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Growth of Marxism in Japan

—with special reference to "Yamakawa-ism" in 1920's.—

(The Report of the 25th International Congress of
Orientalists in 1960 at Moscow Univ.)

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In any discussion of "Marxism in Japan," it is necessary to draw a line of distinction between the stage in which theory and doctrines of Marxism were being introduced into our country and made the object of academic study, and the stage in which Marxism began to function as ideological instrument in class strife. The period of over ten years from 1897 to 1910, when labour movement and socialist movement in Japan were signs of positive development, corresponds with the time during which Marxism was introduced and was gradually differentiated from a set of various socialist doctrines.

Until this period was over, therefore, Marxism never came to assume a practical importance as directing principle in labour movement and socialist movement. It may well be noted that what exerted a pervading influence over the socialist intelligentsia of the time was anarchism, and anarcho-syndicalism.

The tremendous social disruption resulting from the First World War (1914—18), and the impact of Russian Revolution in 1917 and the frequent rice riots at home
in 1918, incidentally urged the labouring masses to set
to work concurrently at organizing labour unions, resort-
ing at need to strikes to protect their interests. Thus
the Japanese socialists, after a time of oppression, had
a chance to reinforce themselves. This period of ‘re-
construction’ for the socialists, ranging from 1919 to
1921, is also marked by an orthodox introduction of
Leninism.

In January of the year 1922, the first issue of the
organ magazine “Zen-ei” (or “the Vanguard”) was
published by Sakai-Yamakawa group, which was the
main body of Marxists in Japan. Shortly afterwards,
in July of the same year, this group, joined by almost
all the leading members of minor Marxist organizations
throughout the country, came to Japan Communist
Party.

Although the formation of the party was in a sense
premature, it was at this time that the need of deriving
theoretical support for labour movement from Marxism
was felt all the more keenly. Marxism was no longer
regarded merely as a doctrine to be studied. It was
now beginning to play the role of an ideological weapon.

It was Hitoshi YAMAKAWA who attempted to
from a directing principle for the movement by adapt-
ing Marxism to the state of affairs in Japan. The so-
called Yamakawa-ism in consequently the earliest of
the modified form of Marxism on the Japanese soil.
During the early part of his career, Yamakawa was
engaged in leveling attacks at the petit bourgeois de-
mocrats, and in the field of labour movement he advocated the necessity of 'shift of course' for the movement, criticizing the doctrines of syndicalism or anarcho-syndicalism. The view expressed by Yamakawa, known as "Hôkô-tenkan-ron." (Suggestion for Shift of Course) was indeed an epoch-making proposal made from the Marxist point of view, to overcome the dilemma which syndicalism involved. Here Yamakawa made for the first time a logical analysis as well as a suggestion for remedy of the theoretical fallacy which had so far been cherished by the leaders of labour movement of the time, including Yamakawa himself. In this way his suggestion for 'shift of course' actually changed the course of labour movement away from the marshy realm of syndicalism and was highly effective in encouraging its reorganization on a more popular basis.

After making the suggestion for 'shift of course' of the movement, Yamakawa expounded the necessity of forming a "Unified Proletarian Party." What prompted him to make the proposition was a unique theory of political system which invariably remained to be the core of his thought. He was convinced that a concerted operation of a 'Single Front Party,' uniting all the anti-capitalistic elements of society, would be far more effective, at least under the social conditions of 1920's in Japan, than a party consisting exclusively of proletariats.

His proposal for a formation of such a party seemed so timely and practical in the political situation of the
day that it was met with an almost unanimous agreement even among the left-wing groups which were busily occupied with the reconstruction of a Revolutionist Party. It certainly had a great deal of potential possibilities and would have proved sufficiently fruitful if a few essential conditions had been fulfilled.

The fundamental drawback, however, of the proposition lay in his erroneous apprehension of the political situation and governmental system of Japan upon which the whole body of his ideas as well as his strategies and theory of party formation were founded. From the exceptional way in which Japanese capitalism developed, and from its dissimilarity in many aspects to European capitalism, Yamakawa inferred that the rise of bourgeoisie in political sphere likewise must have had something unusual about it. He interpreted that bourgeoisie by the time were securely in power, after having assimilated all the surviving feudalistic elements. He was pitifully ignorant of the unsatisfied yearning for democracy among petit bourgeoisie and less wealthy farming population.

The only proper step to be taken was apparently in the direction of mustering up all the democratic forces in society—an improvement over Yamakawa's idea of Single Front Party—to stand against the emperor system, in full awareness of the nature of Japanese monarchy.

The real state of political affairs, however, tended in a contrary direction. Yamakawa's idea of 'Single
Front Party' had a temporal realization in 1926 in the Labour-Farmer Party, which, within a year, underwent changes of nature counter to its original ideal.

Instead of growing into a comprehensive organization for a single front operation against emperor system, it splitted into factions representing each labour unions or farmers' associations.

To summarize, Yamakawaism was the first theoretical expression, embodying an earliest attempt to apply Marxism to Japanese reality and to frame an original system and course of action for labour movement. In other words, Marxism in Japan first manifested itself in Yamakawaism, in the process of rapid growth of labour movement and socialist movement after World War I. In the early half of 1920's, it played an indispensable part in the history of left-wing labour movement as the only directing principle in existence at the time, and its central proposition of Single Front Party had been materialized, if for a brief space of time, as a result of concentrated operation. But when the Labour-Farmer Party (established in March, 1926) splitted into several sects, Yamakawaism lost its practical validity as a system of thought, and was superseded before long by another form of Marxism in Japan known as Fukumotoism.