

The Tragedy of Minamata

Sit-in and Face-to-Face Discussion

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The strike against pollution Workers from the first union of the electrochemical plant in Minamata, the main production facility of the Chisso Corporation and source of Minamata disease, are staging a sit-in before the main entrance during a “strike against pollution,” May 27, 1970. An inscription is written above photographs of the deceased and between floral wreaths similar to those seen at funerals: “Protest rally for rest for the souls of Minamata disease.” The workers are protesting against the derisory compensation offered two days earlier to the victims of Minamata disease by the Ministry of Health, the mediator between the company and its victims. [Photo Shiota Takeshi- First published in *Asahi Gurafu* magazine, June 12, 1970]

Since Minamata disease first appeared in 1956, more than ten thousand people have been officially recognized as affected by the disease, and many more have remained in the shadows. Because of the extent and virulence of the pollution, but also because of the extraordinary conflict between the victims of the disease, Chisso and the government, Minamata has become the symbol of the industrial pollution that has struck contemporary Japan.

Several hundred tons of methyl mercury were continually discharged by Chisso's facility in Minamata between 1932 and 1966. Although mercury was known to be toxic as early as the 1930s, the substance—used as a catalyst in the production of acetaldehyde, a component of PVC,—was simply dumped into the sea, contaminating the entire food chain and bringing about all sorts of symptoms that had never been seen in humans: trouble seeing and speaking, loss of balance and increasingly violent trembling beginning with the hands and legs then moving to the entire body. Fearing social stigmatization, the affected families hid their sick. It wasn't until April 1956, when a mother brought her two little girls to the city hospital, that the public became aware of the disease. But the company continued to repudiate the cause of the disease and contemptuously denied the victims' requests for compensation, as well as those of the fishermen whose livelihood was contaminated.

In December 1959, the company imposed a "consolation agreement" (*mimaikin*) on the families of the victims that offered them ridiculously small amounts of money and specified that "even if in the future it is proven that residue from the plant is the cause of Minamata disease, those affected by the disease agree to make no further claims." This clause forced the victims into a reclusive, extremely precarious life of submission to Chisso until a lawsuit was engaged against the company in 1969.

In 1959, a group of fishermen furious with the management's contempt forced its way into the plant and damaged company property. The labor union, whose leaders were very close to management at the time, reacted by condemning the fishermen's "violence." But in 1962 a strike erupted over salary disputes, and the management encouraged the formation of a second union to break the strike. The conflict divided the city of Minamata into two distinct camps: the anti-establishment supporters of the "first union" and those who supported the "modernization" advocated by the "new union," which was called the "at-your-service union" (*goyō kumiai*) by its adversaries in the first union. By the end of the strike six months later, the "old union," as it was called by its enemies in the second union, had lost the salary battle along with half of its members.

Disaffection remained limited, however, despite systematic and brutal discrimination. By resisting the threats, retaliation measures and humiliation that the management and second union subjected them to, the members of the first union progressively understood what the victims of the disease and the fishermen were going through. Consequently, when the victims' movement became reinvigorated in 1968, a large number of workers from the first union resolutely joined its ranks, breaking radically with the doctrine of union "cooperationism" (*kyōchō shugi*) that was dominant at the time. In August, 400 of them stood in front of the main entrance of the plant and publicly read a "declaration of shame" (*haji sengen*) that attracted national attention:

"[...] Why were we unable to fight against Minamata disease? That we, who know from our experience what struggle means, have been unable until now to fight against Minamata disease, is truly shameful to us as human beings and as workers, and we must reflect on this from the bottom of our hearts. The company's actions toward workers are exactly the same as its actions regarding Minamata disease, and the fight against Minamata disease is also our fight. Even today, the company refuses to recognize that the cause of Minamata disease is the factory's waste, and it hides all its documents. We resolve to devote all our energy to making the company admit responsibility for Minamata disease, to support the victims of Minamata disease, who even today are in the depths of suffering, and to fight against Minamata disease." [1]

It was the first time that the union of a polluting facility had committed itself to supporting the victims of the very pollution it had caused. What happened next would prove that this was not a mere declaration of intent. Two years later, some 800 workers from the first union participated in a "strike against pollution" (*kōgai suto*). They were outraged by the meager compensation that the Minister of Health offered to the families of the victims who had accepted to negotiate through the Minister rather than joining the group of plaintiffs. The pathetic amount of the compensation harked back to the infamous "consolation agreement" imposed by the company 11 years earlier.

The rally took place in front of the large main entrance of the plant. The workers wore their helmets or red bands displaying the name of the union, and they held large red banners reminiscent of the strike of 1962-1963. The families of the victims filed in one after another. Earlier, they had opened the procession march along with the workers, holding portraits of their deceased relatives and friends.

The strike attracted national media attention. A

one-day strike might seem inconsequential; however, in light of the pittance to which labor protest had been reduced in Japan, the event is not insignificant. After the great conflicts of the 1950s, strikes became extremely rare in every industry of the private sector.

Except for a few young workers from a refinery in Kawasaki who were inspired by the strike to stage a similar protest against the production of leaded fuel, the first union's commitment to the victims has remained as rare an event as it was radical, not unlike the Minamata tragedy itself. In

March 1972, eight workers from the first union gave decisive testimony on the witness stand in Kumamoto to prove that Chisso was at fault. Paradoxically, in standing by the victims, they succeeded in forcing Chisso, which wanted to abandon its operations in Minamata, to maintain its electrochemical plant there. Although the plant continues to produce advanced chemical products, the management never stopped ridding itself of recalcitrant unionists: the first union was dissolved on March 30, 2004.



“Sit-on” and Face-to-Face Discussion After the sentencing in the first Minamata disease trial, during the “direct negotiations” demanded by the plaintiffs and the other victims who were prevented from participating in the trial, Kawamoto Teruo, one of the leaders of the victims’ movement, sat down on the negotiation table facing Shimada Ken’ichi, the president of Chisso. [Photo Miyamoto Shigemil]

On March 20, 1973, after a four-year trial, the court of Kumamoto condemned Chisso for its blatant neglect to set forth preventative measures. Moreover, the company had even gone so far as to install a phony mercury filter. Consequently, Chisso was ordered to pay between 16 and 18 billion yen per plaintiff, for a total of almost a trillion yen, the largest sum ever ordered by a Japanese court. The plaintiffs were satisfied with the moral condemnation of Chisso, but they feared that

the compensation would only cover the damage already suffered without providing lasting support to cover future medical expenses. They also felt that Chisso should compensate all of the victims of the disease, not only the plaintiffs in the case. By recognizing the damage suffered by the victims, the sentence gave them full legitimacy to negotiate directly with Chisso.

Negotiations began immediately after the end of the trial, at Chisso’s headquarters in Tokyo;

they would end four months later. In addition to journalists, several photographers were present to support the victims. Among them was the American Eugene Smith, whose article in *Time* one year later made the disease known throughout the world. The filmmaker Tsuchimoto Noriaki made a two-hour documentary that follows the fascinating progression of this face-to-face discussion between the victims and the management of the company. Some of the victims maintained a position of deference toward Chisso management. Others turned the tables: the victims were no longer vassals coming to see the Lord of Chisso. Rather, the company's management, especially its president Shimada Ken'ichi, spoke with deference to the victims. One of them, Kawamoto Teruo, even went so far as to sit cross-legged on the table looking down at Shimada.

Such a stance was revolutionary for the people of Minamata who, until then, had viewed the head of Chisso as a demigod living in an inaccessible world close to the emperor. As with the most important Japanese firms, Chisso's headquarters are situated in the business district of Tokyo, right next to the imperial palace. More than 30 years later, in 1990, one year after the death of Hirohito (now called Emperor Shōwa), Kawamoto was about to ask his son, Akihito, the new emperor heralding the Heisei era, to come to Minamata to offer an official apology. In doing so, Kawamoto hoped to bring about the close of the Shōwa era—marked by Minamata disease—, in order to fully enter into a new era. A similar request had been addressed a century earlier in 1901 to Emperor Meiji by Tanaka Shōzō, a parliamentarian advocating for the peasant victims of pollution caused by a copper mine in Ashio. Torn by voices from the left, who refused to bring the matter to the emperor, and the right, who were afraid to offend the emperor or be subjected to the retaliation of the extreme right, Kawamoto decided to abandon the effort.

For the time being, Kawamoto was not seeking revenge; rather, he seemed to wish to speak with Shimada as an equal. In the most fascinating scene in the film, he is sitting cross-legged on the table, right in front of the president. A discussion about Matsumoto Mune and Kosaki Yazō, who died soon after being diagnosed with the disease, continues late into the night. Kawamoto speaks bluntly. His tone is harsh, but not aggressive; rather than seeking a defeat or revenge, he tries to

communicate on equal footing with Shimada, in order to reveal to him the reality of the victims who have remained in the shadows. It is as though Shimada is hearing what Kawamoto is explaining for the very first time. His eyes are fixated on Kawamoto with a look of fear mixed with interrogation:

Kawamoto: “Are you going to pay for Matsumoto and Kosaki, yes or no, that's all we ask! We have wasted enough time tonight, we have no more time to argue!” [...]

Kawamoto (his voice has changed and is calmer than before): “What does Zen teach us? I don't know anything about Zen... Hmm? What does Zen teach us? And your wife, is she Zen too?”

The president: “Yes... Uh, no, my wife is Catholic.”

Kawamoto: “Oh really, she is Catholic... And what does Catholicism teach us? Is it different from Zen? Hmm? Between Zen and Catholicism, is there a difference? I was told that you have three or four children... Hmm... Kosaki also had children, so did Matsumoto... She had children... Hmm, Kosaki too... He was a father, just like you... Why is there such a difference?... Anywhere you go in Japan, they are all fathers and mothers? Right, boss? Is it normal for there to be such a difference? Fathers and mothers who should be happy... Is it normal for there to be such a difference?” Only Shimada's eyes are still open. Kuga, Tsuchiya and the other managers seem to have fallen into meditation.

Kawamoto: “You are much older than I am, hmm, you have been around the block. You have employed people... tens of thousands. You know how to guess what others are thinking. How men should live... You must have something like familial or moral precepts on that? What is your business slogan? Do you have anything like that? No, oh, so then what is your pastime? (with the voice of someone who is seeking answers) Bonzai? Music? What is it?”

The president: “Bonzai, music, painting, I don't do anything like that.”

Kawamoto: “You must have a pastime?”

The president: “I read books, that's all.”

Kawamoto: “Oh, you read books... You read books... Ah... What book has moved you the most? I don't know much about literature but... What book has impressed you the most? Hmm? These books haven't moralized you? There is no connection between these books and the death of Kosaki and Matsumoto? There is no link? What do you think?”

The president: “They are not entirely unconnected.”

Kawamoto: “Oh, they are not entirely unconnected?”

The president: “Yes, they are not entirely unconnected.”

Kawomoto: “Oh really?”

The president: “Yes.” [2]

Shimada visited the victims in their homes, but, as preposterous as it sounds, the opposite didn't happen: the victims can't enter the home of the president. In other words, a dialogue between equals remains a utopian idea. Like the group of pilgrims from Minamata who prayed in front of the houses of Chisso management, it was as if Kawamoto had presented himself at the house of Shimada. But, unlike the pilgrims, Kawamoto pushed until Shimada opened his door and revealed his humanity, by questioning him about

intimate aspects of his life like his reading or religion (Shimada later converted to Catholicism). This strange exchange later took on an almost mythical dimension for the supporters of the victims. It might be perceived as the paroxysm of this face-to-face quest to obtain, along with monetary compensation, a symbolic recognition of the damage caused. This attitude, which one might call conflictual cooperation, is radically distinct from cooperationism but also from any polemical stand that attempts to diabolize the adversary. From the beginning of the 1980s, this conflictual cooperation would become a major trait of new Japanese labor unions engaged in the prevention and recognition of industrial diseases.



Minamata disease patients leader Kawamoto Teruo sits in front of Chisso's president Shimada Ken'ichi at Chisso's head office, March 1973. [photo: Tsuchimoto Noriaki]

[1] *Sairen* (the first union's newsletter), August 31, 1968. Translation in Timothy S. George, *Minamata: Pollution and the Struggle for Democracy in Postwar Japan*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2001, p. 184.

[2] Tsuchimoto Noriaki, *Minamata ikki (The Minamata Revolt)*, Seirinsha, 1973, 16 mm., b&w, 108 min. Transcription in Tsuchimoto Noriaki, *Eigawa ikimono no shigoto de aru (Film is the Work of Living Beings)*, Miraisha, Tokyo, 1974, pp. 350-354.

Excerpts from a forthcoming book to be published by Editions de l'EHESS, Paris.