Japan's Student Movement and the Revolutionary Politics of 1968

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Historians often neglect Japan's New Left protest movement in the late 1960s, but it was one of the largest in any country. Radical student activists brought the university system to a halt — and changed the future of Japanese politics.

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Global surveys that look at the protest movements of 1968 frequently omit the experience of Japan. In fact, the Japanese New Left and the student protests of that year were among the largest and most influential in any country. A closer look at the Japanese '68 gives the lie to any superficial notion of Japan as an inherently conservative country and offers a window into the wider history of Marxism and left-wing politics in Japan since 1945.

Hiroshi Nagasaki was a leading theorist and participant in the 1968 movement and remains today a major political thinker of the Left in Japan. He writes here about the origins and development of that movement and its legacy for Japanese politics and culture. This is an abridged extract from Nagasaki's "On the Japanese '68" in *The Red Years: Theory, Politics, and Aesthetics in the Japanese '68*, edited by Gavin Walker and now out from Verso Books.

The 1968 moment in Japan is represented above all by the Zenkyōtō student movement, the "All-Campus Joint Struggle League." The movement began at the University of Tokyo and Nihon University, and expanded rapidly to the other major universities over the subsequent three years.

Across the country, 127 universities — 24 percent of the national four-year university system in total — experienced strikes or occupations in 1968. In 1969, this rose to 153 universities or 41 percent. There was also a Zenkyōtō movement in the Japanese high schools.

We ought to state clearly that there was a prehistory to the 1968 Zenkyōtō movement. There were, for example, student movements in 1965 at Keio University and in 1966 at Waseda University against the raising of tuition fees. Moreover, the second half of the 1960s saw an intensification of the American war on Vietnam, and the resistance movements against it were also forerunners of the development of the Zenkyōtō.

From 1968 onward, in addition to the movement in the universities, there were the parallel antiwar

struggles in the streets, organized by the political parties (or sects) of the New Left. The struggles in the streets saw the participation not only of students but also of workers. However, the labor unions and mainstream parties did not organize this worker participation. Rather, it was channelled through the Youth Anti-War Committee, an organization of young workers that shared fundamental characteristics with the Zenkyōtō.

Forming the Movement

Student activists formed the University of Tokyo All-Student Joint Struggle Committee — the Tōdai Zenkyōtō — on July 5, 1968. The graduate students' all-student struggle union (Zentōren) and the joint-struggle committee of university assistants were also included within the Tōdai Zenkyōtō in its broad sense.

Officially recognized student councils existed within all ten of the university's departments, but these positions were largely held by the youth wing of the Japanese Communist Party (JCP), the Democratic Youth League of Japan, known colloquially as Minsei. Independent of these councils, the Zenkyōtō formed as a university-wide mechanism comprised of the struggle committees from each department.

Up to this point, mobilizing in the student movement meant conforming to the rules of the student council and constituting a clear majority within it. The Zenkyōtō, however, was formed in a voluntarist manner — or through direct democracy, so to speak — as an extralegal organization that operated outside the rules and without recognition by the university administration, consciously opposing the existing type of conformism.

The Zenkyōtō had no rules that governed either its membership or its leadership. Political sects participated in the movement, along with a multitude of small nonpartisan groups, but these organizations fought under the banner of each specific university in the Zenkyōtō.

From the moment of its formation, the Zenkyōtō spread to universities across the whole of Japan, something that had never been seen before in the postwar Japanese student movement, marking the specific character of '68. Yet, at the same time, the Zenkyōtō as an organization overburdened itself from the outset with political difficulties specific to the practice of direct democracy, difficulties that would emerge later as the movement developed.

The Tōdai Zenkyōtō put seven demands to the university administration, beginning with the demand for "total retraction of unjust punishments in the Department of Medicine," ending with a call for the previous six demands to be "committed to in writing within a public negotiation" and for the "responsible parties" to resign.

The term "public negotiation" here indicates a form of negotiation derived originally from the opposition between the trade unions and management. The Zenkyōtō, unrecognized as an official entity, would accept demands put forward only through the site of direct exchange — the public or mass negotiation — with the administration.

Toward Insurrection

Given the history of Japanese student movements, it was what had come to be referred to as a "school-specific struggle," in contrast to a nationwide political struggle. As such, it ought to be resolved independently by the university itself. The movement posed demands over tuition fees, the

curriculum, and student self-governance — what the JCP's Minsei referred to as "democratization of the schools." The ultimate form of school struggle, however, came to be the boycotting of classes — the strike.

Although the Zenkyōtō movement had begun outside the institutional framework of democracy, majority decision-making in the officially recognized student assembly either endorsed or rejected its tasks and tactics. The Zenkyōtō movement quickly went from demanding rights based on democratic legal forms into a phase that I call the student insurrection or "rebellion," which burst through the limits of the individual school struggles.

In June 1968, the Zenkyōtō occupied the clock tower, the central symbol of Tōdai's Hongo campus, and maintained the occupation until January of the following year, after the incursion of riot police. On June 11, the Zenkyōtō of Nihon University began its blockade of the school buildings using barricades.

This was a form of struggle not previously seen within the Japanese student movement. The blockades and occupations were independent actions, undertaken without the approval of the official student councils or assemblies. Typically, the radicals who blockaded administration buildings with barricades ended up defeated and isolated, not only due to the intervention of the riot police, but also because they were besieged by the "regular" students.

Minsei, the JCP youth league, counted on this being the case. However, contrary to such expectations, official resolutions by the student assemblies for an indefinite strike spread to all universities. In addition, the opening of the indefinite strike on July 3 by the College of General Education at the Komaba campus, which accounted for more than half of the total student body, gave a tremendous impetus to the whole movement.

At Komaba, with its large number of students, the students' assembly consisted of representatives, but the resolution to strike was taken through a university-wide vote, with nearly 70 percent of the student body participating. The indefinite strike persisted until the following year. With the participation of the Department of Law beginning on October 12, all ten major departments had joined the strike. It was the Tōdai Zenkyōtō that tied together the indefinite strike in each department with the broader school occupations.

The Anpō Struggle

We cannot understand the Japanese '68 without a proper grasp of the movement against the renewal of the US–Japan Joint Security Treaty in 1960, known as the Anpō Struggle. In 1956, a government white paper declared that Japan's postwar period was over. Japanese industry began to emerge from the damage of the war, and a long phase of high economic growth began. Until 1973, the average growth rate exceeded 10 percent.

The political situation had previously been far from stable. During the Allied occupation and the general disorder of the postwar years, there were frequent labor disputes, and political parties repeatedly formed and broke alliances with one another. This chaotic cycle came to an end in 1955, with the consolidation of a system that had two major parties, the conservative Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and the progressive Socialist Party of Japan.

Known as "the '55 system," this framework basically continued until the end of the Cold War. The LDP, the government party throughout this period, was led by politicians from the prewar era. The quintessential figure in this respect was Prime Minister Kishi Nobusuke (1956–60), a former

defendant in the Tokyo Tribunal accused of Class A war crimes.

Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution, written under the US occupation, prohibited the maintenance of a national armed force and renounced war. The Kishi government hoped to revise this article, rearm the Japanese state, and transform the security treaties and guarantees that enabled unilateral American control into a new bilateral agreement. Although it may seem paradoxical at first glance, it was the conservatives who aimed at autonomy from the United States and the establishment of a new, self-reliant military force, while the reformers opposed them, seeking to protect the peace constitution and thereby defend "postwar democracy."

The National Center of Labor Unions (Sōhyō), which was under the influence of the Socialist Party, helped organize a mass mobilization against the Joint Security Treaty. A "citizens' movement" developed in favor of peace, democracy, and Japan's postwar constitution, forming the thought and style of the postwar reform movement, later viciously criticized by the Zenkyōtō. The citizens' movement undertook "joint actions" according to a strict schedule, each time organizing protest demonstrations and delivering petitions to the National Diet in Tokyo.

The 1960 Anpō Struggle consisted of nineteen "joint actions" and saw the participation of 5.8 million people at its peak. The character and aims of the citizens' movement grew significantly more radical, producing a general situation of rebellion in the area around the National Diet in Tokyo. "This is a revolution," cried a segment of LDP politicians. In the end, the Kishi cabinet was forced to resign.

US president Dwight Eisenhower, whose support prolonged the life of the Kishi cabinet, suspended his visit to Japan, and news of the "Tokyo Rebellion" was widely broadcast in the United States. In the wake of this moment, the prewar politicians symbolized by Kishi Nobusuke exited the stage to be replaced by a new administration based on the drafting and implementation of plans for economic growth.

The government and the LDP now studiously avoided any talk of constitutional reform. Successful economic growth would stabilize the LDP as the eternal governing party. On the other side, the reformers would be cast out in perpetual opposition. The "citizens" who achieved victory in the citizens' movements chose the path of moving on from the experience of war. Economic growth assured them lifetime employment and consumption.

However, the main themes of the Anpō Struggle — peace and democracy — did not fade away after its end. "Postwar democracy" became entrenched in the unconscious of the citizenry. Any attempt to encroach upon the postwar constitutional system immediately elicited a counterattack by intellectuals and the media, and any attempt at constitutional reform became a complete taboo, even among LDP politicians.

The 1960 Anpō Struggle thus came to occupy the historical position of a citizens' revolution for Japan. Through the victory of citizens and intellectuals in this national revolution, Japan completed its century of modernization that began with the Meiji Restoration. It was as if the Anpō Struggle had opened the floodgates for a society of high economic growth and mass consumption. The postwar baby boomer generation was raised in this society of mass growth and consumption: what they then confronted in 1968 was the absurdity of this society formed by their parents.

The Japanese New Left

The Japanese '68 owes its origins to the revolutionary faction in the 1960 Anpō Struggle. The Zengakuren — the All-Japan Federation of Students' Self-Governing Associations, formed in 1948 —

was a united organization. In 1960, it encompassed the majority of Japanese universities.

During the Anpō Struggle, the Zengakuren was at the leading edge of the use of joint actions as a tactic. The JCP and other participating groups criticized its radicalism. Nevertheless, it was widely recognized that the student movement had pushed the struggle into a genuine "revolution" of the citizenry.

From its inception, the Zengakuren had been under JCP leadership. However, as the student movement became increasingly radicalized, the opposition between student party members and the JCP leadership began to deepen. In 1958, these student members formed the Communist League (the Bund) as a split from the JCP, advancing the slogan of "A New Vanguard Party."

Several Trotskyist organizations were also forming outside of the JCP, above all the Kakukyōdō or Revolutionary Communist League. Both the Bund and Kakukyōdō would go through multiple splits, giving rise to the various sects that were collectively referred to as the New Left in the 1960s.

The Bund constituted the internal opposition within the Zengakuren to Minsei. The program of the Bund rested on a revival of Marxist revolutionary orthodoxy and the Leninist vanguard party-form. They saw the communist parties of the world, beginning with the Soviet Union, as betrayers of this orthodoxy, and themselves as the legitimate "left opposition" to this betrayal.

When the Anpō Struggle reached its end, the Bund split between two factions: one that defended the ideology of the vanguard party, and one that advocated direct action. The vanguardist side chose to unify with Kakukyōdō, while the other side formed the so-called "Second Bund" during the 1960s. The latter comprised many seasoned veterans of the Anpō Struggle but generally had a younger composition than the first Bund, and importantly, the majority of members no longer had the experience of passing through the Communist Party.

Beyond Kakukyōdō and the Bund, there existed within the Zenkyōtō movement the youth organization of the Socialist Party, various organizations that had been expelled from the JCP, and other sects. Throughout the '68 period, these various sects were unable to form a national coordination council to enact a unified strategy of action, even though the Zenkyōtō was in struggle at practically every single university. During the University of Tokyo struggle, there were regular meetings between representatives of the Zenkyōtō and the sects, and the movement was formed out of the individual departmental Zenkyōtō, but even these departmental Zenkyōtō were themselves constituted by multiple groupings.

The political sects would together come to be called the "New Left," but, unlike the 1960 Anpō Struggle, they no longer constituted a left opposition to the old left, no longer playing the role of an oppositional faction criticizing the JCP from the left. Rather, at most universities, occasional violent disputes between the sects and Minsei had long since become routine. For the sects, the Communist Party was simply one more part of the system.

Self-Negation

Despite the pressure exerted by the indefinite strikes, the university administrations were not inclined to respond to the students' demands. The student movement questioned the stance of their teachers, and at the same time urged a new introspection on the subjects of the movement themselves.

The term "self-negation" emerged from the graduate students and young lecturers, influenced by

their professors who had participated in earlier struggles. But it came to be generalized in a loose manner to mean something like “question how you live.” As such, it permeated the movement, even reaching high school students in their early teens.

In classrooms and public forums, teachers and professors were pressed and questioned, not on the pros and cons of university management policy, but on how they themselves ought to act. Even among friends and colleagues, the question of how you yourself would go on living was relentlessly debated. The Zenkyōtō movement seemed to have entered the same phase as the student insurrection itself. But it was at precisely this moment, as the subjects of the movement tried to question their own ethical stance, that the Zenkyōtō movement became — for better or worse — something befitting the Japanese ’68.

The reaction of the Tōdai administration rapidly began to take political form. It did not put into question how the university — or the students — ought to be, or how they ought to live, but grasped the problem as one of negotiation between groups internal to the university. On November 1, the president, Ōuchi Kazuo, a liberal since the prewar period, resigned. All trustees and deans of the different faculties also resigned, and the expulsion of the medical students was withdrawn.

Basically, all of the seven demands put forward by the Zenkyōtō movement had been met. A new executive branch of the university, represented by Katō Ichirō, the dean of the law faculty, appeared before the students: “You’re barking up the wrong tree with all this self-negation stuff and the agony of youth, just settle it among yourselves, once and for all.” Katō’s straightforward attitude, so different from the equivocation of the Ōuchi administration, was almost refreshing in its directness: “The point is for us to negotiate.”

If the Zenkyōtō sought a yes or no answer to its list of seven demands, Katō’s reply came straight back to them: “From among the demands made by you gentlemen, we have accepted those things we feel to be just but are unable to accept those things that we consider unjust.” As the autumn deepened that year, pressure from the Ministry of Education and the problem of how to implement the following year’s entrance exams came to weigh heavily on the Tōdai administration. This necessitated the rapid development of negotiations “to rationally resolve the University of Tokyo crisis.”

The university appealed to the students themselves, arguing that if things kept going this way, graduation and educational progress for the student body would be put into question. There was an opposition to the Zenkyōtō within the university and among the students — for example, figures like future government minister Machimura Nobutaka, and a Minsei front organization called the Seven-Faculty Representative Group. The opposition between the Zenkyōtō and Minsei had long since passed beyond the merely rhetorical level to forms of violent confrontation.

On January 10, 1969, the Tōdai administration officially exchanged notes of confirmation for the resolution of the struggle with these “representative groups.” The direct result was the end of the occupation of the Tōdai clock tower on January 18–19 after a major intervention by riot police. However, on January 20, the Japanese government announced the suspension of the Tōdai entrance exams for the following year. The administration could not, in the end, declare “victory” in the Tōdai struggle.

Beyond 1968

This situation created difficulties for the Zenkyōtō movement. As the movement tried to strengthen its insurrectionary phase, it had already become impossible for it to return to a politics of

negotiation with the university administration. The focal point was no longer the pros and cons of the list of seven demands.

One possible strategy would have been to wrest hegemony over the negotiations on the student side from Minsei and the "representative groups." But the Zenkyōtō abandoned this strategy along with that of negotiation itself. It had no nationwide organization. Moreover, within the Japanese New Left at the time, there was no consistent, systematic backing for the Tōdai Zenkyōtō by the different political factions.

More broadly, in contrast with the situation of the Zengakuren during the Anpō Struggle, the Zenkyōtō movement had exerted no direct influence on public opinion or the political process and had no expectation of doing so. Above all, the insurrection of the Zenkyōtō movement obsessively aimed at a politics of completely resetting the established political order. The Tōdai Zenkyōtō were physically eliminated from any space outside of the university when the riot police entered campus.

Compared to the Tōdai struggle, the Zenkyōtō at Nihon University (Nichidai) attempted to thwart this outcome, but under inferior conditions of internal university autonomy. The struggle began with demands for student rights, but as soon as the barricades went up on campus, it quickly switched over to a phase of student insurrection.

The Zenkyōtō movement, which spread in waves from the experiences of Tōdai and Nichidai, developed from demands for the democratization of education into strikes and occupations of schools and research offices. However, it became a pattern of the movement that it would end each time with the expulsion of the Zenkyōtō from the university by the administration and the riot police.

Although there was frequent communication between the Zenkyōtō at various universities, there was no nationwide leadership or even a national council. The Japanese '68 took place not as a single thing, but as a series of similar, repeated insurrections.

Revolution and Rebellion

If we consider the Zenkyōtō as the model of the Japanese '68, this form of organization (the joint-struggle committee) shared important qualitative characteristics with the first revolutionary groups that emerged on the historical level, that is, the form of the council (*Räte* or *Soviet*). We must position the council as a mechanism for mass rebellion independent of the Leninist conception of revolution, defined as "the problem of the seizure of state power." 1968 was a council-movement of mass insurrection.

For precisely this reason, the '68 movement diverged from and opposed the prior organizational forms at the level of style, in two senses. The previous style of movement was generally either a form of constitutionalism that foregrounded the liberal right of opposition, or the Marxist-Leninist view of revolution. The quintessential expression of the former was the citizens' movement for postwar democracy; the archetypal form of the latter was the theory of revolution of the New Left sects. The striking characteristic of '68 was precisely to have liberated the concept of "rebellion" from this double-layered framework.

If we examine the case of the Tōdai Zenkyōtō movement, there the Zenkyōtō confronted power by occupying the "point of production" of this space of knowledge-production that we call the university. This clearly recalls the syndicalist understanding of worker-led factory occupations. While the university-wide Zenkyōtō's base was comprised of the individual Zenkyōtō organizations of each department, it also included members of the Marxist-Leninist sects, numerous activists of the

so-called “non-sect radicals,” and various small, relatively loose groupings.

These came together within the movement as part of the council-form known as the All-Campus Joint Struggle League. As its membership was not fixed or set, the league experienced intense volatility and fluctuation in its comings and goings. Within each individual university, alongside the Zenkyōtō radicals there also existed their opposition, Minsei (the JCP youth organization), as well as numerous organizations of the general student population who were unilaterally opposed to the struggle itself.

At Tōdai, for example, these organizations joined with the general student population at university assemblies to determine individual department policies. In such sites, violence was taboo, so the process of decision-making was supposed to remain at the level of a discursive war. The student assemblies in each department would incessantly and endlessly repeat these discursive struggles, which often lasted until the next morning.

These assembles, which far exceeded in numbers the quorum needed to satisfy protocol, in practice became open to participation from the entire student body. For the Zenkyōtō movement, this intricate and complex war of discourse was an experience that closely resembled what Hannah Arendt famously called “the emergence of political space.”

The Zenkyōtō movement was a student rebellion that broke with the established style of postwar Japanese political movements. But it was not only this. The liberation of the concept of “rebellion” (*hanran*) from the theoretical framework of revolution also constituted a fundamental paradigm shift from the traditions of the revolutionary movement.

The various party-formations of the Japanese New Left generally saw themselves theoretically as vanguard parties, inheritors and successors of the Marxist tradition; that is, they saw themselves as *the* Marxist-Leninist party. This was the source of the sectarian literary style, beginning with the party program. Within the movement too, each individual struggle had to be understood as merely one link in a connected chain leading to the ultimate revolution — the movement-form aimed at by the entire national political struggle.

In this conception, the vanguard party was the “headquarters,” the order-giving division, of the mass movement, while the mass movement itself had to be a firm, strong community of revolutionaries. This is the logic of vanguardism.

Yet, at the time, Japan’s “new vanguard parties” were miniscule in comparison to the country’s working class or even its Communist Party, so they resorted to another self-determination: they saw themselves as the Marxist-Leninist “left opposition.” These characteristic “revolutionary parties” were an extension of the 1960 Anpō Struggle. When they encountered the Zenkyōtō movement, they would quickly become influential participants and organizers.

The composition of the Zenkyōtō as a grouping was an amalgamation between the masses in rebellion and the various sectarian formations. This produced a constant flux within the Zenkyōtō movement, the sects, and the masses from vanguardism to mass-movementism and vice versa in reverse. The revolutionary parties had now experienced a mass rebellion, a moment of insurrection.

The year 1968 was the beginning of the second half of the century since the October Revolution of 1917 in Russia. In the fifty years since 1968, the revolution has been actively forgotten as just another historical event. This period of forgetting has now gone on longer than the initial fifty years since its occurrence.

Today, after the 2018 bicentennial of Marx’s birth, we have no choice but to think, even unconsciously, of the destruction of the rebellions of 1968, of the ruins of this demolished form of

thought. Only a thought and practice that rises and emerges from these ruins can become the present we need in order to inherit and follow 1968 today.

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