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Rising Sun Revolutions:
Ashio Miners' Radical Struggle Against Labor Policies in Early-Twentieth-Century Japan

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On the eastern border of Tochigi prefecture in Japan lies the small incorporated town of Ashio. Nestled along the hills with a sparse population of less than five thousand, only Ashio's defunct, derelict facilities near the once abundant copper deposits serve as a reminder that this tranquil landscape was the site of one of the largest uprisings in modern Japanese history. Ashio's blood-stained history of exploitation and revolt, however, is much older than the three days of insurrection and violence that took place in February of 1907. Long before hundreds of workers disturbed, attacked, and destroyed company operations in a flurry, the site at Ashio was home to an extensive feudal mine. Ashio's deeply intertwined relationship with mining stretches back to the seventeenth century when Japan was still ruled by the Tokugawa military shogunate. Although Ashio was rich with copper and subjected to some mining, the shogunate primarily focused on extracting silver from other mines; by the early seventeenth century, Japan's silver exports comprised one-third of the world's silver production.¹ It would not be until the late nineteenth century that Ashio's importance and output would begin to outsize those of silver mines.

Despite the wealth and relatively high social status afforded to those who labored in the mines, the conditions on the ground for the peasants were abysmal. On top of the immediate dangers of collapsing caves and on-site injuries, the toxic fumes and waste produced by these mines often resulted in permanent damage to workers and effectively shaved off years from their lives. Such a brutal work environment persisted even after the Meiji Restoration and Japan's industrialization. Much like their contemporaries across the world at the time, Japanese miners fought back against working under dehumanizing working conditions. For the miners in Ashio, this struggle culminated in a series of riots that took place in 1907. Nimura Kazuo's book, *The Ashio Riot of 1907: A Social History of Mining in Japan*, will consist the bulk of my citations in this article due to his meticulous collection and thorough chronicling of primary and secondary sources surrounding the riot. Because of my limited ability to translate primary and secondary source material written in classical Japanese form, Nimura's work provides interpretations for sources that I have great difficulty understanding. Because there are very few case studies that rival Nimura's masterful historical analysis and wealth of sources, I believe it only makes sense that I rely upon his book for details. Such an approach diminishes the role of other secondary sources in my analysis however, this paper is not simply a book review. I argue that the broader context of evolving association between labor and the state during the early twentieth century

in Japan played a significant role in the development of working-class consciousness among not only miners at Ashio, but also across workers in early twentieth-century Japan.

The Ashio Riot of 1907 has been the subject of significant scholarly attention for multiple reasons. First, the size of the riot was nearly unprecedented. The incident was covered thoroughly by newspapers in addition to numerous government reports that were published in the aftermath of the strike. Consequently, records of the event have been documented very thoroughly. Secondly, the case of Ashio undercuts the popular misconception of the Japanese state as a static, omnipresent entity that exerted direct control and management over every aspect of the industrial economy. Lastly, the riot occurred during a period in Japan's history when the modern Japanese labor movement was just beginning to materialize. Understanding more about the Ashio Riot helps us better understand the general development of workers' organizations in the age of Imperial Japan. Even after over a hundred years, academics continue to debate why the riot in Ashio even happened in the first place. Intellectual historians such as Maruyama Masao have presented the "Atomized Laborers Theory" as a satisfactory answer for the questions that Ashio raised. In summary, the "Atomized Laborers Theory" posits that there were no concrete reasons for the riots and that they "were in fact nothing more than the spasmodic fits of desperately atomized workers and not in any sense part of an organized labor movement."²

Contemporary and past scholars have strongly rebuffed these claims as assumptive and lacking any nuance whatsoever. Another predominant theory developed by labor historians to explain why and how the events of Ashio happened is the Migrant Labor Theory. Okōchi Kazuo, the primary architect of this theory, explains that labor in Japan was conditioned by the development of capitalism in Japan and by regional differences and the unique composition of its labor force. In other words, the peasants that were hired to work at places such as Ashio were never completely severed from the feudal order that had characterized their lives and working conditions.³ As a result, the miners continued to work within a feudal system that degraded and dehumanized their labor to the point that conflict would become inevitable. The last of the three major competing theories is one posited by Nimura Kazuo, who categorically rejects both Masao and Okōchi's theories and offers a different one instead. By historically analyzing "labor management relations" instead of the "labor movement", historians can better grasp what exactly happened at Ashio and why it happened. Indeed, in his book he argues for a shift away from historical studies that "...sought to elucidate the successes and failures of the labor movements of the past, mainly by examining movement strategies and tactics."⁴ While Nimura's work certainly sheds light on several important historical questions by exploring the importance of the production process, his approach only grants a limited perspective on the contribution of miners to the downfall of the lodge system, which was the premodern economic structure under which they worked, and the eventual eruption of the riot. Although Nimura's arguments address the importance

of peasants' historical material conditions in these feudal workplaces, they fail to contextualize the role that the state played in shaping those conditions and how miners' reactions set the stage for the riot.

This essay aims to illustrate how labor-state relations played a much bigger role in setting the conditions for miners' resistance than what past scholarship ignores. The Theory of Labor-State Relations postulates that the Ashio Riot was a function of state action and workers' reaction. Bringing in other labor-related incidents during the year 1907 and examining the riot beyond the production process, this paper will supplement much of Nimura's literature regarding Ashio and demonstrate how the dialectical nature of the relationship between miners and the state dictated the material conditions and served as a direct impetus for the riot. This theory not only helps bridge the microhistorical analysis that Nimura provides with the broader development of labor in Japan that Okōchi focuses on, but also fits comfortably with the recent drive-by Japanese historians to examine more closely the relations between the development of Japanese capitalism and the reaction of the working class.⁵ When I refer to the "state," I refer specifically to the various levels of government institutions within Japan and its policies during the early twentieth century. In the context of this paper, "labor" can be defined as the miners.

But why specifically miners? One reason is the continuity of miners' history from premodern to modern Japan. The social, political, and economic dimensions of mining can therefore be historically traced. Another reason is because of the unique legal relationship that miners had with the state. In 1905, the Japanese government introduced a series of laws that legally required mining companies to adopt standardized labor practices regarding hiring, compensation, and recordkeeping. The 1911 Factory Law explicitly excluded miners from its vast, legally strict provisions. Therefore miners fell under the jurisdiction of the 1905 Mining Law. If the imperial government excluded miners from the litany of expansive protections under the Factory Act, there must have been some unique historical relationship that the state had with miners. Lastly, previous historical scholarship has failed to incorporate miners into the broader Japanese labor movement. Despite taking place in the period between 1905 and 1918 known as the "era of popular violence," historians such as Andrew Gordon have failed to include labor disputes sparked by restless, aggrieved miners such as those at Ashio who helped shape the course of labor resistance to the state.⁶ The contributions made by miners in early twentieth-century Japan cannot be ignored or underemphasized and are the reason for the need for scholarly attention to the working class.

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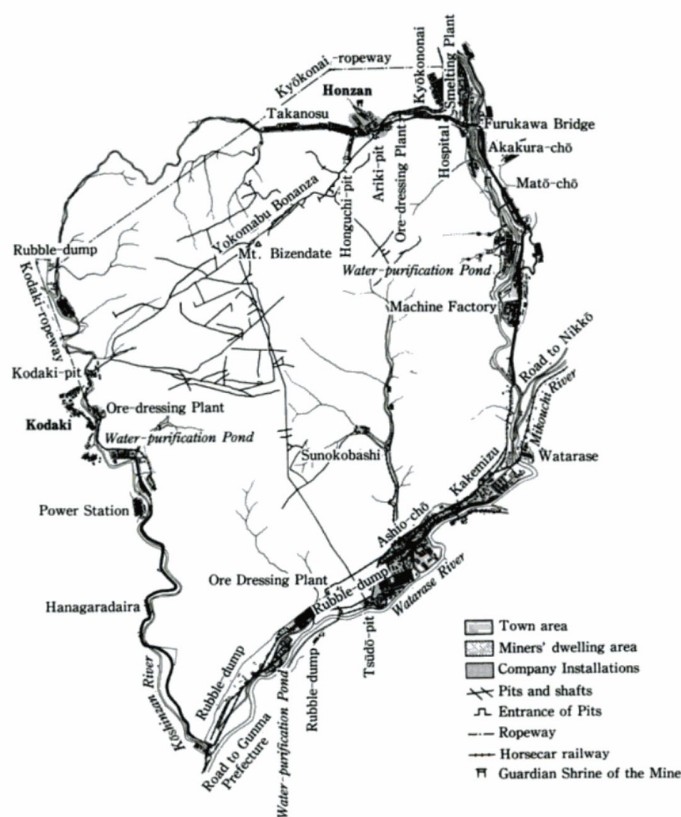


Figure P.4. Map of Ashio copper mine.

The Ashio Riot: What Happened?

The use of the term “riot” to describe the incident at Ashio undoubtedly deserves a degree of scrutiny. Some scholars argue that the incident can be more accurately described as a “strike” because of the proletarian nature of the event. Doing so otherwise only unfairly insinuates that the miners were themselves responsible for their dismal material conditions. I will elaborate on this debate in the summary below with much assistance from Nimura’s texts.

Ashio’s rich copper deposits were first mined during the Tokugawa Era. However, the extraction levels never reached industrial levels until the acquisition of the land by the patriarch of the Furukawa Family, Furukawa Ichibei. A wealthy businessman who invested in many Japanese industries, Furukawa oversaw the transition of the mine from a minute operation into a gargantuan company town with a population of 20,000. Although not everyone in the company town was a miner, much of the population were. They were primarily recruited from the countryside and lived in squalid conditions. Crowded living spaces and constant exposure to toxic wastes produced by the mine created an unhealthy environment. The primary catalyst for the riots has been perceived by contemporary government officials and modern historians to be the grievances of miners towards the

bribing policy of many of the mine's low-ranking company officials. Wage assessments in Ashio were based on projections of how much ore would be extracted, and these company officials seized upon this mechanism of pay as a tool to collect bribes from miners in exchange for raising the wage in the future.⁸ These forced payoffs incensed the workers at the mine, and thus partially explains why the primary targets on the first day of the riot were the lodges of company officials. Hundreds of miners spread throughout the mines and attacked company property above and below ground. Offices and company buildings were set on fire and sporadic cases of dynamite explosions echoed throughout Ashio. Newspapers had reported that by the end of the day, hundreds of "rioters" had partaken in the uprising. In the ensuing three days, the miners' role in the riot began to diminish as many bystanders began to participate in the riot, not to fight for better working conditions for the miners, but to engage in looting and other acts of wanton destruction.

What at first had begun as a wage grievance directed against company officials morphed into a chaotic, disorganized cacophony of rioting. There appeared to be a huge divergence between the aims of the workers and what transpired. The police response was weak and did more to aggravate the situation. With only forty security guards and no more than twenty police officers from the local Ashio police station at hand, the initial course of action of the local authorities was inaction.⁹ Since the rioting took place underground and involved the use of dynamite, many of the first responders resorted to weak-handed efforts such as verbal warnings to deter people from rioting. As the situation deteriorated, additional police reinforcements failed to quell the rioters, and the governor of Tochigi submitted a formal request to the Home Minister, Hara Kei, for military troops to put down the riot. This was the first instance in Japan's modern history in which the military was deployed to quash a labor-related incident in an industrial company.¹⁰ By the time the troops showed up on the morning of February 7th, much of the rioting had subsided and the soldiers served little to no function other than to prevent further violent outbreaks.

Although the exact cause of the riot cannot be ascertained, three competing theories for who started the riots exist: the Spontaneity Theory, the Shiseikai Agitation Theory, and the Theory of Lodge Boss Responsibility. The first, which was the theory that the Utsunomiya District Court synthesized in a report after the trials, pointed the cause of the strike to the pent-up frustration and anger of the miners for how they had been treated. According to this theory, the riot was caused by workers because they held an intense grudge against the company. The second theory, adopted by the prosecution and the Furukawa Company, assigned blame to the Shiseikai, the umbrella labor organization that had spearheaded the creation and delivery of the petition. Considering the draconic nature of early twentieth-century Japanese criminal law and the state's policy of repressing labor unrest, such an explanation was most likely crafted by the prosecution to pin the blame on the Shiseikai as a pretext for persecuting labor activists and discouraging any labor organizing. As mentioned earlier, the *tomoko dōmei* had planned on sending a list of demands to the Furukawa

Company. It is a possibility that the *tomoko dōmei* changed their minds and instigated the riot, but surely they would have only done so once the company management at least reviewed their demands.

While the basic premise of these two theories relies upon the narrative that cast the workers as the architects of the riot, the Theory of Lodge Boss Responsibility offers a different perspective. In this theory, the lodge bosses conspired to sabotage the Shiseikai's plan by inciting a riot. This, in concurrence with Nimura, is perhaps the most convincing contention. The work of the Shiseikai entailed uplifting the wellbeing of workers and improving their material conditions. Such activity served as a direct threat to the debt system that the lodge bosses were running. When a worker fell into debt and needed to borrow from the lodge boss, the lodge boss would require that the worker write a letter granting permission for the lodge boss to collect wages on their behalf. A significant number of miners depended on this system for both their wages and the provision of their daily necessities.¹¹ Had the Shiseikai's petition been accepted by company management, the result would have spelled doom for the lodge bosses' position as creditors. Given the potential circumstances, it would be reasonable to conclude that the lodge bosses, not the workers, directly caused the strike for malicious purposes. As such, characterizing the Ashio Riot as a "strike" is definitionally and categorically incorrect as the workers themselves were not the central plotters of the riot.

This is not to say that labor had no power or say in whether the riots would happen; quite the contrary, the actions of labor organizers most certainly precipitated the tumultuous three days of rioting by submitting the petition that would have undermined the power of the lodge bosses. The Ashio Riot was not an organized, collective uprising of workers who, following classical Marxist doctrine, rose in an act of defiance to overthrow their bourgeois overlords and secure themselves a better standard of life. Rather, it is perhaps more accurate to view the Ashio Riot as a series of unfortunate events that began with the miners' attempts to organize and ended with unscrupulous actors seizing upon the moment to spread chaos and disorder. But the debate over who instigated the riot overlooks the common denominator of all three theories: the assumption that the riot was a result of a labor dispute between workers and management. The very question of "who started the riot?" excludes the state as a culpable actor because the state is not a "who" but a "what." Also, each theory's veracity cannot be supported by any sources. I am not contending that individuals played an insignificant, marginal role in the riot. Rather, I believe the question that needs to be asked is "How did the riot start?" Such a question allows us to historically examine both individual and institutional factors that played a role in the following sections.

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Figure P.1. Location of principal mines in Japan, ca. early twentieth century.

Mining in the Tokugawa Era and Meiji Period¹²

Modern Japan is often described as a nation lacking in resources and raw materials, but Tokugawa Era Japan tells a different story of Japan's pre-modern resource wealth. The discovery of silver and gold deposits in the sixteenth century opened the gates for Japan's participation in the already rambunctious pre-capitalist global trade network. Seeing an opportunity to buffer the financial coffers of the military government, the shogunate immediately ordered the feudal lords to set out to develop these rich deposit sites and export the products through the few but critical trading routes the shogunate maintained with the outside world, in strict accordance with the policy of maritime restrictions long referred to as *sakoku*¹³. As mentioned earlier, silver exports from Japan at one point constituted approximately a third of the global silver trade. Afterward, gold and silver mines stagnated while copper replaced them both as the preeminent precious metal in the mining economy. Production increases inevitably led to the rise of a class of specialized peasants who mined, hauled, and shipped out the tremendous quantities of ore that were collected.

The historical development of miners' working conditions in Japan cannot be entirely divorced from the historical development of the country's political economy. Early modern Japan's

political economy was largely driven by what classical Marxists often detail as the open and clear oppression of the peasantry by the land-owning elite -- i.e. the aristocracy. A very rough, theoretical sketch that would illustrate this hierarchy would be a pyramid partitioned into five social statuses from top to bottom: The shogun, the lords (*daimyō*), the samurai, the artisans, and traders, and finally, the peasants (*nōmin*). While this framework is generally correct and extremely helpful in understanding the relative positions of power within feudal Japanese society, it does not address the specific, complex relationships of power between premodern miners and those who dictated their work. To elaborate, mining was not a standardized industry during this period of Japanese history. The *daimyō*, while pledging their allegiance to the shogun, was the *de facto* managers of their land and acted independently of each other. As a result, mining and labor management practices differed across the gamut of lords who happened to own land with precious metals. The *daimyō* usually either directly managed the mines through appointed bailiffs or magistrates or indirectly managed the mines through merchants who would pay an agreed sum for every certain amount of resource extracted.

To complicate this socioeconomic dynamic even further, the *daimyō* and their contractors did not manage the miners and the mining operation. Instead, as Nimura points out, “It was common practice for a master miner who specialized in mine management to contract for sole responsibility for a single mine or subset of operations, and to employ workers at each production stage: pit digging, mining, dressing, refining, and so forth.”¹⁴ These master miners were independent operators who procured their equipment and oversaw the miners they employed. The mine masters, therefore, for the most part, directly controlled production. In some cases, however, the appointed officials and merchants were required to directly manage the digging of shafts and large pits for ventilation and drainage. These bosses would thus subcontract out operation and labor management to skilled miners known as *kanako*. While the *daimyo* certainly played an important role in the day-to-day lives of miners, these master miners and *kanako* ultimately decided how long the miners would work, what kind of work they would do, and how much of their pay they would have to yield. While I will go much more in-depth on these structures of socioeconomic relations later in this essay, I would like to highlight the feudal characteristic of these systems. Because of the previous lack of need for this specific type of labor, peasants from the countryside were recruited to work at these mines. Much like a peasant that worked on the rice fields, a miner in Japan worked under the notion of vassalage and was required to dedicate a portion of their pay to the mine master. On top of that, the working conditions in these feudal mines were incredibly dangerous. While the pay was surprisingly high enough to attract people to work in the mines, the miners were heavily exposed to toxic fumes and physical pain; the effects of these hazards were reflected in the very low life expectancy among miners.

Yet despite these degrading conditions, the mine master system worked extremely well for the *daimyō* and the foremen. Shifting the responsibility of paying workers to the foremen allowed the *daimyō* to focus on other issues within their domain. Furthermore, if a problem regarding working

conditions or pay ever arose, the *daimyō* could simply blame the mine master and replace him. For the mine master, this system provided him a financial basis to live upon in addition to occupying a higher rung on the social ladder so long as he managed the mines well. To be sure, cases of miners revolting against their overseers were not uncommon. But none were revolutionary enough to significantly change or abolish this management structure.

The arrival of Commodore Matthew Perry and his black ships in Edo Bay marked the beginning of the end of a political economy that up to that point relied heavily on feudal socio-economic relations. In the ensuing civil war, a seismic shift in the political landscape of Japan occurred: the shogunate and its allies surrendered to imperial forces, and the newly crowned Emperor Meiji declared the establishment of the Japanese Empire. Now in power, the Meiji government began to pursue policy changes that would radically transform the political economy of Japan. Nonetheless, significant roadblocks existed in Japan's path towards industrialization. It is perhaps easy to understand industrialization as a linear, rapid process. But in truth, industrialization in Japan, much like elsewhere in the world, was neither uniform nor instant. While the new government wielded absolute political authority, they did not necessarily control every aspect of production and could not possibly reorganize the entirety of Japan and bring it under the umbrella of the state. Indeed, the role of the state centralized further during Meiji industrialization, but the imperial government heavily deferred to private capitalists regarding industry regulation. Industrialists and the moneyed class, who had lent the weight of their influence to unseat the shogunate, capitalized on their support of the Restoration to control production.¹⁵

The largest and most successful companies become conglomerates through vertical integration, infamously known as *zaibatsu*. As these businesses expanded their capital base, they began purchasing mining rights issued by the government. As titleholders, they became *de jure* operators and managers of mines. Some of the most famous companies included the Furukawa Company, which owned and operated the Ashio Mine and other mines located in the Tohoku region, and the Mitsui Company, which held deeds to coalfield deposits in Kyushu. At the beginning of the Meiji Era, mines across Japan employed prison labor to a large extent. In Ashio, for example, the Furukawa Company requested the provincial government to send as many prisoners they could spare due to labor shortage.¹⁶ But even this proved to be an unsustainable model, and the mining industry increasingly continued to rely upon poor farmers in rural areas to work in the mines.¹⁷ As the demand for coal and metals drove up due to the massive buildup of the military, more peasants were hired to the point that company towns began to emerge. The development of capitalism in Japan ultimately created irreconcilable differences between the legal prescription of the capitalist nation-state and the working conditions of the quasi-feudal mining industry and led to the collapse of the lodge system. In the next section, I will discuss how these irreconcilable differences were born out of the shift in the state's relationship with labor.

The 1905 Mining Law and The Lodge System

The lodge system provided the framework for the relationship between miners in modern Japan and the people for whom they worked under. Earlier in this essay, I briefly outlined this model in the context of feudal-era Japan. This system continued even after the nominal dissolution of the feudal class system. The *zaibatsu* now occupied the role of owners as the *daimyo* had, and initially, the companies' management of labor relied upon methods similar to the mine master system that the *daimyo* had employed in their mines. The mine master system that dominated the feudal mines slowly declined as the *kanako* expanded their influence and gave rise to a new system of subcontracting that put workers under the direct control of these *kanako*, whom I will refer to as "lodge bosses" throughout the rest of this paper. This "lodge system," which is also referred to as the "foreman system," resulted in highly decentralized operations at the mines with numerous subcontractors spread throughout various parts of the mine who had their miners in employment. Two types of subcontracting management existed, as Murakushi summarizes below in the context of coal mines:

The foreman system can be broadly divided into two major types. The first type was the system where a hired foreman was contracted to be in full charge of the entire coal mining operation. The foreman was paid a proportionate sum of money in relation to the amount of coal extracted. Although there were cases whereby the foreman was also an investor, he was solely in charge of the coal mining operation. In lieu of the coal mine manager, he conducted the operation by hiring pitmen to work for him. The pitmen were controlled and supplied under a special labor system called the "bunkhouse system" (*naya-seido*). This type of foreman was necessary in view of the fact that coal mine managers were not experienced and they, therefore, needed a foreman to run the entire operation. This type of foreman system existed from early Meiji to the 1890s, at the time of the development of the endogenous coal industry as well as during the formation of modern coal mines. This type is often called the "chief foreman system." The second type which developed after the dissolution of the first type was a system whereby a foreman was contracted specifically to be responsible for labor management. This type was functional when the manager was either experienced in management and technology or capable of directly employing competent staffers for the operation. The foreman's task, thus, was limited to labor management. This type of foreman existed mainly from the 1880s and was called the "bunkhouse foreman system."¹⁸

Despite its initial tolerance of this arrangement of labor management, the Furukawa Company began to scrutinize the lodge system in the late 1880s due to the business's troubled financial situation. Furukawa Ichibe believed that he could lure lucrative capital investments by expanding and upgrading the workforce, which would increase the output of the mine. Such a result, however, could only be achieved by centralizing operations and discarding the lodge system that had been in place for so long.

This proved to be a daunting task, as the company would have to directly compete with the lodge bosses in recruiting labor. Furthermore, the company would then be directly responsible for the

pay and working conditions of the workers; such a change meant that if miners were to have grievances, company management would have to directly negotiate with the miners. Nonetheless, the Furukawa Company embarked on this path towards unified mining operations by massively advertising to potential hires, opening new pits under its direct control, and offering loans to *kanako* who would then become indebted to the company.

Yet despite their efforts in reducing the number and power of the lodge bosses, subcontracting continued to persist throughout the mine. Unlike state-owned mines that were able to rely on the awesome powers of the state to root out any subversive activity, private companies such as Furukawa derived their security from the spare number of security guards they employed along with the local police. In the several years leading up to the Ashio Riot, the lodge system manifested itself in two forms, similar to what Murakushi outlined, which Nimura described in the passage below:

In the first, key workers such as miners, shorers, drill operators, and underground transport workers were known as category one workers, and they were directly employed by the company. The lodge bosses appear to be unable to bid for the contracts to carry out the work done by such men; their main responsibilities were limited to recruitment and supervision of the workers' daily needs and behavior, but they still did handle and pay out the miners' wages. In the second system, the various grades of labor such as haulers and carters (category two workers) had no direct relationship with the company. They were employed by the gang bosses to do work for which the bosses had contracted, and they worked under the supervision of their bosses.¹⁹

It is safe to say then that contracting was still taking place at Ashio Mine well into the turn of the century. This in turn begs the question of how a system born out of feudalism could persist well into the era of industrialization and an economy dominated by a capitalist means of production. Okōchi Kazuo asserts that the character of the labor market made the lodge system inevitable.²⁰ Nimura argues to the contrary, stating that it was the premodern production process that facilitated and worked in confluence with the lodge system. Yet both scholars fail to acknowledge the influence of relations between labor and state as a factor in the persistence of the lodge system. The state's role in labor management within the mining industry at the turn of the twentieth century was limited. The dearth of regulations meant that neither foremen nor the company had a significant disincentive to end the practice of subcontracting. Moreover, the Japanese government was far more concerned with addressing riots, strikes, and anti-war protestors in urban areas such as Tokyo.

That is not to contend that the state was absent in labor management at the mine; the Police and Public Order Law of 1900 effectively banned strikes and permitted the company to call in the police to suppress any cases of labor agitation. For the most part, the state viewed labor disputes within the mines as a local, company-related problem that could be resolved internally. As historian Sheldon Garon put it, "In essence, Meiji labor policy emerged within the confines of industrial policy. Individual entrepreneurs might occasionally complain about their lack of political power vis-a-vis the

bureaucrats, but for the most part, the business of Meiji Japan was business.”²¹ Indeed, the state’s hands-off approach only reinforces the notion that the government’s concern with labor lied within workers’ potential to challenge the state’s political authority. At the same time, while workers did protest their conditions, and in some cases won concessions, they could not justify their actions on a legal basis because no law existed that granted them that privilege. Striking and labor agitation would have invited undesirable scrutiny from the imperial government, but the company’s labor practices would continue unchecked by the state.

Much of this would change, however, when in 1905 the imperial government passed the Mining Law containing the following provisions concerning workers’ rights:

Article 75

- *A mining right holder must make rules about the employment of mining workers and labor management and receive permission from a mining inspection director.*

Article 76

- *According to the provisions of this order, a mining right holder must prepare and keep a name list of mining workers at their mining office.*

Article 77

- *When a mining right holder fires a mining worker, the holder gives a certificate, which states the terms of employment, type of their work, skills, payments, and the reason for dismissal by request.*

Article 78

- *A mining right holder decides the payment date more than or equal to once in a month and pays in currency to mining workers.*

Article 79

- *With an order, the Ministry of Agriculture can restrict the age of mining workers, working hours, and type of women’s and children’s labor.*

Article 80

- *If not due to mining workers’ serious negligence, a mining “right” holder must support mining workers or their family when the workers get injured, disease, or dies on the job, according to the provisions of the order.*²²

The 1905 Mining Law was neither the first nor the only attempt by the state to regulate mining operations. The 1871 Mining Act was the first legislation concerning mining enacted by the government, and some of its key stipulations included establishing the government as the proprietors of individual mines, banning foreign ownership of mines, and limited the terms of mine leases to fifteen years.²³ In 1890, the government revised the 1871 law by curtailing the fifteen-year limit on leases. These laws only legislated capital-state relations, not labor-state relations— neither of the previous mining laws included requirements of certain conditions for workers.

Due to the lack of government documents and correspondences, the motivations for the passing of the 1905 Mining Law remain mysterious. It is unclear if the Furukawa Company or other

mining companies lobbied for this law and/or conspired with the government to have it passed to eradicate subcontracting. Although it is very possible that the companies perhaps desired a legal pretext to end the lodge system, this would then raise questions as to why they did not encourage a law banning subcontracting to be passed instead. A much simpler explanation would be that the Japanese government, amid the Russo-Japanese War, believed that the state had a vested interest in ensuring standardized operations at mines to ensure reliable production. As Notehelfer states, “By the turn of the century, Ashio produced 40 percent of Japan’s entire copper output, and copper represented the country’s third most important export commodity, surpassed only by silk and tea. Copper also played a crucial role in Japan’s military build-up, and at least one Japanese scholar has argued that without Ashio copper Japan could not have fought the Sino-Japanese (1894-1895) and Russo-Japanese (1904-1905) wars.”²⁴ Regardless, this legislation marked a significant departure from the Japanese imperial government’s previous practice of not intervening in the internal affairs of mining companies. While not outlawing the lodge system outright, these provisions mandated the direct employment of workers, which implied any form of indirect employment, such as subcontracting, would be considered illegal. The provision of guaranteed compensation to injured and sick workers is also extremely noteworthy. Mining companies rarely doled out sick pay, partially due to the costs associated with sustaining injured employees but also because the lodge bosses directly handled miners’ wages.

Furukawa Company was now caught in a difficult position: it was legally obligated to directly employ the miners but was also still heavily dependent on the lodge system to carry out labor management tasks that the company was unable to monopolize. To be sure, the 1905 Mining Law did not contain groundbreaking, widespread protections. Save for a mine inspector’s review, the law gave mine owners generous leeway in how they dictated the working conditions of its workers. More importantly, the legislation lacked a means of enforcement; but it is precisely this lack of protections and enforcement which stirred frustration among workers. Nimura lends weight to this argument: “With the exception of the enforcement of the Mining Industry Law, these issues...were not causes likely to mobilize an effective movement of the Ashio miners.”²⁵ Whether the riot at Ashio can be categorized as an “effective movement” or not, the miners’ anger can be traced back to the introduction of the law and the failed enactment of its provisions. The miners’ relationship to the state was now reframed from the context of political order to that of labor management as the government purposefully or inadvertently inserted itself into the question of who dictated the material conditions of the miners. For many miners, the answer to that question was themselves and they quickly began to organize with one another to push for better working conditions as mentioned earlier.

Labor organizers played a significant role in the conversation of workers’ rights in the Ashio Mine and the events leading up to the riot. “Mining brotherhoods,” referred to in Japanese as *tomoko dōmei*, served as the primary system of support designed by and for miners. Members of the *tomoko*

dōmei had the privilege of relying upon the organization for food, minimal financial assistance, and shelter, which also extended to sister chapters of the organization at different mines. Another prominent labor group at the time was the Ashio branch of the Greater Japan Society of Devotion to Japanese Labor, commonly known as the *Shiseikai*. Founded by an organizer by the name of Minami Sukematsu, the *Shiseikai* pursued two goals: wage increases for workers and improvement in the food rations given to workers.²⁶ To accomplish this, the *Shiseikai* embarked on a project of building a coalition to win popular support for these demands. This entailed winning the support of both the mining brotherhoods and the lodge bosses. As I will explain further in the essay, the lodge bosses, who are also referred to as “*kanako*” and “*foremen*”, served as third-party contractors who hired and oversaw miners. While the former was easy to convince and bring on board, the latter’s support proved more difficult to enlist. For the *Shiseikai*, it was crucial to receiving the blessings of the lodge bosses because, as Nimura explains, “...the understanding and cooperation of the lodge bosses would greatly help them realize their demands since the bosses acted as the official channel through which the frustrations and the desires of the workers were conveyed to the company.”²⁷

The lodge bosses understood this as well, and despite initially appearing to not actively oppose the *Shiseikai*, in secret, the lodge bosses contemplated ways in which they could undermine it. On 7 January 1907, the lodge bosses attempted to preempt the *Shiseikai* by putting forth a petition to company management for wage raises, which angered many miners and members of the *Shiseikai*. Consequently, the *Shiseikai* and the *tomoko dōmei* began to collaborate on a set of much more comprehensive demands. In the days preceding the riot, an organizing committee consisting of the *Shiseikai* and four major *tomoko dōmei* from Tsudo, Honzan, Sunokobashi, and Kodaki (all major locations within the mine) drafted a list of demands to company management. The demands can be roughly divided into six segments: wages, safety and sanitation, aid for the sick and injured, the supply of daily provisions, the rights of representatives of the workers’ brotherhoods, and miscellaneous issues.²⁸ With the sole exception of aid for the sick and injured, the demands reflected the growing calls by workers for the Furukawa company to implement policies that went beyond the mandates of the 1905 Mining Law. The state’s recognition that workers had certain rights only exacerbated the agitation at Ashio; the miners convinced themselves that they deserved broader guarantees and protections than those provided in the Mining Law and that these demands would be effectively enforced. The brotherhoods planned on forwarding these demands to the company on February 6th, but two days before that could happen, on February 4th, the Ashio Riot began.

Labor-State Relations in the Aftermath of Ashio

Recriminations were swift as the authorities attempted to mete out punishment to the alleged perpetrators of the riot. As I discussed earlier, the prefectural government and the Furukawa Company identified the *Shiseikai* and its collaborators as the initial source of the unrest and vigorously

prosecuted many of them in court. These heavy-handed tactics must be understood, however, within the frame of labor-state relations to better understand the broader, systemic implications of the riot. No longer serving a circumscribed intermediary role, the state's forceful reaction to a supposed workers' insurrection highlights another shift that occurred in its relationship with labor; its previous intervention with the paternal 1905 Mining Law was now followed by its violent intervention with repressing the riot.

The fact that the riot was most likely not instigated by the workers does not diminish the role of the Ashio Riot in changing this labor-state relationship because, in the state's eyes, labor held sole responsibility for the destruction at Ashio. The riot's impact on the labor struggle in Japan significantly outsized the actual contributions that miners made to the riot itself. The year that the riot took place saw record-high incidences of labor disputes in the entire country, regardless of which source is examined. The following table provided by Gordon lists the annual number of labor disputes in Japan's heavy industries. Throughout the thirty-nine years that this chart covers, the average number of strikes each year averages a little under two. Yet, in the year that Ashio took place, 1907, the number of strikes was over six times this average. Whether mines were considered "heavy industries" and events such as Ashio included in the chart remains unclear.

TABLE 3.2 LABOR DISPUTES IN HEAVY INDUSTRY
NATIONWIDE, 1878–1916

Date	All Disputes	Strikes/Violence	Demands/Petitions
1878	1	0	1
1893	1	0	1
1897	8	4	4
1898	3	2	1
1899	0	0	0
1900	1	0	1
1901	0	0	0
1902	3	2	1
1903	2	1	1
1904	1	1	0
1905	2	1	1
1906	6	4	2
1907	13	8	5
1908	6	2	4
1909	3	2	1
1910	6	4	2
1911	2	1	1
1912	3	2	1
1913	3	1	2
1914	3	0	3
1915	1	1	0
1916	7	6	1
Total	75	42	33

SOURCE: Aoki Kōji, *Nihon rōdō undō shi nenpyō* (Tokyo: Shinseisha, 1968).
NOTE: No disputes in 1879–92 or 1894–96.

Nimura provides more accurate and broad statistics drawn from the Ministry of Agriculture and Commerce: sixty “industrial actions” took place in the year 1907 and incidences at mining sites constituting sixteen of these “industrial actions,” comprising well over a quarter of the labor disputes that year.³⁰ To be sure, it is impossible to pin down the causal relationships between the Ashio Riot and other incidences of labor-related actions within the country. Nationwide inflation resulting from the 1905 Russo-Japanese War and increasing industrialization may have played a relatively large part in stoking consternation among workers. However, multiple factors support the perspective that the Ashio Riot and its public perception at the time as a workers’ revolt helped to partially motivate, if not inspire, workers in other parts of the nation to agitate and organize. First, the Ashio Riot took place very early in the year in February, while many of the incidents that year, such as the Bessho Mine Riot, occurred much more in the middle and latter parts of that year. While this does not establish a direct cause, the case for Ashio’s influence on labor unrest during this period would be significantly weaker had it taken place during the fall, summer, or even early spring. Second, news of the riot spread throughout Japan not only through the influence of newspapers but also by word of mouth from mineworkers who were laid off and made their way to other mines in the country.³¹ Of course, even though these oral versions of the events that happened at Ashio were a distortion of what had occurred, the power of the image of thousands of miners engaged in an uprising against their working conditions that the government and workers themselves peddled around cannot be understated. Socialist observers at the time were also not ignorant of the events at Ashio. An article published in July of 1907 by the Osaka Common People’s Newspapers reflected the views of some of the more left-wing elements of the Japanese socialist movement: “Even though we do not necessarily praise terrorism, the attitude of the capitalists and politicians clearly proves [that working class violence forces them to concede reforms] and therefore we cannot reject terrorism out of hand.”³²

It should thus be clear that the riot captured the attention of both labor and the state. Oddly enough, and I am sure critics would view this fact as a hole in my Theory of Labor-State Relations, the imperial government saw no need to overhaul labor policy in the direct aftermath of the series of labor unrests of 1907. If my dialectical framework was indeed correct, then would not the Japanese government have reacted to these demonstrations of working-class anger by implementing changes to either expand or further restrict the freedom of workers to prevent similar events from happening? This question must be answered from two directions. First, the state did react to these labor actions with emergency police powers and repression. Using the military and police to suppress any resistance by labor became a trademark policy of the imperial government. Moreover, despite the lack of immediate policy change, Gordon notes, “An unprecedented wave of strikes and labor disputes in 1906 and 1907 strengthened the government position that ‘beautiful customs’ by themselves were an inadequate guarantee of healthy industrial development.”³³ Such implications reinforce the fact that while the state may not have reacted immediately, its attempts to reform labor practices with the 1911

Factory Law and other related legislation support the notion that the mutiny at Ashio played a factor in the push for such laws.

The 1911 Factory Law consisted of dozens of pages of regulations and rules concerning labor relations which were much more expansive than the 1905 Mining Law and shared some similarities. For example, the Factory Law contained an ordinance that guaranteed compensation for work-related injuries— such a provision bears some semblance to Article 80 of the Mining Law. Second, and more importantly, the state failed to admit or understand its role in facilitating the downward spiral of labor management that allowed conditions at Ashio to deteriorate. Its dramatic intervention in the mining industry with the 1905 Mining Law upended its precedent of staying out of business affairs. It cannot be said definitively that if such a law had not been passed, the Ashio Riot would not have occurred. While labor reform would possibly have been beneficial to the state's vested interest in efficient production by addressing the needs and concerns of workers who would then be less incentivized to strike, it would have been politically difficult for politicians and bureaucrats to constructively admit that any fault would lie with them. For political purposes, it would be much more convenient to blame anarchists, socialists, and even workers themselves for the eruption of violence in 1907.

Conclusion

The investigation of the Ashio Riot leaves more questions than it answers. While the wide availability of government records and newspaper documents help construct the riot as a miners' rebellion, they also impose contradictory narratives. If the Shiseikai and the miners' brotherhoods were truly responsible for the riot, why did they plan on sending a petition of demands several days after the riot took place? While the Theory of Lodge Boss Responsibility best explains how the riot unfolded by resolving this contradiction, there is not enough evidence to prove without a doubt that the lodge bosses instigated the riots to shield their status. The current historiography of the lodge system itself requires further examination. Even though this mode of production fell largely out of favor at the turn of the twentieth century and after Ashio, historians cannot agree when the practice of subcontracting definitively ended.

To what extent did the Ashio Riot spur labor actions across the country and shape the modern Japanese labor movement? Ashio was not the only mine nor the only industrial site in Japan that saw labor unrest in the tumultuous period of 1907. There is plenty of evidence of strikes that took place across the country during that year and afterward. Perhaps the biggest resurgence in labor action occurred in 1918 when the entire nation experienced a rice shortage and culminated in a series of strikes across the country. While these events took place more than a decade after Ashio, further exploration of undiscovered primary sources and case studies of these incidences may shed more light on the impact that Ashio left on Japan's working-class consciousness.

My use of the Theory of Labor-State Relations, which treats the riot as a function of the dialectical relationship between labor and the state, offers a satisfactory framework by synthesizing the minute relationships between workers and their overseers with the structural relationship between labor and the state. Marxist interpretations of history can be flawed, but that does not invalidate dialectical materialism as a viable chassis of historical analysis. This theory, however, must be tested not only among miners but also among workers of other industries in modern Japan. For example, in 1911 the Japanese government passed the Factory Act which standardized conditions of employment, work safety and wages for those working in factories. This piece of legislation may signal another shift in the relationship of labor and state, but more research on the matter is required. What struck me the most throughout my research was the irony of the Ashio Riot— an event that was not ignited by labor became the spark that ignited labor action across the nation. It is a matter that undoubtedly deserves much more exploration.

Notes

1. Kazuo Nimura, *The Ashio Riot of 1907: A Social History of Mining in Japan*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 12.
2. Nimura, *The Ashio Riot of 1907*, 42.
3. Nimura, *The Ashio Riot of 1907*, 155
4. Nimura, *The Ashio Riot of 1907*, 4.
5. Paolo Calvetti “The Ashio Copper Mine Revolt: A Case Study on the Changes of Labor Relations in Japan at the Beginning of the XX Century,” (University of Naples, 1987), 89.
6. Andrew Gordon, *Labor and Imperial Democracy in Prewar Japan*, (University of California Press, 1991), 27.
7. Nimura, *The Ashio Riot of 1907*, 22.
8. Nimura, *The Ashio Riot of 1907*, 189.
9. Nimura, *The Ashio Riot of 1907*, 104.
10. Nimura, *The Ashio Riot of 1907*, 107.
11. Nimura, *The Ashio Riot of 1907*, 122.
12. Nimura, *The Ashio Riot of 1907*, 14.
13. See Hellyer (2010) for more information on Japanese foreign policy during the Tokugawa Era.
14. Nimura, *The Ashio Riot of 1907*, 12.
15. Albert Solomon, “Revision of the Japanese Mining Law Under the Occupation,” *Washington Law Review* 26, no. 3 (1951): 233.
16. F.G. Notehelfer, “Between Tradition and Modernity: Labor and the Ashio Copper Mine,” *Monumenta Nipponica* 39, no. 1 (Spring 1984): 19. doi:10.2307/2384478.
17. Solomon, “Revision of the Japanese Mining Law,” 235.
18. Murakushi Nisaburō, “Technology and Labor in Japanese Coal Mining,” (Tokyo: United Nations University, 1980), 58.
19. Nimura, *The Ashio Riot of 1907*, 172.
20. Nimura, *The Ashio Riot of 1907*, 174.
21. Sheldon Garon, *The State and Labor in Modern Japan*, (University of California Press, 1987), 19.
22. Iwasaki Sodō, *Kaisei kokuyū tochi bukken harai sage tetsusuki zensho: Fu eirin kōgyō tetsuzuki annai* (Tokyo: Daigakukan, 1909), 101-102.
23. Murakushi, “Technology and Labor,” 23.
24. Notehelfer, “Between Tradition and Modernity,” 12.
25. Nimura, *The Ashio Riot of 1907*, 54.
26. Nimura, *The Ashio Riot of 1907*, 69.
27. Nimura, *The Ashio Riot of 1907*, 73.
28. Nimura, *The Ashio Riot of 1907*, 97.
29. Gordon, *Labor and Imperial Democracy in Prewar Japan*, 71.
30. Nimura, *The Ashio Riot of 1907*, 189.
31. Nimura, *The Ashio Riot of 1907*, 191.
32. John Derek Crump, “A Critical History of Socialist Thought In Japan To 1918” (University of Sheffield, 1980), 208.

33. Andrew Gordon. "The Evolution of Labor Relations in Japan: Heavy Industry, 1853–1955" (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 1985), 67.