A double entendre embedded in the title of this book encompasses two of the three core themes that tie this work together and two key characteristics of labor movements throughout most of the twentieth century. “Divisions of labor” refers both to the ways in which competing ideologies divided labor movements into competing partisan groups, and to units of military organization, in the sense that workers were organized and mobilized in “wars” of various kinds via these ideological groupings. These “wars” include not only armed conflicts among states and nations but, in the broader sense, prolonged and intense political competition among social categories (class war) and more abstract competition over ideology and international hegemony (e.g., cold war).

The third core theme of the book is the globality of the process out of which the contemporary Japanese labor movement—the primary focus of this work—emerged. That is, the movement’s evolution is presented as part of a larger geopolitical process shaping labor movements in Japan and other parts of the world during the years that stretch from World War I through the Cold War era that began in the late 1940s. The global dimension is especially significant because political forces of this period impinged with particular intensity on national-level labor movements.

The processes described here established the ideological and organizational attributes of the labor movement in Japan and other so-called advanced industrialized countries of today, thus setting the basic institutional and political parameters within which labor movements would continue to operate. By focusing on the globality of the Japanese movement and its connection to the “divisions” of labor as described, we have an analytical frame of reference that helps us isolate those forces and circumstances critical to the dynamics of labor politics in a particular national context. Put another way, this book offers a globally contextualized comparative history of the Japanese labor movement.

Inspiration for approaching the task in this way came from the sense of déjà vu I experienced when reading works on Western European labor-movement his-
tory after having gained a general familiarity with Japan’s labor history. It was not simply that familiar characters and plot devices kept reappearing in the different national narratives as if they were put together out of the contents of a Hollywood scriptwriter’s toolbox; there were also astonishing simultaneities in the timing of key developments in histories that were separated geographically by the world’s largest land mass and an ostensible “East-is-East, West-is-West” cultural divide. The close proximity and easily observable concrete evidence of the intertwining trajectories of national labor movement histories within Europe has encouraged a global—or, alternately, contextualized comparative—approach. European labor movement history is thus often written as a Europe-wide history or as compendiums of multinational case studies. The resulting accumulation of explicitly and implicitly comparative studies has fostered a cognizance of the international and global nature of the forces that have shaped the histories of labor movements. By contrast, despite a number of initial stabs (moreso in works published in Japanese than in English), comparative analysis of Japanese labor-movement history has not been undertaken to anywhere near the extent that it has of European labor history. One of the main reasons for this has been Japan’s isolation as the only independent industrialized country in a historically nonindustrialized, largely colonized, part of the world. Also, for the non-Japanese scholar and student of labor history, linguistic hurdles must be overcome in order to access the relatively numerous publications and source materials that are essential in the study of the Japanese movement. In light of this, a subsidiary purpose in writing this volume is to begin to bridge the gap between the two sets of literatures by systematically comparing developments in Japanese labor-movement history with those of three leading countries in Western Europe—France, Italy, and West Germany.

Having said this, several provisos are in order. First, although the effort here is meant to highlight the “globality” of Japanese labor history, strictly speaking, the framework of analysis adopted is interregional rather than global. Nonetheless, the interregional context implicitly meters global forces. This is because the three Western European countries and Japan shared contiguous political-historical “spaces” in the global system during the period in question in the sense that all four were countries near the epicenter of the transition from Allied-Axis to Cold War East-West conflict in the international system. Precisely because of this “location,” their respective labor movements were impacted powerfully, and in systematically similar ways, by this global-level transition. Thus, although the empirical coverage is admittedly far from global in its scope, by connecting developments in the labor movements of these specific countries to the regional manifestations of a global phenomena, we are able to recognize the global dimension of the local-level histories covered, and may even be inspired to extend the analysis to labor histories in other “locations” in the global system.

A second proviso is that, although it does engage in extensive comparative
analysis, the book is primarily a Japanese labor-movement history. It departs from
the standard practice of a single-country study (i.e., only tangential coverage of
other countries), but it does not conform to the standard format for a conventional
comparative study either (i.e., more or less equal weighting of all countries cov-
ered). In terms of format, discussions of each subperiod begin with an extended
discussion of broader developments in the international system, in the interna-
tional labor movement, and in the three Western European cases, which is then
followed by a more extensive and detailed discussion of counterpart phenomena in
Japan. From a conventional standpoint the book may include too many pages dis-
cussing other countries or, alternatively, may give too much weight to a single
country. When read, however, with the proper intent in mind, the logic of this
“imbalance” should be apparent.

A third proviso is that this is not labor history in the sense of a history of the
working class or a history of industrial relations. The term “labor movement” is
used here in the wider, European—rather than the narrower, American—sense. It
is this that Adolf Sturmthal referred to when he stated, “A multitude of organiza-
tions—varying from country to country and from one historical period to another
—come under that common heading. These are unions, of course, but also polit-
cial parties (which can be associated in a variety of ways with trade unions), work-
ners’ educational organizations, cooperatives (mainly consumer cooperatives),
mutual insurance organizations, workers’ sports organizations, and so on, all the
way to workers’ stamp collectors groups.”4 This study concentrates on the first
two—trade unions and political parties—among these various interrelated organ-
izations, along with the councils and other associations they spawned.

Fourth, my treatment focuses also on the thought and strategy of labor move-
ment leaders. Until about a quarter century ago, labor historians generally dealt
with matters like the ideological currents, the ways in which labor movements
were organized nationally, and how these ideologies and organizational arrange-
ments mediated relationships between and among the working class and capital
and the state. More recent work has consciously attempted to broaden the focus
in an effort to better grasp working-class history in its full panoply. This has led
to an eclectic profusion of studies on a variety of topics, including industrial rela-
tions inside factories, working-class culture, role of gender in working-class lives,
consequences of inter-ethnic relations on work life, and local-level union and
working-class community organizations, to name just a few. In this sense, my
book may be old-fashioned, but through this kind of elite- and thought-focused
analysis, I hope to demonstrate the key elements of the globality of the period’s
labor history.

Finally, the book was written bearing in mind such dictums of Charles Tilly’s
as that “we should build concrete and historical analyses of the big structures and
large processes that shape our era,” and that our “analyses should be concrete in
having real times, places, and people as their referents and in testing the coherence of the postulated structures and processes against the experiences of real times, places, and people.” Tilly maintained in particular that these “should be historical in limiting their scope to an era bounded by the playing out of certain well-defined processes.” We need to recognize, he adds, that “when things happen within a sequence affects how they happen.”5 Not intending a political-science-style universal model of global-local interaction in labor movements, applicable across time and space, my working premise is that these global forces—namely, the spread of particular types of working-class ideologies and particular alignments in the international-state system—were, if not unique, certainly distinctive during the period and were not present beyond it.