

A Japanese Interpretation of the Recent Food Riots

By SEN KATAYAMA

Our brief sketch of the popular movement in Japan, its mobs and its riots, that appeared in the Sept.-Oct. issue of the *Class Struggle* under the title of "Armed Peace on the Pacific," will be the best introduction to a description of the recent riots that shook Japan. Riots are not new in Japan. During the last three centuries of feudal regime there have been hundreds of riots among the farmers, tenants and even among the city people, uprisings against their oppressing rulers and their exploiting rich. In the cities these riots were usually directed against the wealthy rice merchants, the peasant uprisings against feudal chieftains, directly against land-tax collectors, and indirectly against the rich in the villages. But they rarely were of more than local significance. Under the ancient feudal system the peasant had no political rights; they were meek and passive in their relations with the feudal officers. But when conditions became unbearable, they had no means of redress, and their dissatisfaction found violent expression in riots, burning and destruction. The vengeance of the authorities, when once the disturbance was passed, was terrible. The leaders were brutally punished, and only too often their wives and children as well. They were crucified and exposed to the public gaze as a warning. But the demands made by the mobs were usually at least partially met. Rents were reduced and rice prices lowered; an oppressive ruler deposed, an unbearable tax collector removed.

The recent riots, in their outward appearance, showed little variation from this general character. But for the first time in the history of revolutionary movements in Japan, they were not centered upon small territories. They extended over three prefectures, Tokyo, Osaka and Kyoto, over thirty

provinces, and in Hokkaido, the northern part of Japan. Altogether this uprising affected over two-thirds of the Japanese Empire. The *Oriental Economist* reports that there were destructive riots in 142 different localities; that in 38 places they could be put down only by armed troops. In Osaka the rioting continued for three full days and nights, and it is roughly estimated that at its height a force of over thirty thousand soldiers, including cavalry were necessary to control the infuriated masses. The press reports that have just reached us extend over the 13th of August and contain detailed reports of the revolts in Osaka and in a few of the principal cities of the Empire. After this date all reports suddenly cease. The Government had forbidden the publication of further news concerning these uprisings, fearing, not without cause, their extremely contagious character. Even later, when the press was again permitted to print reports of the riots that were spreading rapidly all over the country, these news items were strictly controlled and censored, and only news furnished by the government was allowed to appear in print. From all indications, however, rioting in Tokyo, Nagoya, Sendai and in other large cities must have been even more frightful than that in the cities previously reported. In Kure, where the chief Navy Yard of the Empire is located, the marines were called out in full strength to quell the desperate mobs, while all thoroughfares and important crossings were armed with machine guns. But in spite of the rigid military discipline that obtains in the Japanese army, it was found that a number of marines had made common cause with the rioting masses. The police authorities, realizing from the start their impotence in dealing with the rioters sent plain clothes men into the crowds who marked the backs of the ringleaders with chalk, to arrest them later when the fury of the mob had spent itself. Trickery of this sort, however, only served to inflame the popular fury. In Tokyo an uprising was led by women, girls and children, and spread within a week all over the country. The time was ripe for a revolt against the autocratic government. There were riots