I was suggesting the other day that it would be good for the success of your campaign to avoid portraying yourself as a 'socialist', unless you have to. For the meeting this evening, use the term 'social justice' instead of 'socialist' ... For your message to be appreciated in the widest possible circles, I recommend that you avoid any pronounced use of socialism or socialist' (ILOA Cat 1/29/11/2).

This difficult position and Albert Thomas' caution were unfortunately also seen as an objective alliance with the seat of power and the crushing crackdown on the left wing of the workers' movement. He was heckled by Marxist students at his speech to Tokyo Imperial University and handbills protesting against his visit abounded. One such leaflet, handed out by the Federation of the Tokyo Branch of the Proletarian Masses Party (*Musan taishūtō Tōkyōbu rengōkai*), was particularly virulent:

'Go home Albert Thomas, traitor and capitalist lackey... He used to be a socialist, but he became a minister in the First World War and entered the service of a war waged in the capitalists' interests and he successfully served to enlist the workers in it. As his reward, he was appointed Director of the International Labour Office... He claims to have come to observe the situation of workers in Japan, but that is a lie. He spends his time toadying to the capitalist organizations. And can someone who spends his time sightseeing in Kyoto or Nara understand the suffering of the workers? In fact, his real purpose is to create an international federation of unions

subservient to the capitalists here in the East too ... That's why the right-wing unions tried to join forces before he arrived' (ILOA Cat 1/29/11/2).

Once back in Geneva, Ayusawa Iwao sent a letter to Albert Thomas on 5 January 1929 making a preliminary report on the trip. In it, Ayusawa expressed his fear that it was seen mainly as a sign of support for the government's policy of co-opting the right wing of the union movement at the expense of the independence of the Japanese union movement as a whole:

'Both employers and government officials have informed me that the Thomas mission was a success. Although Mr. Thomas has not obtained ratification for the time being, he has at least enjoyed a resounding moral victory with public opinion... However, at the same time, the fact of the matter is that a certain number of our friends with centrist leanings think that the Thomas mission did a great deal for the solidarity of the right-wing unions, already somewhat over-backed by the government, but that the mission did not do enough to help Japanese unionism as a whole. It did nothing for the left-wing unions and the center unions remained quite indifferent to it. Those who say that may well be right, up to a point...' (ILOA Cat 1/29/11/3).

The Manchurian Incident and the accusation of social dumping

In the 1920s, Japan membership of the ILO played a decisive role in the legitimization, to a certain extent, of labor unionism and collective bargaining, and the advance of labor legislation. As the controversies surrounding Albert Thomas's visit to Japan show, one of the reasons the Japanese government agreed to these developments was that they enabled it to coopt the right wing of the labor movement to fight against the advance of communist labor unionism. Yet another important reason is that Japan's social policy was driven by bureaucrats and experts aware of the fact that economic development could no longer rely solely on cheap labor. Japanese industry had to modernize to increase labor productivity and labor-capital cooperation by recognizing right wing unions. Like Albert Thomas, they were entirely aware that 'Japanese family traditions' were not up to the social stakes of the time. Indeed, Japanese experts researching how to raise labor productivity, such as Teruoka Gitō of the *Kurashiki rōdō kagaku kenkyūjo* (Kurashiki research center for labor sciences) or Uno Yōichi of the *Kyōchōkai*, liaised closely with ILO experts and the international congresses for scientific management (Wren 1998). Yet ratification of the conventions was also seen as a condition to strengthen Japan's position in the international order. An obvious parallel can be drawn here with the policy taken by the League of Nations Health Organization at the same time. Indeed, Ludwig Rajchman, Director of the LNHO, like Albert Thomas, saw Japan as having a crucial role in making their organization true global standard makers. However, Thomas's visit also revealed the fragility of the industrial democracy that the ILO had been able to promote. Following the Manchurian incident, the Japanese government renounced any further institutionalization of the labor movement.⁵ As Takahashi Hirohiko put it, 'liberal corporatism' was being replaced by 'state corporatism' (Takahashi 1997: 4-6). Furthermore, the reformist unions' disposition toward international cooperation was weakened by the nationalistic tide driven by the situation in North-East China.

⁵ The rejection of the 1931 Labor Union bill, ended the Home Ministry Social Bureau efforts to pass a law to protect labor unions activities.

So when Japan's membership of the League of Nations started to be debated, relations with the ILO were also put in question.

In a letter dated 5 August 1932 to Edward Phelan, Head of the Diplomatic Division at the International Labour Office, Ayusawa Iwao, Director of the ILO Tokyo Branch Office, discussed the probability of a deterioration in Japan's relations with the ILO due to the Manchurian Incident: 'If Japan leaves the LN, I'm afraid that the furious nation may not distinguish between the LN and the ILO, and that the social justice message may not carry enough weight. I believe the least we can do is to, on the pretext of presenting the new director's greetings,⁶ send someone from Geneva to ... explain to the officials met the technical differences between the ILO and the LN ... the possibility for a State to remain a member even after withdrawal from the LN, and its interest in doing so ...' (ILOA Cabinet file 1932-1938 XR 35/1/5).

The International Labour Office did indeed send Kamii Yoshio, Japanese official to the organization, to Japan from July to October 1933. During his mission, he remarked on the winds of change against the ILO's influence in Japan. Although the unions close to the ILO were naturally very much in favor of Japan staying in the organization, they were nonetheless convinced that their country was victim of the most industrialized countries closing their borders to its workers and stood by the government's position on the issue of Manchuria. On 19 April 1933, a ceremony was held for the labor delegation to the 17th session of the International Labour Conference. It was decided that reference should be made to the Manchurian Incident only if direct questions were put on this point and that the response should be as follows: 'The Japanese workers' movement is politically and economically strong enough to be able to effectively oppose and alter government and military policy. Moreover, Japan has a special interest in Manchuria, which is probably the only territory to which the Japanese, who are refused entry to the United States, Australia and so on, can easily emigrate. As long as the working classes of the European and American countries are unable to demand that their government or ruling class immediately open their colonies to all the world's populations, it will not be reasonable to accuse the Japanese working class of doing nothing' (ILOA C 35-2-1).

Following his meetings with employers, Kamii said he believed they would not have an openly hostile attitude to the institution as long as there was no anti-Japanese feeling within the organization. He therefore recommended handling the accusation of social dumping with care (ILOA Cabinet file 1932-1938 XR 35/1/5). Indeed, the reasons that made the ILO an important partner for Japan started to change. Employers, generally hostile to the ILO in the 1920s, started to earnestly defend cooperation with the organization.

Soon after Japan's withdrawal from the LN in late 1933, a report was hence presented to the National Federation of Industrial Organizations (*Zensanren*) by a close adviser to Watanabe Tetsuzō, the employers' delegate to the 1933 International Labour Conference, and one of the main defenders of keeping Japan in the ILO. The report stated that the organization had become the only place where Japan could defend its economic interests. In addition, the report also considered that the risk of seeing union delegates take advantage of their podium at the conferences to denounce working conditions in Japan, of seeing the government forced to

⁶ Ayuzawa was referring to Harold Butler, the new Director-General of the International Labour Office, who took over from Albert Thomas who died that year.

develop social legislation jeopardizing employers' interests, and of the ILO being a platform for the dissemination of the Socialist International's ideas in Japan had greatly diminished (ILOA C 35-2-1).

The perception of a much-reduced union threat was obviously a factor in changing the employers' attitude, but their stance was, more importantly, driven largely by the fact that the Japanese economy was even more internationalized and export-oriented in the first two-thirds of the 1930s than it had been in the 1920s. The percentage of exports in GNP was generally lower in the 1920s – ranging from 13.9% in 1921 to 20.3% in 1929 – than in the 1930s when it rose from 15.3% in 1931 to 23.7% in 1936 and still remained over the 20% level after 1933 (Ohkawa and Shinohara 1973: Appendix tables 1,3 and 30). Granted, Sugihara Kaoru has shown that the heavy and chemical industries were relatively independent of international trade conditions and military spending, being contingent more on private investment dynamics, domestic industrial networks and the development, albeit modest, of the domestic market. Yet he has also shown that Japan benefited from the resilience of the intra-Asian market, despite the tensions. In spite of Japan's difficult negotiations with British India and the Dutch East Indies and the fact that the 1932 Ottawa agreements made it harder for Japanese manufactured products to penetrate the British Empire, Japan's share in trade with these European colonial empires did not decline. Japan preferred to increase its exports of manufactured goods and maintain customs duties on its lower imports (Sugihara 1997: 259-280 ; Sugihara 2005: 11-13). Yomoda Masafumi (2006: 168-185) has also shown the extent to which Japan depended on multilateral trade agreements in the first part of the 1930s when growing numbers of tariff barriers were emerging against Japanese imports.

The formation of economic blocs was hence a fear shared not only by industrialists, but also by many members of the Japanese ruling class. In an article in *Kaizō* magazine, demographer Ueda Teijirō returning from the Institute of Pacific Relations conference in Banff on Japan's population problems reported on the speech given by major internationalist Nitobe Inazō. In it, he had said that while nations at an advantage may adopt extreme economic self-sufficiency policies, others may be forced to extend their sphere of influence beyond their borders in order to form economic blocs and stabilize their national economies. If such measures were adopted on a global scale, the world would be divided into several economic and political blocs and the struggle among them would be a huge catastrophe for mankind (Ueda 1933).

In March 1934, Ayusawa Iwao wrote in a letter to the director just how the issue of social dumping had fired Japanese public opinion and he issued a number of internal memos at the International Labour Office charging that if Japan were to stand accused at the 1934 International Labour Conference, it would leave the organization in June (ILOA XE 6/2/1). The response of senior International Labour Office officials to the crisis was to advise Japan to provide guarantees of good will, to divert attention away from just the question of wages and try to show that its working conditions were better than its accusers claimed. On 30 September 1933, Harold Butler wrote to the Director of the Tokyo Branch Office, Asari Junshirō, that, 'If the Japanese government were in a position to say that Japan is on a par with the other industrialized countries with which it competes with respect to working hours, weekly rest and women's work, the accusation of unfair competition would lose a great deal of its weight given that comparisons of wage levels and standards of living are always much harder to make' (ILOA C 35-2-1).

Yet the International Labour Office also tried to temper the United Kingdom's actions and produce a field survey that could serve as a serious basis for the debates on this charge of social dumping.

The Maurette Mission

The International Labour Office sent Fernand Maurette, Assistant Director of the Office, on a mission to visit Japanese factories and meet union, employer and government representatives from 3 to 21 April 1934. This Maurette mission showed how much relations between Japan and the ILO had changed since Albert Thomas's visit. Over and above the official rhetoric, the mission's main purpose was no longer to promote industrial democracy and global social legislation, but to save international cooperation jeopardized by the progression of protectionist policies and economic blocs.

The day of his arrival on 3 April, *Hōchi Shinbun* ran an editorial entitled 'Welcome Mister Maurette' in which it stressed the unfair accusation against Japan, 'Mr. Maurette's mission has two purposes: one is to promote the status of the workers and improve the employment situation to contain social unrest; the other is to study the question of 'social dumping' ... When making an international comparison of wages, when exchange rates change daily, it is inappropriate to take the gold value for a comparison of wages in different countries in order to judge living standards in these countries ... The low cost of living is due to the low cost of rice – the staple food of the Japanese people – and a labor supply surplus. The Europeans and Americans should open their doors to Japanese immigrants before complaining about low Japanese wages ...' (*Hōchi Shinbun* 03/04/1934).

Maurette was nevertheless able to count on the social reformists close to the ILO who still had a voice in the public debate. The foremost of them, Maeda Tamon, tried to present the ILO and Fernand Maurette's visit in a positive light in his editorial in the *Tōkyō asahi* on 5 April: 'Working conditions in Japan have been criticized in the international conferences for a number of years with a peak in 1926. Each time, Japan explained itself and we got the impression that the question was settled. Yet competition from Japan has brought the issue back up ... It is argued that competition has been made possible by the devaluation of the yen, and not by a drop in working conditions. In fact, it is reported that the condition of the workers has improved greatly since the war. The above-developed argument is for the benefit of the outside world. When we look within the country, we can see that there is a great deal of room for improvement in working conditions ... Ratification of the conventions on working hours and banning night work for women and children would disarm those who mount public opinion against Japanese products' (*Tōkyō asahi shinbun*, 5/04/1934).

In addition to being the subject of a host of articles and editorials, Maurette's visit was punctuated by receptions held in his honor attended by high-ranking government officials and businessmen along with factory visits. He visited 20 factories. These visits culminated in a report, drafted on his return, which proved most well-disposed towards Japan. Far from finding production conditions backward and essentially labor intensive, Maurette reported, in particular, that he was most favorably impressed by the mechanization and productivity effort and the mark

of the science of work in the firms he was shown: 'During my visits to factories and workshops I was constantly struck by the rapid and indeed brisk way in which the employees worked, with the result that the output per worker is high ... The output of the Japanese worker in large undertakings has undoubtedly made great progress. This is, of course, partly due to the improvement of equipment and mechanical methods. It is also partly due to the general and thorough application of carefully studied methods of organizing work in such a way as to produce the maximum output with the minimum expenditure of effort, and of strengthening the muscles and general health of the worker by means of a well-balanced diet' (Maurette 1934: 33-34).

On the more sensitive question of low wages, he appeared to take up the argument put to him so many times during the course of his visit: that the benchmark for a comparison with other countries could not be the gold value, as the International Labour Office had initially done with the Director's Report in 1933, but should be the relative value of wages within the country' (Maurette 1934: 26-28). Fernand Maurette felt that, even if he had been shown only the most modern factories, he was in a position to form an opinion and concluded his report with the judgement that there was no social dumping by Japan and that its competitiveness was essentially due to the yen's depreciation after leaving the gold standard and to the modernization of industry (Maurette 1934: 58).

This report had a considerable impact in Japan. A letter from Ayusawa Iwao, Director of the ILO Tokyo Branch Office, to Fernand Maurette dated 11 November 1934 informed him that the National Confederation of Industrial Associations (*Zensanren*) had ordered a thousand copies of the report translated into Japanese. It even said, 'The objectiveness of the description, the sympathetic attitude of the analysis, the precision of judgement and even the tact displayed by the conclusion to this report, all of this was appreciated at its full value ... this report has reduced the risk, if such has ever existed, that Japan may leave the ILO out of its misgivings' (ILOA G 900/46/23/2).

The Disintegration of Relations with the ILO

The Maurette report brought a temporary turn for the better, but could not shroud the paradoxical situation of relations between Japan and the ILO in the 1930s. Despite continuing membership following withdrawal from the LN and the new interest shown by employers in ILO membership, the importance that politicians and bureaucrats attached to the ILO plummeted. In fact, as pointed up by many historians such as Sakai Tetsuya (1989), Kato Yōko (1993), Yasuda Kayo (2014), and Jon Thares Davidman (2001), in its relations with the US, GB and international organizations, Japan was unable to formulate a consistent foreign policy in the 1930s due to the coexistence of different sensibilities within the government, between the army and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and even within the ministry itself. This situation played a major role in sustaining Japan's relations with the ILO, as it was the case with the League of Nations Health Organization, and the Institute of Pacific Relations, despite growing tensions and indifference, even after the start of the invasion of China in 1937.

Despite the Saitō government's lack of interest in labor legislation, Ayusawa Iwao, succeeding

Asari Junshirō, had taken over the position of Director of the Tokyo Branch Office with great gusto. In a letter to Harold Butler dated 20 December 1934, he demonstrated his tireless dedication to his role as publicist for the ILO. Under his management, the Branch Office continued to receive prominent public figures such as Mizuno Rentarō, former Home Minister (ILOA Cat 5 45 2 5). He also tried to rekindle the activity of associations that had served as meeting places for the liberal social reformists. For example, on 28 November 1935, the Association for Social Legislation (*Shakai rippō kenkyūkai*) held a meeting at the Takaratei Restaurant in Tokyo, to revive its dormant activity. In attendance was the core of the social reformist circles close to the ILO (ILOA XC 35 1/1). However, in a letter to Director Harold Butler, Ayusawa Iwao also wrote, 'I am impressed by the precautions I have to take and it would not be an exaggeration to say 'discretion'. The atmosphere in Japan, regardless of the circles one moves in, is still highly suspicious of Geneva, even though the situation is not as bad as it was last year. The military party is still making its influence felt in that great care is required when speaking of the ILO and the fact has to be made clear that it is an organization separate from the LN ...' (dated 2 December 1935: ILOA XC 35 1/1).

One sign of the ILO's gradual loss of influence was the increasingly difficult relationship as of 1936 between the International Labour Office's representative office and the cooperation agency, whose creation had been bound by Japan's membership of the ILO. On this, Ayusawa Iwao wrote to the Director on 26 December 1936 that he had, 'recently had the opportunity of speaking to *Kyōchōkai* to ask them if they could, alongside the Association for Social Legislation, help organize a conference of union leaders, members of parliament, academics, publicists and others with a liberal view of labor relations to promote union legislation. Mr. Kawarada, Director of *Kyōchōkai* refused point blank ...' He added later in his letter that the director was now, 'of the opinion that liberalism was a thing of the past in Japan ... He believes that Japan is heading for a controlled economy' (ILOA XC 35 1/1).

Although leaders continued regardless to see the ILO as an important instrument serving the economy and Japanese diplomacy, there were also growing doubts about the ILO's ability to check the progression of the bloc economy. At a meal at the Industrial Club of Japan on 11 April in honor of the employer, government and worker delegates to the international conference, government delegate Kitaoka Jūitsu pointed out that justice for the workers was impossible unless international economic justice were done in the form of freedom of trade. The ILO's most urgent task was to re-establish this freedom. He explained that, for a country such as Japan, the fastest way to raise the workers' standard of living was to lift the customs barriers put in place against its products. However, labor representative Kono Mitsu said that although all charges of social dumping against Japan had ceased, it was not because the other industrial powers were satisfied with labour conditions in Japan, but because they had now put tariff barriers in place. Ayusawa added at the end of his report, 'Foreign countries have not changed their attitude to Japan. What has changed is that Japan is now in a defensive position instead of being offensive. Japanese trade now reaches out right into the most remote markets. Japan's concern today is no longer to win further markets, but to defend what it has already conquered ... If this day and age is called a 'period of emergency', it is because an economic war, longer and farther reaching than an armed war, is being waged. It is true that the ILO has lost a great deal of its utility and is possibly no longer what it claimed to be, but it bears particular significance in this period of economic war ...' (ILOA XC 35 1/1).

The increasingly tense international climate and the government's unwillingness to ratify new conventions put in the balance the International Labour Office Director's planned visit at the invitation of the National Confederation of Industrial Associations (ILOA C 35-2-1). The visit was eventually cancelled. Withdrawal did not come immediately after Japan went to war against China in July 1937, but was precipitated by the LN Council's adoption on 30 September 1938 of a report stating that LN members could apply Article 16 and paragraph 3 of Article 17 of the constitution.⁷ Kitaoka Juitsu, Head of Japan's Representative Office to the ILO in Geneva, was relieved of his duties on 5 November and Zen Keinosuke, employers' representative, and Yonekubo Mitsusuke, labor representative, accordingly sent their letters of resignation as non-governmental representatives to the executive council. Exchanges continued a few months more as the International Labour Office made a vain attempt to force Japan to continue to pay its contributions for a period of two years on the premise that it had not respected this period of notice, notice period that it had nevertheless respected when it left the LN (ILOA XH 7/ 35/2).

Conclusion

The reassessment of the significance of the International Labour Organization in the history of pre-war Japan, even after the Manchurian incident, shows the importance of the dilemma that the Japanese governing elites had to face regarding their model of economic, social and political development and its repercussions on the nation's status in the international community. It also challenges a teleological view that has artificially tacked the German *Sonderweg* thesis onto the history of Japanese social reformism, as criticized by Erik Grimmer-Solem.⁸ This history cannot be reduced to adherence to the German model by Japanese bureaucrats, who would then have irreversibly turned their backs on the liberalism that inspired the first socio-economic reforms of the Meiji era, and which would have ultimately driven a totalitarianism that got into full stride as of the early 1930s (Grimmer-Solem 2005). In actual fact, labor policies were inspired in turn by ideas that circulated from one continent to the other by means of the international contacts possible among social reformers, and Japan's relations with the ILO were of considerable importance in the development of liberal social reformist circles highly active into the 1930s.

In addition, Jeffrey E. Hanes (2002) has clearly shown that although many future members of Japan's governing elite were to study in Germany at the turn of the century, this was not an authoritarian change of course already preparing the ground for the rise of 'fascism', but quite simply they are making the same intellectual pilgrimage as the day's Americans and Europeans, described by Daniel T. Rodgers (1998), to the country most advanced in popular health and social management. And when social reformers turned to the ILO, it was mainly because it was

⁷ Article 16 of the Covenant of the League of Nations specifies that, 'Should any Member of the League resort to war in disregard of its covenants ..., it shall ipso facto be deemed to have committed an act of war against all other Members of the League, which hereby undertake immediately to subject it to the severance of all trade or financial relations, the prohibition of all intercourse between their nationals and the nationals of the covenant-breaking State, and the prevention of all financial, commercial or personal intercourse between the nationals of the covenant-breaking State and the nationals of any other State, whether a Member of the League or not.'

⁸ He cites, in particular, the work of Kenneth Pyle (1974) and Bernd Martin (1995).

the main seat of thinking on labor issues. Even though Japan does not fit in with the chronology of the successive development of civil, political and social citizenships put forward by Thomas H. Marshall (1965) or Pierre Rosenvallon (2011), it does bear an uncanny resemblance when it comes to the development of social security institutions. It too started by updating its traditional mechanisms to aid the poor with the 1874 'Relief Regulations' (*Jukkyū kisoku*) before introducing legislation to protect miners (1905 Mine Act) and then factory workers (1911 Factory Act) and subsequently developing a welfare benefit system (1922 Health Insurance Act, 1936 Retirement Fund Act, 1938 National Health Insurance Act and 1941 Pensions Act). This social security system still structures Japan to quite a large extent today.

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