

## Book Reviews

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Sugiura M. *Against the Storm: How Japanese Printworkers Fought the Military Regime, 1935–1945* (trans. Kaye Broadbent and Mana Sato). Melbourne: Interventions, 2019. ISBN (pbk) 978-0-9945378-5-0 AUD 25.00.

**Reviewed by:** Diane Fieldes

*Against the Storm* is a first-hand account of the struggles of printworkers by one of their leaders, Masao Sugiura, centred on his experiences in the *Shuppankō Kurabu* (the Print and Publishing Workers Club, hereafter the Club). Born in 1914, Sugiura was a Tokyo union activist, and had been a leading figure on the strike committee of a major Tokyo printworkers' strike in 1935. This translation by Kaye Broadbent and Mana Sato is the first English-language publication of a memoir which was first published by surviving members of the Club in the 1960s, with a second version, which forms the basis for this translation, being produced in 1981. *Against the Storm* was unearthed by Kaye Broadbent, who provides a useful introduction situating the printworkers' actions in Japan's broader working class history.

The book is significant because so little has been available in English about the anti-war activities, strikes and other forms of resistance that took place in Japan in this period. Even in workplaces central to the war effort, there was struggle. Little wonder that Kaye Broadbent commented on her accidental discovery as 'Finding this book was equivalent to winning the lottery' (p. 2). This hidden history of Japanese anti-war resistance against the imperial state is particularly important given the still-common perception of war-time Japan as a society characterised by docile obedience to military rule, as Jack Crawford usefully outlines in his review of the book in *Overland* (Crawford, 2020). Of course, a counter-narrative to the dominant Anglophone historiography was not Sugiura's motivation in writing the memoir. Instead, he (and the other members of the Club who helped collate the information) sought to preserve a record of workers' war-time resistance, and of their own contribution to preventing the workers' organisation from completely disappearing during the war. They also wished to commemorate their mentor and comrade, Shibata Ryūichirō, who had died in prison just months before the war ended.

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 unofficially led the committee. Even before this experience, life in the 1930s was hard for young workers, and Sugiura felt its effects. He describes a cartoon of the times depicting a young person facing three roads: 'one was the road to suicide, another was the road to decadence and the third was the road to Marxism' (p. 23). Under Shibata's influence, it was the latter road that the young Sugiura took.

Soon after, open union organising and the anti-war activism of the JCP was effectively wiped out by the state. As the demands of war-time production, first against China, then the Allies in World War II, increased, so too did the level of repression necessary to expand productive capacity by driving workers ever harder. In November 1940, trade unions were compulsorily disbanded, and on their ruins rose the Patriotic Industrial Association (PIA), which Sugiura describes as 'anything but a union. It was a bureaucratic mechanism for the massive wartime mobilisation of workers controlled by the health and internal affairs ministries. The PIA forced workers into military production and for capitalists it was a slave labour-like organisation that guaranteed unlimited exploitation' (p. 98).

State repression did not succeed in ending all resistance. Instead, it prompted Shibata to shift focus from the Society that had emerged from the defeat of the strike to a broader, less overtly political Club that organised social activities for workers instead of open politics. A social club which organised cultural events, book clubs and sporting activities; raised funds for unemployed members; and put on theatre performances that had a dual purpose for those who led the shift: to avoid detection by the Special Police and to find an audience for left-wing ideas. As Shibata put it, while surveying a picnic of 80 people which had replaced the banned 1936 May Day celebrations, 'Even if circumstances get really bleak, activism can take any form' (p. 46). Even during the depths of wartime repression, dissatisfaction with the war grew among those living at the bottom of society. Quoting a 1942 document from the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Sugiura gives a brief sketch of the creative ways in which class struggle in some form continued under wartime conditions, from spending one's shift napping in the storeroom to making personal items during work time, or working only when directly supervised, to an increase in collective violence against supervisors and management.

The Club grew to around 1500 members at its height. Sugiura gives a typically selfless account of what his day consisted of during the war:

My mother would wake me at 5.30 a.m. I would hurriedly wash my face and gobble down breakfast. With my lunchbox in one hand I would dash out of the house. If I walked I would not make it, so I ran to the train stop and got to work narrowly escaping being late. I changed into my work clothes, picked up my tools and got to work. Five minutes before lunch time I would secretly eat my lunch and, in the 30 minutes we had for lunch, I would visit two or three workplaces close by and complete my tasks. Then I would rush back to my workplace and work until 5 pm. In the thirty minute break I had before starting overtime I would visit a few more nearby workplaces. I worked overtime from 5.30 pm until 8 pm. As soon as work was over I would head off to the Club's office. A lot of young people would be gathered there, printing out materials for various gatherings. We would

do this together or have a meeting and before we knew it, it was midnight. I would rush to catch the last train, and when I arrived home and got to bed it was about 1.30 am. I would then be woken up again at 5.30 the next morning. I continued this life for several years. But it was not only me, numerous young people lived this life with a passion, and did so happily (p. 89).

Somehow amid all this, the leading Club members also engaged in serious study of socialist literature, even though possession of the books they were reading would have meant arrest. All this activity took place under that threat – and worse. When state repression intensified, it was only a matter of time before the Club leaders were picked up by the police: Sugiura, Shibata and others were arrested in 1942, tortured and imprisoned until the end of the war. Only the Women's Section of the Club continued in the midst of severe repression. It was Shibata who suggested they think again when they consulted him about disbanding, pointing out that the low status of women in Japan could be used to their advantage, as 'even when they are active, they are not noticed at all' (p. 107).

The work of the Club was often unglamorous and seemingly unimportant, but it saved from eradication the thread that linked the previous era, of more open struggle, with the struggles that would take off when the war ended. As soon as the war finished, and despite the best efforts of the Allied occupying forces, democratic movements including the Council of Industrial Unions flourished. Club members were ready. The overwhelming determination to keep union traditions alive 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. Union membership in late 1945 was 600,000; by June 1948, it was 6.7 million. The 1946 May Day demonstration attracted 2 million workers nationwide.


The book concludes with a 2016 interview conducted by Broadbent with Sugiura himself, then 102 years old. It was only in January 2021, aged 106, that Sugiura's remarkable life of over 90 years of political activism ended. The publication in English of his memoir is a fine tribute to one who did not give in to the storm.

## References

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