

1949

As the Civil War was nearing its end, the Nationalist Party (Guomindang, or GMD) retreated to the island of Taiwan. At a time when the United States was forging its anticommunist networks in East Asia against both the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China, the GMD-led Republic of China with its strategic location and its claim to represent the only legitimate government of 'free' China constituted an important ally for the US Government, an alliance that was sealed as the Korean War broke out. The two Chinas then began an intense diplomatic competition that lasts to this day. Internally, the GMD ruled with an iron fist. To impose order on the island in the face of increasing popular unrest, in May 1949, the Nationalist authorities declared martial law. They would not lift it for thirty-eight years until July 1987. This essay looks at the tumultuous period for labour in Taiwan in the aftermath of World War II, before the GMD managed to annihilate any social force that went against its authoritarian rule.

A Spark Extinguished: Worker Militancy in Taiwan after World War II (1945–1950)

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On the day of the strike, around three to four hundred workers took a boat to the shipyard but didn't go into the workplace. Instead, with our own toolboxes in hand, we assembled and blockaded the offices. Then, workers with military training background subdued the armed factory police and put them into the shipyard's privately built iron cages. The shipyard was surrounded by the sea. To prevent the managers and supervisors from running away and sending out information, the trained workers patrolled the seashore and hence the island [on which the shipyard was located] was sealed off. The strike went on from morning to night for around twelve hours. The employers eventually gave in and accepted the workers' demand for a pay raise. That night, the strike was over and we won!

— Ruan Hung-Ying, Keelung shipyard worker and leader of Keelung Metal Workers' Union in the late 1940s¹

Towards the end of 1949, the regime of the Chinese Nationalist Party (Guomindang, or GMD) retreated to the Province of Taiwan as a result of the Chinese Civil War. Albeit defeated, the GMD was once again supported by the United States due to the outbreak of the Korean War and the US strategy of containing communism—a Cold War arrangement that led to the establishment of the Republic of China (ROC) in Taiwan and the ensuing diplomatic competition with the People's Republic of China for the representation of China that lasts to this day. Although the GMD would impose military rule on Taiwan for the next thirty-eight years, the ROC regime—in opposition to 'communist China'—was referred to as 'free China' by both the GMD and its allies, most notably the United States.

A Strike-Less 'Free China'

On 4 July 1976, the bicentenary of the US Declaration of Independence, the ROC Government in Taiwan paid for an advertisement in *The New York Times*. It read:

[The labour force in Taiwan] is the best bargain in Asia, if not the world, when efficiency as well as cost is taken into account. And the island's workers are well disciplined; there is practically none of the costly labor strife that characterizes industries in many parts of the world. There are no strikes.²

From the late 1960s, a so-called economic miracle occurred in 'free China'. Current studies have attributed this successful economic growth to Taiwan's low labour costs and meek workers, with some researchers even suggesting that prior to the 1980s a worker movement did not exist on the island.³ This led to the widespread belief that Taiwanese workers have always been docile and easily tamed.

Yet, in the post-World War II years, workers in Taiwan were militant, often instigating radical strikes and industrial action, courageously fighting for improved labour conditions. Taiwan was not innately 'an island without strikes'. The 'strike-less island' was an outcome of the imposition of martial law and the GMD's brutal suppression of the left. Under martial law, the ROC Government systematically annihilated thousands upon thousands of workers, peasants, indigenous people and members of the underground Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to eliminate any social force that went against the grain of its authoritarian rule.

Legacies

In 1895, the defeated Qing Dynasty and the victorious Japanese Empire signed the Treaty of Shimonoseki, in which China ceded the island of Taiwan to Japan. Taiwan had been under the jurisdiction of the Qing imperial government since 1684 and, in 1885, it had even been established as a Chinese province under Qing rule. For centuries, Han Chinese immigrants from the coastal region of mainland China had constituted the majority of the local residents. Due to the Treaty of Shimonoseki, the Japanese Empire took hold of Taiwan and began a process of colonisation that would last five decades.

In the early years of Japanese colonisation, Taiwan was mainly an agrarian society. For the purposes of governance and exploitation, the Japanese Empire developed Taiwan into a colonial economy and modernised the island to some extent. For instance, to enlarge sugar exports from Taiwan to Japan, the Japanese Government introduced semi-automated and fully automated production techniques. Mechanical operations gradually replaced manual labour and the scale of mechanisation and factories expanded. To facilitate the export of the colony's resources, the Japanese Government also devoted itself to the construction of port facilities. As a result, cement factories were built and the demand for port workers increased. Because of this process of industrialisation, the population of waged workers in Taiwan began to increase.

The mid-1920s witnessed the thriving of peasant and labour movements for the first time in the history of Taiwan.⁴ For instance, an unprecedented island-wide strike broke out in 1927 as mechanics in southern Taiwan initiated a labour dispute. These movements were organised and led by anticolonial, nationalist cadres.⁵ In particular, towards the end of the 1920s, a nationwide peasant union with a membership of more than 20,000 came under the directorship of the Taiwanese Communist Party (台灣共產黨, TCP), a newly established party aspiring to overthrow the Japanese regime. Meanwhile, a left-wing reformist party, the Taiwan People's Party (台灣民眾黨, TPP), led a general labour union of more than 10,000 members, as well as some related worker organisations.

Yet, in the early 1930s, the Japanese colonial government severely suppressed these thriving movements. The TCP was branded an illegal organisation and almost fifty of its cadre members were arrested and prosecuted. Higher-ranking leaders were sentenced to more than ten years in prison, although some of them managed to escape to mainland China. The TPP was disbanded by the colonial government in 1931, in the year the Japanese invaded northeastern China. As the Imperial Japanese Army gained power, the Japanese Empire embarked on a series of expansionist wars. Japan picked Taiwan as a base for its invasion of Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands, and hence accelerated the industrialisation of the island to meet the empire's military demands. This meant the peasant and labour movements had to be subdued.

Fast forward to the end of World War II. On 15 August 1945, Emperor Hirohito announced the surrender of Japan to the Allies. As per the 1943 Cairo Declaration, Taiwan was restored to the ROC and, in October 1945, the ROC Government sent a number of GMD officials to the island to

accept the surrender of Japan and simultaneously take over the administration of the now former colony.

During the last two years of the war, those who had once been imprisoned or under surveillance by the Japanese colonial government, as well as members of the TCP and TPP, had restarted their organising work. Witnessing the impending downfall of Imperial Japan, organisers and leaders of peasant and labour movements began to rebuild connections and networks, marshalling in secrecy members of the past movements, ready to rise again when the moment arrived.

The restoration of Taiwan to the ROC ended five decades of Japanese colonisation. Having been discriminated against under Japanese rule, most Taiwanese people fervently welcomed the return to China. Nevertheless, because of the language barrier—learning Chinese was banned in the late Japanese colonial period—and the condescending attitude of GMD officials, the very people who had been so welcoming of the new rulers soon began again to feel discriminated against. Moreover, the GMD regime in Taiwan was incompetent and continued to engage in corruption and abuse of power, exactly as it had done in mainland China.

Less than eighteen months after the return to China, towards the end of February 1947, uprisings broke out all over Taiwan, culminating in an extensive anti-government movement that came to be known as the 'February 28 incident' (二二八事件). The movement was violently suppressed as the GMD called for troops from the mainland to launch a brutal crackdown. More than 10,000 civilians died.⁶

Organisational Work from the Left

Between 1946 and 1949, before and after the February 28 incident, Taiwanese workers instigated at least twenty-five major industrial actions, which included wildcat strikes, work-to-rule protests, assemblies, appeals and petitions. As evidenced by news reports from that time, those who organised and instigated radical industrial action came from all walks of life. These Taiwanese labourers and activists, from both urban and rural areas, were railway workers, dock workers, shipyard workers, printing workers, bus drivers, sugar mill workers, low-level employees at government agencies, teachers and physicians.

Before the February 28 incident, the cadres and members of the TCP who had been arrested and imprisoned during Japanese colonisation played an important role in organising and assisting these persistent

industrial actions. Yet, after the restoration of Taiwan to the ROC, the GMD intelligence service had obtained a great amount of information about these political activists and placed them under surveillance. After the February 28 incident, the already stringent discipline tightened even further. Most experienced cadres and members were compelled to flee to Hong Kong or mainland China. The deteriorating political situation prevented them from continuing their organisational work in Taiwan, not to mention assisting worker and peasant movements on the island.

Nevertheless, when the GMD took over the administration of Taiwan, some Taiwanese who had been based in mainland China for several years were sent back to the island to conduct underground activities on behalf of the CCP. These Taiwanese communists had escaped to the mainland to avoid being captured by the Japanese colonial government and, once there, joined the CCP. In collaboration with a few Taiwanese communists still unknown to the GMD intelligence, they established the Taiwan Province Mission Committee of the CCP (台灣省工作委員會) to organise social movements and recruit new underground party members.

Although the ROC authorities managed to suppress the uprisings and popular resistance by deploying military forces, the February 28 incident further intensified resentment of the GMD regime among the local population. Under such circumstances, more and more intellectuals and students joined the underground party, which in turn was able to establish strongholds in critical factories and workplaces in Taiwan. In some shops and industries that offered better conditions, the underground party successfully organised the cadres and gained leadership posts in some unions. Prior to 1949, when the GMD regime eventually imposed martial law, the underground party even prompted extensive demonstrations and well-planned work-to-rule actions throughout the island.

Collective Resistance

In 1946, one year before the February 28 incident, two similar strikes broke out in the two most important port cities in Taiwan, Keelung in the north and Kaohsiung in the south. In the face of extreme inflation, shipyard workers in both ports went on strike in June and September, respectively, to fight for a reasonable pay raise.

In June, workers at the Keelung shipyard—a factory built during Japanese colonisation and then taken over by the GMD regime—launched their strike. They not only blockaded the factory, but also subdued the armed

police deployed to stop them. They even detained the factory director and some senior managers (who had been appointed by the GMD), demanding face-to-face negotiations. Within a day, the employers agreed to the workers' request for a pay rise. The strike gave rise to the Keelung Metal Workers' Union (基隆鐵器職業工會), a union co-organised by the shipyard workers and the mechanics of two other nearby factories.

A few months later, workers at the Kaohsiung shipyard in southern Taiwan started a strike that bore a significant resemblance to the action in Keelung. Both shipyards, in fact, belonged to the same company and, after World War II, were taken over by the GMD. In September 1946 at the Kaohsiung shipyard, more than 1,000 workers blockaded the factory, subdued the armed police and detained the director and other senior managers. Workers also demanded immediate, face-to-face negotiations. Similar to what happened in June at the Keelung shipyard, the striking Kaohsiung workers won a reasonable pay rise with their one-day action.

The Kaohsiung strike benefited from the assistance of left-wing organisers who had been active in the late 1920s during the Japanese colonial era. It is likely that the strike at the Keelung shipyard in June, sharing a number of characteristics with the one in Kaohsiung, might also have received the same support. Supported by organisers from the TCP and TPP, these two strikes can be considered the most coherent, militant industrial actions in the postwar years in Taiwan. Precisely because of this, during the White Terror of the 1950s, when the GMD regime launched a bloody anticommunist campaign, many cadres and members, as well as low-level workers of the two shipyards, were arrested and received severe sentences.

After the February 28 incident, most organised labour movements were developed by the underground groups and members of the Taiwan Province Mission Committee of the CCP. In 1949, their efforts bore fruit. By May of that year, as the GMD regime lost ground in the mainland and prepared for a total retreat to Taiwan, the Taiwan Province Mission Committee had already obtained full or partial leadership in the two main unions in Taipei: the Employed Drivers' Union (台北司機工會) and the Postal-Telecommunications Workers' Union (台灣省郵務工會). After three years of organising efforts, the committee was now ready to instigate collective actions for workers' rights.

In March 1949, to negotiate a pay rise, the Employed Drivers' Union had launched a work-to-rule action, in which all city bus drivers drove at a speed of twenty kilometres per hour. Although the action caused

inconvenience for passengers, residents of Taipei City considered the union's request reasonable and thus supported the workers. As a result, after a day of work-to-rule, the city government agreed to a pay rise as demanded by the union.

Mobilising the workers in the postal-telecommunications department was tougher. Even though the sector employed around 6,000 people, dispersed all over Taiwan, the underground party organised the workers in Taipei and established a branch there. It also made every effort to contact and bring together workers at different locations. Many postal-telecom employees joined the underground party and broke through the GMD's control of the union. Some underground party members were elected to leadership positions in the union.

The GMD officials never hid their condescending attitude towards Taiwanese postal-telecom workers. After the return of the island to the ROC, the GMD regime regarded the 6,000 postal-telecom workers who were hired by the Japanese colonial government as temporary rather than permanent employees. For this reason, Taiwanese postal-telecom workers received a wage that was only one-fourth to one-fifth of that of the permanent postal-telecom workers from mainland China. This unfair treatment caused a strong sense of discontent and resentment.

In 1947, a former Nationalist intelligence agent from mainland China was appointed by the GMD as president of the Postal-Telecommunications Workers' Union. Under the new leadership, the workers' requests to be recognised as permanent employees remained unanswered. Meanwhile, by the end of 1946, the Taiwan Province Mission Committee of the CCP had effectively mobilised the low-level employees of the postal-telecom department in Taipei. Through activities such as labour education and journal publications, the committee established underground working teams to contact and connect postal-telecom workers. The workers' demands to be granted permanent employment became more and more intense.

At the end of March 1949, more than 400 postal-telecom workers gathered in Taipei. After the GMD-appointed department director disregarded their request, the workers promptly launched a street demonstration, marching from the department headquarters to the Taiwan Provincial Government building—where the GMD troops had fired the first shot two years earlier, in February 1947. Throughout the march, people supportive of the workers' demands joined the demonstration one after another and, by the time they arrived at their destination, the crowd

had grown to around 2,000 people—enough to surround the Provincial Government building. The demonstration shocked the GMD regime, which was then preparing for a complete retreat to Taiwan.

The demonstration led to the recognition of the 6,000 Taiwanese postal-telecom workers as permanent employees. In fact, this mobilisation in Taipei was the largest of all those in the postwar years. And yet, it also marked the last action by Taiwanese workers' movements for decades to come.

Annihilation

On 19 May 1949, not long after the work-to-rule action by the Drivers' Union and the postal-telecom workers' demonstration, the GMD regime declared martial law in Taiwan, under which all industrial action and strikes were banned. According to the martial law order, those who encouraged or instigated workers' movements could be sentenced to death.

In December 1949, the GMD regime—defeated in the Chinese Civil War—retreated to Taiwan. From 1950, the underground organisations and groups, including the postal-telecom workers' branch and the Drivers' Union, were repeatedly raided and destroyed. A great number of cadres were arrested and sentenced to severe punishment. Some were even convicted of treason and executed. During the White Terror of the 1950s, about 1,000 people⁷—including farmers and workers, left-wing intellectuals and students, union cadres and apolitical civilians—were executed.

From 1950, the GMD regime began to regulate and control all union organisations and factories in Taiwan. It pressed for the restructuring of the unions, assigning directors to each union and sent out intelligence agents to factories to conduct onsite surveillance. Workers were also encouraged to watch over and report on 'suspicious characters'.

Under martial law, any collective action by Taiwanese workers could be considered 'treason' and hence lead to arrest or even execution. Union organisations, at the same time, were reduced to GMD-manipulated 'yellow unions'. As the ROC Government strived to thoroughly eliminate every trace of resistance, the Taiwanese workers' militancy inherited from the anticolonial tradition of the Japanese colonial era was exterminated.