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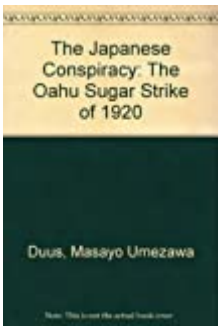


**Masayo Umezawa Duus.** *The Japanese Conspiracy: The Oahu Sugar Strike of 1920.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999. xiii + 375 pp. $23.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-520-20485-0; $60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-20484-3.

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In early 1920 in Hawaii, Japanese sugar cane workers, who made up nearly half of the work force on Hawaiian sugar plantations, struck for a wage increase. Although the strikers eventually capitulated, the Hawaiian territorial government cracked down on the strike leaders, bringing them to trial for conspiracy to dynamite the house of a plantation official. Afterward, to end dependence on Japanese immigrant labor, the planters lobbied in Washington to lift restrictions on the immigration of Chinese workers. Instead, the clash helped secure that passage of the Immigration Act of 1924 (often called Japanese Exclusion Act). Originally published in Japan in 1991, Masayo Umezawa Duus's narrative of these events presents a complex picture of the Oahu sugar strike tailored to the Japanese audience. (In fact, the book won the Oya Prize and the Sincho Gakugei Prize, the two most distinguished nonfiction prizes in Japan.) The author tries to remedy a limited knowledge in Japan regarding Hawaii in 1920 by surrounding the details of the strike and its aftermath with a variety of details and material not immediately relevant to Hawaii, such as comments on the Sacco-Vanzetti case to illustrate the fear of radicals then prevalent.

Using newspaper sources, Japanese Foreign Office correspondence and reports and Hawaii court records, Duus gives a detailed, blow-by-blow account of the strike, the dynamite case which occurred after the strike, and the trial of fifteen of the alleged conspirators. This narrative leads to the conclusion, which examines the 1924 Immigration Act sponsored by Senator Hiram Johnson of California. The bill added Japanese to the excluded category – now all Asians were excluded and lower quotas were put in place for southern and eastern Europeans. The legislation reflected the views of residents of the Pacific coast states and was bitterly resented in Japan.

The "conspiracy" of the title stems from the newspaper and sugar planters' propaganda developed to fight the strike and the campaign to persuade Congress to admit Chinese workers on an indenture contract to counter the perceived dominance of Japanese workers. Hawaiian planters had been searching for the proverbial ideal worker – cheap, docile and plentiful since 1850. Hawaiians, Chinese, Portuguese, Japanese, eastern Europeans, Puerto Ricans, African-Americans, poor white Americans, and Filipinos made up the list of trials; each in turn had been found to be unreliable, expensive, truculent and generally unworthy. Each new group in turn was praised as the "final solution' to Hawaii's "Labor Question."

While Duus's narrative is interesting and somewhat informative, the conspiratorial approach results in a misleading picture. Despite the erratic documentation, the author presents an interesting and useful picture of the

important event from a Japanese perspective. The intense focus on actions of Japanese workers tends to obscure the Hawaiian elements of the situation. There is considerable confusion in the story about the events of the Kingdom of Hawaii, its overthrow and the establishment of the Republic of Hawaii and its subsequent annexation. Thus, chapter one is good in showing the flow of ideas between Japan and the United States but is weak on Hawaiian details. There is no recognition of the fact that Japanese men had been barred from emigrating to Hawaii since 1906 and that a large percentage of the plantation workers were born in Hawaii. The lack of knowledge of the labor movement results in a telescoping of the labor structure. The American Federation of Labor is described as the "largest union" (p. 23).

In an attempt to set the scene, the author describes the IWW on the mainland as being identified as "bomb throwers," drawing on the Haymarket affair. A meeting at Waialua Plantation in 1913 is described as a "meeting of white telephone operators from the mainland urging the Japanese to join the IWW" (p. 44). A Hawaiian Sugar Producers Association (HSPA) transcript of the IWW meeting describes one A. V. Roe, a telegraph operator, addressing the Portuguese Camp workers at Waialuas (Beechert, *Working in Hawaii*, p. 153). Lurid descriptions of the Filipino workers being imported to Hawaii are based on stereotypical newspaper accounts. The author seems unaware that the Hawaiian sugar industry was desperately seeking a new supply of labor. Cut off from Japan in 1906 and barred from China as a source, the Philippines was the sole remaining source of cheap labor.

The industry had tried to meet U.S. objections to Asian labor by importing a variety of Europeans. The high cost and the refusal of these to submit to the conditions of sugar employment led to the elaborate scheme to import indentured Chinese workers. The Hawaii Emergency Labor Commission, formed in 1921, launched a massive campaign to persuade Congress to grant an exemption to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882.

The Japanese sugar workers' strike of 1920 had its origins in World War I inflation. As early as 1917, the Young Men's Association of Hawaii, a Buddhist organization, began to hold meetings on the issue of the cost of living and the wage scale. Made up largely of young men born in Hawaii, these workers communicated through the Buddhist organization. Beginning in Hilo in 1919, the Young Men's Association issued demands for a higher wage. "Within ten weeks organization ran like a cane fire through the four major islands." (John E. Reinecke: *Feigned Necessity: Hawaii's Attempt to Import Chinese Contract Labor, 1921-1923*, 1979, pp. 98-99) The HSPA issued a warning in early 1917 to its managers that wage demands of Japanese organizations could lead to trouble. Nowhere in the text is there any awareness of this development. The younger workers, recalling the results of the 1909 strike, were determined not to allow the Honolulu Japanese business and intellectual community to dominate the issue. Plantation unions, based on the AF of L model were set up through 1919-1920.

Local leaders formed an executive committee. As negotiations broke down, the need for planning resulted in the appointment of spokesmen. The book focuses on these spokesmen to the exclusion of the local leadership. The emphasis is placed on the propaganda generated by the Hawaiian Sugar Planters Association and the two main Honolulu newspapers. The *Honolulu Advertiser* was hysterical in its denunciation of the strike as a plot by Japan "to take over Hawaii" as an outpost of Japan. No evidence is cited, nor is there any explanation of how such an action could occur without U.S. response. The lack of citation throughout lends an air of popular journalism to the book. Conversations are laid out at length, thoughts and mindsets are described in vivid terms, all without documentation. Then at other points, the author is lavish in documentation, as in the blow-by-blow account of the dynamite conspiracy trial.

The problem of translation and "adaptation" is evident in a number of ways. The leading defense attorney is misidentified. William B. Lymer is consistently cited as Lymar. J. Edgar Hoover is listed as the Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation in 1920. The Bureau of Investigation, the predecessor of the FBI, produced a report in 1921 describing the strike as "a weapon in Japan's strategy to take over Hawaii." The Bureau cited the Japanese Federation of Labor as an example of the frightening unity and teamwork of the Japanese (pp. 220-221). The author correctly doubts that the Japanese translator at the trial had a sufficient command of English to produce intelligible translations for the all-English speaking jurors. At one point prosecutor Heen is described as objecting to a witness' testimony on the grounds of "hospitality" rather than hostility (p. 210). Numerous errors of Hawaiian sugar industry detail detract from the authority of the narrative. For example, Waikiki is described as an "uninhabited swamp" until developed by Gov. McCarthy (p. 234). Likewise, people in Hawaii are incorrectly described as being unable to afford white sugar because of the high prices prevalent in 1920-1922.

The work concludes with a detailed examination of Hiram Johnson's immigration bill in 1923-1924 and the efforts of the Hawaii Emergency Labor Commission to deflect the exclusion of Japanese. The chapter is entitled "The Japanese Exclusion Act." For a Japanese audience, the focus makes sense. The desperate efforts of the Commission to win an exemption for Chinese workers, the opposition of organized labor and the widespread anti-Asian sentiment of the Pacific Coast were too much for the limited political influence of the Hawaiian planters. However, the book does considerable violence to an understanding of the basic issues. Although the author quotes extensively from Reinecke's *Feigned Necessity*, the clear focus of Reinecke's work on the labor aspects of the situation is lost. A large part of Duus's effort is taken up in a minute examination of the spokesman for the Japanese Federation of Labor, Noboru Tsutsumi. This obscures the fact that the Federation was organized by plantation unions, coming together only at the executive board level. Inexperience and poor communication complicated and hindered their efforts. Despite this, the local unions raised significant amounts of money. The fact that a majority of Hawaii's plantations continued production unabated and had a loss sharing agreement through the HSPA and their insurance policy, the workers faced a difficult barrier. The industry made extensive changes in their organization as a result of the strike. The HSPA emerged as the dominant factor in plantation policy, shifting the center of power from the managers to the agency. An extensive social welfare program was initiated to alleviate some of the worst features of plantation life. In that sense, the strike succeeded, despite the appearance of defeat.

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