

**Spring 2022 Lecture Series:
Progressive and Radical Buddhist Experiments in Modern Japan
James Mark Shields (Bucknell University)**

Lecture #4 (of 4): Shōwa Buddhist Socialism (1930s)

W 4/27 at 7:00 PM Eastern, 6:00 PM Central, 4:00 PM Pacific (R 4/28 at 8:00 AM Japan Time)

In the early decades of the twentieth century, as Japanese society became engulfed in war and increasing nationalism, the majority of Buddhist leaders and institutions capitulated to the status quo, preaching, in the words of Joseph Kitagawa “the virtues of peace, harmony, and loyalty to the throne.” One notable exception to this trend, however, was the Shinkō Bukkyō Seinen Dōmei (Youth League for Revitalizing Buddhism), founded on April 5, 1931. Led by Nichiren Buddhist layman Seno’o Girō (1889–1961), and made up of young social activists who were critical of capitalism, internationalist in outlook, and committed to both an pan-sectarian and more “rational and practical” form of Buddhism that would work for social justice and world peace, the League’s motto was “carry the Buddha on your backs and go out into the streets and villages.” In many respects, the League was an extension of earlier movements towards Buddhist modernization and reform dating back to the 1880s. And yet, by the time they were founded, Japan had entered a very different, and much more conservative (some would argue fascist) stage. Their activities in support of poor farmers, striking workers and *burakumin* “outcastes” eventually led to the arrest of Seno’o and the League’s forced dissolution in 1937. The Youth League for Revitalizing Buddhism has been called the first—if not only—“engaged Buddhist” movement in modern Japan, and along with contemporary Engaged Buddhism, might be criticized for placing secular liberal (in this case, socialist) values of rights and freedoms above traditional Buddhist doctrines. This paper analyzes the views of the Youth League for Revitalizing Buddhism as found in the writings of Seno’o Girō, in relation to the historical and political context and with specific reference to various “problems” surrounding the emergence of Buddhist socialism in modern Japan, including the use of Nichiren’s *Risshō ankoku ron*, the *Lotus Sutra*, and the relation of Buddhism to materialism.

佛教をブルより奪還しろ!!
來れ! 新興佛教の旗の下に

創立記念
新興佛教大講演會

日時 四月五日午後六時半
場所 本郷・帝大佛教青年會館

我等の主張
既成教團の撲滅!
資本主義反對!
全佛教徒の大同團結!
當來佛教社會の建設へ!

主催 新興佛教青年同盟

安達 大橋 奥村 野山 野原 山尾 渡 実建 有年 澄義 土 安火 春若 松明郎