“Seiji tōsō—kuso kurae da!” (Political struggle is all for shit!) Vulgar and sarcastic, this line from a free verse poem written by railway worker Minami Kyōko puts into sharp relief the extent to which a vocal minority of women union members thought that the strongly politicized “workplace struggles” (shokuba tōsō) that characterized the political agenda of socialist unions during the 1950s did not represent the interests of wage-earning women. Printed in the April 1956 issue of the monthly union magazine Kokutetsu bunka (Railway Culture), Minami’s poem gave voice to working women affiliated with Japan’s left-led labor unions who were frustrated with the strategic decision of the male union leadership to prioritize the left’s national political agenda over the economic interests of wage-earning women union members.

In the formative years of the postwar labor movement, leftist unions such as Kokurō (Kokutetsu Rōdō Kumiai; National Railway Workers’ Union), an affiliated union of the 6 million strong socialist labor federation Sōhyō (Nihon Rōdō Kumiai Sōhyōgikai; General Council of Trade Unions), formally endorsed the principles of women’s equality in the workforce and put in place measures to promote women’s active participation in union activities. The very fact that the editors saw fit to publish Minami’s searing criticism is itself evidence of ambivalence and

1. Minami Kyōko, “Haru,” Kokutetsu bunka, April 1956, 41. The full text of Minami’s poem will be examined in Chapter 5.
contestation within the socialist labor movement over issues of gender and equality at a time when powerful political and cultural forces were denying the promise—enshrined in the 1947 constitution—of equality between men and women.

This book explores a confluence of developments within Sōhyō-affiliated unions, which despite the federation’s formal endorsement of gender equality had the effect of relegating women union members to a status secondary to men in the workplace and within their unions. Writing in 1956, Minami was angered by the strategic decision of Sōhyō leaders to align with the Japan Socialist Party (JSP) and mobilize union membership against the consolidation of the domestic center-right political agenda of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and its acquiescence to an international Cold War alliance with the United States.

Japan’s left-led labor unions, able to swell the ranks of political demonstrations with hundreds of thousands of unionized workers, were the lynchpin of opposition politics during the 1950s and 1960s. The largest of these unions were engaged in political campaigns that ranged from resistance movements against conservative attempts to retract union rights to local and national social movements in opposition to nuclear weapons, rearmament, and Japan’s military security alliance with the United States embodied by the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty of 1951.2

Although supportive of their unions’ political agenda, many women expressed concern that the labor movement’s deep involvement in the peace and anti-nuclear movements distracted unions from their fiduciary duty to focus on issues of direct concern to women as wage-earners. By the end of the 1950s, a vocal few, like railway union member Minami Kyōko, were clearly frustrated with ‘political struggles’ they perceived to be too far removed from the fundamental interests of rank-and-file working women.

Minami’s critique also offers an overlooked factor in the experiences of wage-earning women of the postwar era who have tended to drop out of the waged workforce after marriage or the birth of their first

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2. The latter of these political struggles were of particular importance to union leaders who sought to position organized labor as a key partner in the JSP’s bid to win control of the national legislature.
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child, only to return to lesser paying work roughly a decade later. Although this “M-curve” phenomenon (for the M-shaped curve of women’s labor-force participation plotted according to age) to some degree describes the trajectory of women’s employment in the United States, Great Britain, and Germany since 1945, Mary C. Brinton argues that the it has been far more pronounced, and persisted far longer, for women in postwar Japan than any contemporary industrialized society.

The persistence and depth of this trend in women’s employment is in part because government officials, business associations, pundits, and even a few segments of the women’s movement have generally accepted the assertion that women of the postwar era drop out of the waged workforce by choice. Labor scholars in Japan and the United States, on the other hand, generally agree that the status of women in the workplace has been undermined by employment practices that fail to promote and pay women on an equal standing with their male co-workers. Recent studies of women’s employment patterns in postwar Japan have identified causal factors such as the persistence of maternalist ideologies, the assertion of corporate management policies, and the failure of government to enforce protective legislation.

3. During the 1950s and 1960s, wage-earning women tended to drop out of the workforce around the age of 25 and return in their mid-30s. These ages have shifted in recent years. Women in the 1990s and early 2000s appear to have married and had children after the age of 30, and appear to be returning to work about a decade later. Labor sociologist Kawanishi Hirosuke claims that the M-curve had all but disappeared by 2005; however, Labor Ministry data from 2006 still demonstrated a clear M-shaped curve. Although the “M-curve” has flattened some since the late 1980s, the basic structure to waged work for women remains. See Brinton, Women and the Economic Miracle, 28–32, 123–40, 168–88; Gender Equality Bureau, Cabinet Office, “Women in Japan Today, 1996,” [accessed 16 April 2007]; Gender Equality Bureau, Cabinet Office, “Women in Japan Today, 2006,” [accessed 16 April 2007]; and Mouser and Kawanishi, A Sociology of Work in Japan, 132–35.

4. Kucera, Gender, Growth and Trade; Spencer, Gender, Work and Education in Britain in the 1950s; Cobble, “Women’s Employment and the Domestic Ideal”; and Brinton, Women and the Economic Miracle, 32–34.

Brinton argues that the Japanese M-curve, which has characterized the trajectory of women’s workforce participation since 1950, is in part the result of the rapid absorption of large numbers of married women into a wage-earning workforce that prior to World War II had been primarily composed of young unmarried women. However, Brinton also argues that the persistence of the M-curve phenomenon is primarily the result of weak structures for the enforcement of employment law, and Labor Ministry bureaucrats predisposed to think of women as temporary workers without need for long-term employment protections.

This arrangement has been beneficial to Japanese employers. Kumazawa Makoto argues that most Japanese companies rely on a production scheme predicated on the M-curve. Although newly hired blue- and white-collar employees often start in positions in which both men and women begin with the most menial and routinized work, male employees are far more likely to be promoted into positions with higher rates of pay. Kumazawa argues that in addition to relegating women to high-turnover, lower-skilled, lower-paid positions, managers are able to bear the cost of tracking men faster by precluding women from attaining higher-paying seniority-track positions. This has been a persistent problem in postwar Japan.

6. Between 1950 and 1980, more than 40 percent of the adult female workforce shifted from working in family cottage industries (naishoku) to waged employment outside the home. Many recent improvements to women’s status in the workplace are credited to revisions made to the Labor Law in the late 1980s and again in the late 1990s, which relaxed many of the legal restrictions on women’s workforce participation dating to the Labor Standards Law (1947), which had banned night work by women and guaranteed menstrual leave. These protections came to be perceived by women’s rights activists as material constraints to women’s gaining equal footing in the workplace, and their removal from the law was seen by many women’s studies scholars as having bolstered women’s legal equality. However, even these reforms have not significantly altered the employment trajectory for women that in 2006 still retained the M-curve. Brinton, Women and the Economic Miracle, 1993, 33; Andrew Pollack, “Jobs, At a Cost, for Japan’s Women,” New York Times, 8 July 1997; and Weathers, “Equal Opportunity for Japanese Women.”


8. Kumazawa Makoto introduced the basis of this argument in his Portraits of the Japanese Workplace and further discusses it in his Josei rōdo to kigō shakai. See also Molony, “Japan’s Equal Employment Opportunity Law and the Changing Discourse on Gender.”
Ignoring legal protections against sex discrimination in the workplace established by the Labor Standards Law (Rōdō Kijun Hō) in 1947 and reinforced by the Equal Employment Opportunity Law (Danjo Koyō Kikai Kinto Hō) of 1986 (both revised to provide for stronger enforcement powers in 1997), managers still often refuse to promote women after their mid- to late 20s, which they justify by asserting that women of that age are likely to marry and leave the workforce anyway. Kumazawa argues that because the base of low-wage production is covered by female employees, who as short-term, temporary employees are not eligible for promotion or significant wage increases, managers are able to pay and promote male employees faster without creating a corresponding increase in labor costs.9

This book argues that in the formative decade of the postwar labor market, socialist unions affiliated with the national federation Sōhyō indirectly assisted managers in moving women to the periphery of the workforce, even while publicly advocating equality between the sexes. Instead of pressing employers to uphold the equal treatment in the workplace guaranteed to women by the 1947 Labor Standards Law, leaders of Japan’s 27 largest socialist unions (which together represented more than 5 million union members) pressured their 1 million wage-earning women members to support wage agreements that relegated their wage-earning value to the periphery of a male-headed household economy.10

Studies of women and labor in twentieth century Japan have focused on industrial sectors employing the largest numbers of women. Women textile workers constituted the majority of industrial workers until the


10. The total number of women union members during the 1950s increased from 1.5 to 1.7 million. Twenty-seven unions accounted for about two-thirds, and the textile workers’ unions accounted for the remaining third. The Zensen Dōmei (Zenkoku Sen’i Sangyō Rōdō Kumiai Dōmei; National Federation of Textile Industry Workers Unions) was the only majority female union (80 percent) of the postwar period. The percentage of female members of the other 27 national unions ranged from 1 to 20 percent.
late 1920s, and as much as a third of wage-earning women until the late 1970s. Studies of labor management relations after 1945, on the other hand, focus on economic sectors employing primarily men, and have made women’s experiences merely a footnote to the larger story of organized labor by largely ignoring women who constituted a minority of workers in the industrial sectors that dominated the high-speed, high economic growth of the postwar era.

Studies of Japanese women and labor also establish that union and non-union activism of the prewar and wartime eras set important precedents for labor militancy and worker autonomy in an era that precluded women’s political rights outside the context of the patriarchal household, and significantly predated constitutional and legal protections mandated by the Allied Occupation of Japan (1945–52). Yet it was only after 1945 that labor unions could claim to represent more than a few hundred thousand wage-earning men to its few thousand women members.

The Allied Occupation mandated significant social and legal reforms specifically tailored to assist in the formation of a strong labor movement. Mostly overseen by American labor experts and former union activists, the Labor Division of SCAP (Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers; also known in Japan as GHQ, for General Headquarters) also played a significant role in convincing women to join labor unions.


12. Most scholars make respectful mention of women laborers, but reconstruct the narrative of labor unions through the perspective of the male majority and make mention of women’s union participation only in the context of workplaces and unions where women were the majority. Sumiya, Nihon rōdō undōshi; Shiota, Nakabayashi, and Tanuma, Sengo rōdō kumiai undō no rekishi; Ōkōchi and Matsuo, Nihon rōdō kumiai monogatari; Hyōdō, Gendai no rōdō undō; Hyōdō and Tsuka, eds., Rōshi kankei no tenkan to sen-taku; Gibbs, Struggle and Purpose; Price, Japan Works; Kume, Disparaged Success; and Gordon, The Wages of Affluence.

13. Strong, politically engaged women in Japan have had a significant history—one that has considerable overlap with the history of women’s labor activism. See Tanai, “Yūaikai Fujinbu no katsudō ni tsuite—jo”; Suzuki, Jokō to rōdō sógi; Suzuki, Josei to rōdō kumiai (jō); Hunter, Women and the Labour Market in Japan’s Industrializing Economy; Mackie, Creating Socialist Women in Japan; and Faison, Managing Women.
The effort to encourage unionization was so successful that by the late 1940s a million women belonged to unions representing workers in the textile, communications, service, and education sectors, and another half million women belonged to some 25 different national unions representing workers across the major economic sectors. In all, one in two wage-earning women had joined their representative unions.  

A decade later, the total number of women engaged in full-time waged work had more than doubled from 2.98 million to 6.3 million, and the total number of women belonging to unions had increased to just slightly more than 1.7 million, dropping from 50 percent in 1949 to 8 percent in 1959. Although the total number of women belonging to unions did remain relatively stable, these data show that union leaders failed to elicit the greater part of a rapidly growing population of wage-earning women to join the labor movement.

Part of the explanation for this trend rests in the way in which corporate managers and government functionaries promoted gendered ideologies in order to encourage women to embrace social roles that many Japanese thought embodied their dreams of affluence. Gender ideologies, like the prewar ideal of ryōsai kenbo (“Good Wife, Wise Mother”) and paternalist social campaigns such as the state- and corporate-sponsored New Life Movements (Shin Seikatsu Undō), had profound impact on the course of women’s union participation during the post-war period.


15. The vast majority of women worked full time. In 1960, only 8.9 percent of wage-earning women were engaged in part-time work (less than 32 hours per week), largely in non-unionized service sector jobs. Kōsei Rōdōshō, ed., *Josei rōdō bakusho*, 23.

16. The number of women union members dipped sharply to 1.3 million in 1953 (32 percent of all wage-earning women) as a result of the economic recession that followed in the wake of the Korean war. Even though the total number of women in the workforce increased to 1.77 million in 1959, the percentage of the female workforce that belonged to unions had slid to 28 percent by 1959 (1.77 million of 6.3 million). Significantly, the total number of unionized women decreased 17 percent more than that for men. In 1949, 57 percent of wage-earning men belonged to unions, and 37 percent in 1959.

The corporate New Life Movement, inspired by the state-sponsored health and hygiene campaign of the same name, was only one of many 1950s-era rationalization schemes deployed by company managers who sought to thwart union militancy by reshaping the working-class home. Andrew Gordon argues that these corporate-sponsored movements had a significant impact on the lives of working-class women. During the 1950s, large corporations across Japan hired and trained organizers to teach the wives of blue-collar employees housekeeping, child rearing, and household management skills as a means of rationalizing the day-to-day household functions of their company-owned homes. Gordon examines the corporate movement through which a number of Japanese employers attempted to undermine the efficacy of unions by creating outreach programs aimed to extend management’s influence into individual workers’ homes. These movements were successful, Gordon argues, in part because most labor unions failed to respond to the corporate initiative.18

When unions did respond, instead of encouraging double income, dual union families, they embraced the same typology of domestic household advocated by the corporate New Life organizers. Ōmiya Miyuki examines the extent to which the Fujinbu (Women’s Department) of the railway workers’ union Kokurō, which represented 15,000 wage-earning women members in the 1950s, developed maternalist women’s organizations intended to foster a “union-friendly home” by mobilizing women married to male union members.19 Ōmiya finds that the central committee of Kokurō asked the Fujinbu to organize the Family Union Movement (Kazoku Kumiai Undō) as early as 1949. Tellingly, the union leaders did not provide additional funding and Fujinbu activists struggled to find ways to balance the added responsibilities of organizing housewives with its original mandate to represent the interests of wage-earning women all through the 1950s.20

20. Ōmiya’s study demonstrates how the Fujinbu’s mandate to organize housewives negatively impacted the fight against workplace discrimination, but does not address the impact on women’s status within Kokurō.
Yamada Kazuyo introduced the first critical studies of how maternalist ideologies influenced the institutional framework of the national federation Sōhyō.21 Founded in 1962, the Sōhyō Shufu no Kai (Association of Sōhyō Housewives) was the brainchild of male union leaders who sought to mobilize women married to wage-earning male members of Sōhyō-affiliated unions, and not engaged in waged employment outside the home. The Sōhyō Shufu no Kai immediately displaced the Sōhyō Fujinbu, which had a broad and more equality-oriented agenda, and became the federation’s primary organization for soliciting women’s union participation during the 1960s and 1970s. Significantly, union leaders created organizations like the Family Union Movement and the Sōhyō Shufu no Kai despite the urgent criticisms of rank-and-file women members who during the mid- and late 1950s explicitly told the federation to direct organizing resources toward the fight against workplace discrimination—not toward organizing the home.

In the six chapters that follow, this book makes use of the analytic tools afforded by both social and cultural history to make a three-part argument. The first and second chapters look at the way three otherwise diverse political and social discourses overlapped by promoting customary notions of sex and gender. The first chapter surveys the social history of women’s union activism during the first half of the twentieth century in order to identify a history of labor militancy that establishes a context for the rapid rise in women’s union activity that occurred after 1945. The second chapter investigates how visual artists affiliated with the postwar labor movement borrowed from their prewar predecessors a powerful cultural and intellectual pantheon of ‘womanhood’ in their attempt to channel women’s union activism in support of political agendas that, perhaps inadvertently, precluded consideration of women outside the context of the male-centered family.

The third and fourth chapters examine how the customary notions of gender deployed by union propagandists also shaped the institutional structures of Sōhyō, the dominant labor organization of the 1950s. The

third chapter reconstructs the institutional history of Sōhyō to include how the wage systems won in the 1950s affected the lives of rank-and-file women. The majority-male unions of the 1950s fought for, and won, wage systems that presumed a woman’s wage-earning value was secondary to that of her husband. It all came down to jobs, and the unions belonging to Sōhyō privileged jobs for men over those for women.

The fourth chapter shifts between social and cultural sources in reconstructing the narrative of how women labor activists affiliated with two of the most militant unions of the 1950s built housewives organizations as a means of facilitating women’s political and economic agency. The chapter explores how many women activists made use of customary gender roles in order to win a toehold in the power structure of Japan’s militant socialist unions by focusing on the decade of women’s activism that grew out of the harsh material conditions faced by residents of coal mining and military base communities across Japan. Paradoxically, the success of their efforts set the stage for national union leaders to pressure all union women to become housewife activists.

The fifth and sixth chapters argue how the institutional structures built by Sōhyō and its affiliated unions relegated women’s wage-earning value to the periphery of the household economy and built institutional frameworks that encouraged women to define their social roles through their positions as housewives. The fifth chapter examines in depth how the development of the Family Union Movement at Kokurō influenced leaders of Sōhyō to form the Sōhyō Shufu no Kai, and resulted in the channeling of women’s union activism in support of political campaigns demanding family wage and income tax structures that advantaged a male-headed household. Contrary to popular assertions, union militancy did not itself alienate the women directly engaged in the highly centralized union politics of the 1950s. Instead, the radical base of Sōhyō’s women activists were alienated by the family union campaigns (kazoku kumiai undo), first deployed en masse by Sōhyō member unions in the early 1950s, which turned off many wage-earning women who did not necessarily desire to subordinate their identities as wage-earners in order to play the role of wives and daughters of union men.

The sixth chapter reconstructs Sōhyō’s participation in the national political struggles leading up to and including the 1960 anti–Security Treaty Protests as a means to examine the extent to which socially con-
constructed gender norms underpinned Sōhyō’s political rhetoric and social policies. Shifting from social to cultural history, the chapter examines the gendered propaganda deployed by labor activists during the 1958 campaign to stop passage of the Police Powers Law, and ends by exploring the extent to which similarly gendered propaganda underpinned the dual struggle against mass layoffs at the Miike Coal Mines in Kyushu and ratification of the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty—union struggles that dominated the political landscape of Japan in 1959 and 1960. The chapter concludes that despite vociferous criticism of the gendered social roles relegated to them, women belonging to Sōhyō-affiliated unions had little choice but to participate in the political struggles of the era in their role as housewife activists, not wage-earning union members.

In reexamining the political landscape of the postwar labor movement in Japan, this study asks historians of labor and gender to reconsider the extent to which gender and class have shaped the meaning of citizenship in the twentieth century. Labor movements across the globe have represented working-class interests as a masculine norm, and many recent studies of women and labor in Western Europe, the United States, and Australia establish how after 1945 wage-earning women fought hard just to earn the right to belong to unions ostensibly formed to represent the interests of all workers.22

Early studies of women and unions in Western Europe, the United States, and Japan establish how, despite their formal exclusion from union membership, women were nevertheless significant participants in the formation of labor movements during the mid- and late-nineteenth century.23 Although sex discrimination remained commonplace in both the workplace and in unions, wage-earning women constituted by the

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22. Those that have been the most influential to this study include: Colgan and Ledwith, Gender, Diversity, and Trade Unions; Deslippe, Rights, Not Roses; Dollinger, Not Automatic; Cobble, The Other Women’s Movement; Fonow, Union Women; Cobble, Dishing It Out; Gabin, Feminism in the Labor Movement; and Milkman, Gender at Work.

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mid-twentieth century between 20 and 30 percent of all union members in most industrialized nations.24

In her comparative study of women’s union participation, Jennifer Curtin identifies three interconnected strategies used by women labor activists to encourage women to become active in their unions: proactive recruitment, the creation of women’s organizations with the specific mandate of representing women’s interests, and the creation of programs to address issues of particular concern to women union members.25 In postwar Japan, women union activists deployed similar strategies, with similar degrees of success. Yet by the end of the 1950s, Japan’s male-dominant labor unions, which represented the majority of wage-earning women, had reallocated funding resources for promoting women’s issues to benefit the interests of a male-centered agenda.

The six chapters of this book lay the groundwork for the core argument that women wage earners found the struggle for equal rights particularly difficult in both their workplace and society in part because contemporary ideals of citizenship in industrialized societies emerged alongside the assumption that a woman’s economic and political status are dependent on her role as a wife. Alice Kessler-Harris observes, in the American context, that “to fully be a man required a dependent wife and therefore implied that women could or would not themselves be economically independent.” She argues that “work functioned as an explicit defining notion of universal citizenship,” and women, historically denied equal access to work, consequently also were precluded from the rights and obligations of citizenship.26

The gendered roles for working-class Japanese men and women promoted by postwar unions reinforced cultural forms and economic structures that made it next to impossible for women to obtain full-time, permanent, high-wage employment. As a result, the ideal working-class home envisaged by labor leaders helped to exclude working-class

women from equal access to waged work, which also precluded them from the rights and responsibilities of full citizenship.\footnote{Article 28 of the 1947 Constitution established the right of every Japanese citizen to belong to a labor union, and Article 27 established that every citizen has the right, and obligation, to work (kinnō).}

While this had a significant impact on the life-choices available to working-class women, it also had disastrous consequences for the labor movement. By the end of the 1980s, conservative retrenchment and waning union membership roles led to the dissolution of Sōhyō and radically transformed its largest member unions, including the one to which railway worker Minami Kyōko had once belonged. Indeed, the demise of the socialist labor movement was in part the result of the failure of union leaders to protect the economic basis of citizenship for their most vulnerable members: women.