

The State of the Union Movement in Japan: Is There a Future?

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1.0 Declining Unionization Rates and the Japanese Labor Movement Within the Global Setting

With the “triumph of capitalism” in the 1990s a new competitive dynamic will fundamentally change the way work is organized (confer with Mouer and Sugimoto 1995: 255-257). After remaining at about 35 percent for the twenty years prior to 1975, the unionization rate in Japan has dropped significantly over the past twenty years (see Table 1). A recent report of the ILO (Anonymous 1997f) suggests this is owing to a wide range of factors, many of which are specific to certain countries: changes to the legal framework for unionism, the introduction of new technologies, changes to the labor force participation rate of particular groups, the increase of the peripheral labor market, downsizing, and growing unemployment.

Those writing about industrial relations and work organisation in Japan have emphasized the importance of allegedly unique features: long-term employment, seniority wages and the enterprise union. Although the research of Koike (1989) and others has helped to put the first two into comparative perspective, showing that neither is peculiar to Japan, only a few writers such as Kawanishi (1989 and 1992) have examined in detail the way the enterprise union functions. One reason for this neglect may have been the complexity of Japan's labor movement with competing national centres and ideologies. Another would be the closed nature of Japan's large firms.

With parts of the Japanese model of HRM now obviously present in the new capitalism, it is pertinent to focus on the enterprise union and to ask how it is responding to the new logic of capital which seems common to most advanced economies. How well is it coping with the on-going process of industrial restructuring with the growing importance of tertiary industry and the “hollowing out” of manufacturing? With the globalisation of the economy, the extension of capitalist arrangements, and the injection of market principles into economic policy, many states have committed themselves to the reorganization of work so as to enhance each firm's competitiveness. At the level of the firm heightened competition has placed an increased value on the ability of firms to relocate employees and to adjust overall employment levels quickly as the short-term financial fortunes of the firm fluctuate.

There are also concerns with social justice and transparency. Mechanisms such as the

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“convoy system” (the collective bailing out of firms having difficulty in a particular industry by other firms in the industry and in *keiretsu* groupings) and the involvement of *sokaiya* (racketeers to control annual meetings of stockholders) have helped to offset various noncompetitive corporate practices. The result has been a complex maze of “hidden subsidies” which have covered up unprofitable initiatives taken by management and even the channelling of ‘slush funds’ to cronies by a small number of corrupt managers. The surpluses required for these practices have ultimately been generated through some form of social dumping, often made possible by the careful orchestration of tightly knit *keiretsu* arrangements and by tacit understandings among the those who form the business-bureaucratic-political community. Critical to this shifting of resources has been the segmented labor market and the inequalities between a privileged aristocracy of labor and a large peripheral labor force.

It has long been assumed that the enterprise union and the consultative practices associated with it have facilitated the attainment of high levels of productivity with social justice.

The OECD (1977), Taira (1977) and Yakabe (1977) have praised Japan’s internal labor markets as a source of the highly motivated and committed labor force which has forged Japan’s rapid economic growth.

Such writers often conclude that the enterprise union has facilitated the smooth operation of such markets. They emphasize the ability of the enterprise union to enhance flexibility through its generally cooperative approach to working with management within a framework which is commonly seen as providing a humanistic context for human resource management.

Given this positive assessment, however, the drop in Japan’s unionization rate is ironic. If the enterprise union has indeed been an important force facilitating Japan’s extremely flexible response to the successive oil shocks of the mid-1970s, as many allege, then one must explain why the enterprise-based union movement in Japan has weakened over time rather than strengthening. Even accepting the common claim that the enterprise union is more suited to the functioning of large firms with vertically structured internal labor markets, one would expect unionization rates to rise in the large-scale sector. They have not. Nor has the slight movement of the labor force from small-scale to large-scale enterprises been accompanied by rising unionization rates. Moreover, in 1991 nearly seventy percent of the labor force in the private sector was still employed in firms with fewer than 100 employees (Rodo Daijin Kanbo Seisaku Chosa Bu 1996: 52).

In considering the decline of the union movement in Japan, one must consider at least three elements. One is economic restructuring. While the shift from secondary to tertiary industry has been noted, the more telling variable has been the push within enterprises to achieve competitive best practice on a global level. The second element is the shift of power from unions to management. The third element has been the distancing of unions from their members and from others in the labor force. Each of these elements is considered briefly below.

2.0 Structural Change and the Social Framework

It has been argued that the high-tech and high-service industries impose flexibility requirements on employees which make those industries difficult to organise. However, the research of Freeman and Rebeck (1989) and Ito and Takada (1990), which Tsuru (1994) also accepts, suggests that only a fourth to a fifth of the drop in unionization rates in Japan might be

due to employment shifts between industries. The data presented by Fujimura (1997: 300-303) clearly show that the drop in unionization rates has occurred across nearly all industries and in large firms as well as small firms.

In shifting away from the structural change argument, however, the impact of technology should not be overlooked. Clearly, its impact has been more in terms of work practices (e.g., labor process) in all industries and at all levels within already established firms. They seem to be resulting in a further segmentation of the labor market, and are making it more difficult for the enterprise union to define a role for itself which will attract the support of a wide range of employees within the same firm. In many established firms the push to be more competitive has occurred primarily in terms the growing peripheralization of the labor force. In 1996 women employed part-time accounted for 41.8 percent of all women employed in the labor force. Overall, 23.3 percent of Japan's labor force was hired on a non-regular basis. Moreover, while the unionization rate is high among regular employees in Japan's largest enterprises (i.e., in those with more than 1000 employees), about sixty percent of Japan's employees are employed in firms with less than 100 employees. However, the enterprise union has continued to define itself primarily in terms of the core labor force.

Japan has responded in two ways to make the economy more competitive. The first is the liberalization of the economy. The second response to competitive pressure has been to "liberalize society". On the one hand, employers have wanted to isolate the social relationships relevant to their firms' operations from the general process of economic liberalization. For example, Nikkeiren (The Japan Federation of Employers' Associations) (1997) has argued that it was important to the motivation and cohesion of their employees that Japanese firms continue practices which embraced traditional work norms, maintain traditional work force discipline, and ensure that a certain egalitarian outcome was achieved. The reality is, however, that changes are being sought in the social relations which characterise work. In concrete terms the average Japanese worker will be affected by proposed revisions to the Labor Standards Law.

One revision is to give management more freedom to regulate work loads by easing constraints on overtime. Present regulations allow unions and management to agree to up to 15 hours of overtime per week, 45 hours per month, and 360 hours per year. While management wants to remove the upper limits, labor wants to retain them. The longer hours will make it even more difficult for women to compete with men on an equal footing in terms of promotion and opportunities for more income. Firms already keep men at work so long that they cannot share in domestic duties to the extent necessary for wives and mothers to enter the labor force on a regular basis (as core employees).

A second revision aims to enhance the discretion of management to redefine work loads for its white-collar employees in terms of output rather than the time actually required to get the output. The proposed revisions will expand the number of jobs for which management can fairly unilaterally decide on what is a reasonable amount of time (which can then be translated into a "reasonable fixed wage") to complete a particular design. The shift from paying for labor input to paying for labor (product) output means that the employer is no longer assuming responsibility for assessing the value of labor *per se* or for enhancing its value as human capital. By purchasing the output rather than the labor, it is converting each employee into an independent subcontractor. This segmentation of the core labor force corrects a certain

inequality while creating another which divides the membership of the enterprise union. As Araki (1996) explains, the current system tied to hours of input tended to subsidize slower or less productive employees at the expense of more able workers. Because the less able employee will need overtime to complete his work, he attracts overtime pay beyond the normal salary he would otherwise receive for working more productively and completing his work within the normal hours.

A related matter affecting both blue- and white-collar core employees at Japan's large firms is the period of the labor contract. The law currently allows management to conclude labor contracts for up to one year for employees in a limited number of occupations. Management wants to be able to conclude longer contracts of 3-5 years with a much broader cross-section of its white-collar labor force. Changes to the law will allow management to further reduce its unionized core labor force by taking professionals, other highly skilled employees and technical workers out of the category of core employees and placing them on 3-5 year contracts (Nikkeiren 1995: 32). Such employees will think carefully about how union affiliation affects their chances for contract extensions with the same firm or for reemployment.

While these examples represent management initiatives to allow the more flexible utilization of its labor force, they also respond to globally generated pressure to be more competitive (Nakagawa 1996) and underline the ambivalence of many skilled white-collar workers toward schemes which subsidize less productive elements (i.e., fellow employees) in the economy. Enterprise unions will have to rethink whether they can continue to limit their membership to permanent core employees whose numbers are declining.

At the level of the enterprise narrowing the core labor force contracts the traditional base for enterprise unionism. This will produce a smaller union movement committed to Japan's aristocracy of labor--the small elite of male employees in the large firms. That aristocracy has in many cases supplied the leadership not only for many of Japan's enterprise unions but also for many of its industrial federations, and could perhaps be cited for highjacking the labor movement to serve its own interests. It will also expose divisions in what was previously a fairly cohesive core of blue- and white-collar employees. Beyond the enterprise employees in the more competitive firms and industries have increasingly come to see their economic interests compromised *vis-a-vis* those in the less successful sectors. This undermines notions of labor solidarity nationally. As Kawanishi (1992: 35) and others have documented, the enterprise unions came to be led by the better educated workers (many of whom were already in managerial track positions). Over time such unionists have been happy for the wage system to move from a labor-input to a product-output basis, which better rewards them for their higher productivity by widening intra-firm wage differentials--in the first instance between the unionists (as core employees) and the peripheral labor force, and then increasingly among the more productive unionists and the less productive ones. The ultimate outcome has been an enterprise union which has committed itself to a philosophy and an ideology which put productivity first. Herein lies one basis for apathy among the second-tier of the permanent labor force whose interests have been less well looked after by the enterprise union.

When appraising the prospects for the enterprise union and the union movement in Japan as a whole, some attention must be paid to the egalitarian heritage left by the militant industrial unions which dominated Japan's industrial relations in the late 1940s and early 1950s: (i) the

levelling of invidious status distinctions which tended to divide into castes the manual workers and the office staff and (ii) the injection of livelihood guarantees into the wage system. The enterprise union was a response to what many skilled employees saw as excessive egalitarianism once the material standard of living had risen to above subsistence levels. The push for productivity shifted attention from the relative size of income shares to their absolute size. The important thing was simply that the material standard of living was improving at least some for everyone. To the extent (i) that the driving force behind Japan's ever expanding economy was the large unionized firm and its core labor force and (ii) that consumerism (the desire for a higher material standard of living) came to be the paramount value for most workers, the enterprise union made sense. There was a kind of social contract.

However, the validity of that social contract has come to be questioned. Somehow, high monetary incomes and more material consumption had not been transformed into a commensurately high standard of living. The high cost of living and the absence of safety nets bolstered the sense of economic insecurity and fuelled their need to work even more competitively. The conditions for worker solidarity have changed; unless the union can respond to the needs of both the core and the non-core labor force, its unionization rates will continue to decline. At the same time, with a smaller elite among its ranks there may be an opportunity for the union movement to "spread its wings" and recruit members from among those traditionally in the peripheral labor force and from among core employees who will in the future no longer be part of the core. However, the ever-present linkage between wage levels, job security and competitiveness reflect an overall weakness in the position of labor within the internal labor market. That weakness will continue to undermine the ability of the enterprise union to unify its membership.

3.0 Fluctuations in the Political Influence of the Union Movement

The emphasis on cooperative industrial relations has shifted attention from Japan's history of pitched industrial conflict at the national, industrial and enterprise levels during the postwar period. That history includes the large number of disputes in the 1940s and 1950s, the widespread conflict between number-one and number-two unions at the enterprise level from the 1950s through the 1970s, the ideological divisions in the Diet and elsewhere in the political arena, the successive "red purges", the refusal of the Japanese Ministry of Education to interact with the Japan Teachers' Union, and many of the Spring Wage Offensives.

The shift in power from Japan's industrially based unions to enterprise unions was the result of a long power struggle over some thirty years. The struggle had several dimensions. Most obvious was the campaign of management and successive conservative governments against Japan's strong industrial unions. On another level, however, the distinction between the core (unionized) and the non-core or peripheral (non-unionized) labor force was accentuated. On yet another level elitist white-collar permanent (unionized) employees in Japan's large firms lined up against the less educated and less skilled permanent (unionized) employees in their own union (i.e., firm).

Attempts to connect the enterprise union to the internal labor market require a further comment. Many of the "internal transfers" of employees in Japan's large firms have not been internal at all; they have been out placements to subcontracting and other related firms.

Accordingly, if there is merit to the argument linking union functioning to labor markets, the logic might very well be for Japan to have *keiretsu* unions rather than enterprise unions. While this would present unions with the challenge of having to incorporate a membership with even more heterogeneous interests, it would also provide a larger critical mass and offset the ability of management to weaken the union by shifting its workforce to external operations (e.g., subcontractors or other related firms). By highlighting the power relations among groups of employees in the larger "internal" labor market, one draws attention to the dilemma of the enterprise union. However it is organized, the future of the enterprise union will depend upon the position it takes on inequalities which now differentiate a labor force that no longer sees itself as a single coherent social class *vis-a-vis* management. Although many enterprise unions had distanced themselves from their traditional dependence on simplistic Marxist concepts and the associated symbols (Fujimura 1998: 7), they have not yet found another unifying concept which is more convincing.

In looking for a common denominator in its membership, the enterprise union has sought to maintain its function as a protective organization. However, despite the rhetoric about cooperative arrangements, the enterprise union has not been able to influence significantly a number of areas which affect working conditions such as the speed of conveyor belts, the rotation of employees to jobs or shifts, and the promotion process. This contrasts, for example, with many of the workers' councils (*Betriebsrat*) in Germany, or the strong protection given by many American unions to seniority rights. Here, as Fujimura (1998) suggests, one must be careful not to underestimate the influence of the enterprise union. The enterprise union has been instrumental in removing the CEO in several large Japanese firms in the early 1990s: the Mainichi Newspaper Corporation, the Tokyo Broadcasting Corporation, Yamaha Corporation, Toyo Keizai Shimposha (a leading publisher of business-related books and reference works), and Tokyo Shoko Research. In each case employees were expressing their dissatisfaction with excessively authoritarian decision-making, management's lack of vision and poor performance in financial terms. Benson's surveys (1995) of small and medium-sized firms also indicates that the enterprise union has made a difference. Further, 81 percent of unionized firms have arrangements for joint labor-management consultations, compared with only 32 percent of non-unionised firms (Rodo Daijin Kanbo Seisaku Chosa Bu 1996: 232).

The fortunes of the union movement can also be viewed in terms of the average size of its smallest organizations independent unions (column E in Table 1). This yields a different approach to periodization than does simple reference to the unionization rate *per se* (as is used by Fujimura 1997: 298-299). During the period of strong industrial unions, the average size remained at about 190 persons, dropping to about 185 with the first serious push for enterprise unions in the mid-1950s, but coming back to 190 persons as union membership and the strong industrial unions affiliated with Sohyo were strengthened and legitimated by the vocabulary of the socialistically inclined free speech movements and anti-Vietnam War movements around the world in the 1960s. During the 1970s, however, conservative enterprise unionism comes to the fore in Japan, and average size steadily drops to around 165 from the early 1980s during the period of adulation for Japanese-style management and the enterprise union until the bubble economy bursts. Although unionisation rates continue to fall, and a growing number of employees come to feel that they have been left behind by the bubble years, the average size of

Japan's labor unions increases from the low of about 165 members in 1986 to 176 by 1996. This reflects the concerted efforts from the late 1980s to reunify the labor movement.

These small shifts in average size (in the range of 5-10 percent) are fairly significant in terms of the financial viability of labor organizations and the leadership which they can support--especially at the industry and national levels. One of the shortcomings of the enterprise union identified some time ago by Shirai (1983: 141) is its weak financial base. Based on an international comparison, Naito (1983: 146-147) argued that such weakness was reflected in the very high membership subscription fees paid by unionists in Japan, a factor which connects to some of the cynicism Japanese enterprise unionists feel toward their union. In recent years a number of unions are having had to draw on reserves from their strike funds to finance day-to-day operations. The decision of large industrial federations such as Tekko Roren (The Japanese Federation of Steel Workers' Unions) and Denki Rengo (The Japanese Electrical, Electronic and Information Unions) to move from annual to biennial wage negotiations is an attempt to rationalize activities by preparing better for fewer bargaining sessions.

At the industrial level, few leaders are financially independent enough to pursue issues of social justice. Most have come up from an affiliated enterprise union, and serve at the industry level because of the support of their home union (and firm). Because most union leaders have to retain their employment status with their original employer in order to qualify for health and retirement benefits, it is important for them that they be able to return to their firm upon completing their stint in the union movement. To have a place to return to upon serving out their terms for the industrial federation and to be able to draw at least some part of their salary from the firm during their involvement in union affairs, the support of their employer is also often necessary. Accordingly, there are few career union leaders at the industrial level who fully commit themselves to the union movement as an egalitarian movement with a major concern for the more disadvantaged members of the labor force. Although there is, as Iwasaki (1993) notes, variation in this regard and some industrial federations do hire professional staff, many who have come up "through the ranks" from enterprise unions tend to be reigned in by the forces back home.

Rengo is now attaching importance to union organization at the industrial level and recognizes the need for a critical mass of committed leaders who are financially independent. Although there is a firmly entrenched commitment to the idea that strong enterprise unions are the best guarantee that democracy will be maintained in the movement and the move to create an independent professional leadership will take time, steps are being taken to train and develop such a leadership.

Finally, in assessing the union movement in Japan at the end of the 1990s, some attention must be given to its ability to effect change in the political arena where economic and social policy are generated. A major goal in forming Rengo was to pool resources and end the forty years of continuous conservative government. Rengo struggled with a number of visions for achieving that aim before deciding to rebuild the Social Democratic Party of Japan (SDPJ) and the Democratic Socialist Party (DSP). Following their poor performance in the July 1992 Upper House elections, however, the possibility of creating an entirely new political party was briefly entertained. Then, as Nitta (1993) notes, the Rengo leadership was instrumental in achieving a seven-party ruling coalition following the July 1993 Lower House elections. Nitta attaches

importance to (i) the decisive trend away from single-party support at the level of the industrial unions, (ii) Rengo's contribution in controlling factional brawling within the SDPJ, and (iii) its calming influence on the DSP which had considered joining the conservatives to form a coalition.

Important also was the numerical possibility of forming a coalition without the Japan Communist Party which had won only 15 of the 511 seats (albeit attracting 7.7 percent of the popular vote). Most significant here was been the union movement's conscious decision to focus on realistic democratic socialist policies to advance the welfare of the average employee and to move away from supporting left-wing politicians and their causes.

Rengo's political involvement went considerably beyond electioneering and behind-the-scenes manoeuvring to bring the coalition into being. Shinoda (1995) argues that Rengo's combined resources allowed it to develop much more sophisticated policy briefs for a wider range of issues than had previously been possible. This allowed it to have a much greater input into the policy deliberations at the bureaucratic level and to public opinion—especially in the area of social welfare. While Rengo has moved away from the left-wing politicians, the October 1996 Lower House election resulted in further erosion of the support for middle-of-the-road democratic socialism, and the main conservative party was returned to government. For Rengo the election underlined the growing apathy, cynicism and alienation among certain segments of the labor force which were finding it difficult to raise their standard of living any further.

4.0 The Inability of the Enterprise Union to Meet the Growing Diversity of Needs Among Its Members

The productivity first orientation of the enterprise union movement has tended to focus attention on wages and the material standard of living. The rallying cry of the 1960s was "Wages on Par with Those in Europe!" When hours of work were put on the agenda by the national centers in the mid-1970s, the focus was on reducing only the standard work week so that more overtime pay could be earned. From 1975 to 1990 hours of work did not shrink.

As workers acquired basic consumer durables in the early 1960s and then colour televisions, coolers and cars in the early 1970s, mass consumption fostered a belief that any Japanese could join the middle class simply by working hard. However, from the 1970s there is a growing realization that income differentials were widening with the mass consumer market becoming increasingly segmented. A standard of living defined largely in terms of consumer durables gave way to one built around less tangible status symbols and style in the late 1980s.

The growing sense of affluence has been accompanied by the disinterest in political activity which seems to characterise consumerized cultures and working class consciousness in many advanced societies. The income benefits of union membership have come to be taken for granted.

A related perception is that the enterprise union could not provide good employment guarantees. In the name of improved productivity enterprise unions have often assisted management to implement early retirement schemes and other means of retrenching employees.

Once the bubble broke in the early 1990s and some of Japan's financial institutions became a bit shaky, firms began to downsize and the enterprise union appeared to be unable or unwilling to provide much backup for many of its members whose jobs come under threat. The laying off of females, the difficulties of new graduates in finding suitable employment, and the transfer of males in the semi-core labor force downward to smaller subcontracting firms were not

conspicuous until the mid-1990s when an increasing number of middle managers found themselves unemployed and the sense of job insecurity began to receive some prominence in the media.

A further concern among employees has been the excessive regulation of their lives. Important is their inability to control their work schedules or their long hours of work. Already in the heady days of the late 1980s *karoshi* (death from overwork) began to receive attention, and workers began to ask why their hours of work needed to be longer than their counterparts elsewhere in the industrialised world. The media has also focused national attention on the absentee father and the needs of the family. It is not surprising then that the move toward more flexibility in determining work schedules has been welcomed by many employees (Sato 1997). It is also likely that the favourable response of employees to the new approach to management by results reported by Morishima (1997) may also link to a sense that employees are able to make a more open choice between (i) higher income with longer hours of work and (ii) shorter hours of work and fuller participation in family life. Along with embourgeoisement came globalization and the ideologies which accompany it. Increasingly intellectual and ideological developments abroad will impact on Japan as its society becomes increasingly borderless. To assess the impact of these changes on perceptions about the utility of union membership among employees, careful study of the changing state of working class/middle class culture is needed.

5.0 Toward New Forms for Unionism in Japan

Most discussions of industrial relations and work in Japan tend to deal mainly or even exclusively with the existence of enterprise unions (*kigyobetsu kumiai*), and then often only with what is called the "company union" (*goyo kumiai*). While some industrial unions have existed from before the war and others were formed during the late 1940s, they were joined by the enterprise unions in the 1950s and 1960s. However, the union movement was driven by full-time male employees in Japan's large firms. Departing from that pattern, many new form unions (*shingata rodo kumiai*) have emerged over the past twenty years. In recent years Rengo and the other national centers have promoted such unionism in an effort to stem the downward slide in unionization rates. Three types are discussed below.

5.1 Regional Unions

As the percentage of core employees in the labor force has declined, the number of *paatotaima* (parttimers), *arubaito* (student casuals), *freetaa* (long-term casuals), *haken rodosha* (dispatched workers) and others hired on an irregular basis has increased. One approach to organising these kinds of workers without a stable base in a single firm has been to establish regional unions (*chiiki yunion*). Rengo's national executive committed Rengo to a membership drive in June 1996. That September Rengo decided to increase its membership by 1.1 million over three years. Part-timers and employees in small and medium-sized firms in medical and welfare services, financial services, construction, printing and airport services were targeted.

By June 1997, however, Rengo had managed to recruit only about 150,000 new members in 10-20 prefectures. The union movement as a whole had not been involved in a membership drive for some time and was not well prepared for the rigours of such a campaign. Organizers had difficulty explaining the benefits of union membership to parttimers and to the dispatched workers who had seen the movement as serving primarily the interests of Japan's core labor

force. To counter the increase in unemployment and job insecurity, Rengo decided to fund its organization efforts more adequately and to provide assistance to workers looking for work by establishing a kind of job exchange. It also began to train organizers.

5.2 Unions for Managers

Another kind of union has been formed by managerial staff. Under trade union legislation in Japan supervisors and other lower level managers (*kanrishoku*) are placed outside the union's domain. A growing number of those in this stratum of management have been required to accept wage cuts, redeployment, or even "voluntary" retirement as restructuring occurs. Because voluntary retirement is a better outcome for management than having to fire employees, lower level managers have had to put up with considerable psychological pressure and various forms of intimidation designed to "push" them out. Without a union, middle-age managers have become easy targets in many firms.

In December 1993 the Tokyo Union of Managers (Tokyo Kanrishoku Yunion) was formed by 15 individuals. It had 700 members in mid-1997 (Anonymous 1996a). Branches were later formed in Nagoya (1995) and in the Osaka-Kobe-Kyoto area (Anonymous 1997b). With more branches being established plans are to form a national center to coordinate their activities. Their most important activity has been the "labor hot line" for those who feel their rights are being abused by management (Shidara, Ito and Kawahito 1997). The involvement of the Nihon Rodo Bengo Dan (Labor Lawyers Association of Japan)—an association of lawyers willing to give their time for the union movement—has been critical. During ten days in 1995, 1700 calls were received from persons wishing advice about their rights at work. Two thirds of the calls concerned the deterioration of working conditions owing to restructuring; the other third concerned work place intimidation designed to induce resignation or the acceptance of a major relocation within the firm. Women and young workers seeking advice have increased over time.

Half of the callers were managers; the other half were ordinary employees. The callers came from large and small firms alike. It has become clear that there is a need for independent job advice by those in career track employment but not yet into the lower ranks of management. The union now plans to broaden its activities and to become a general union seeking to free individual employees from the social confines of the firm. Critical of the enterprise union's excessive concern with cooperation and with achieving the goals of management for the benefit of a small group of employees, it is focused on looking after the rights of members who are less fortunately positioned in a particular work environment.

Rengo's think tank recently surveyed 2000 office staff (of whom about fifty percent were department and division heads). It indicated that with the introduction of the annual salary system, more persons were having to negotiate individually their working conditions with management. Many felt that they could not depend on the enterprise union to assist in those negotiations. This was particularly true in the case of managers who had been seconded to other firms. With the line between employees and the lower level of management becoming blurred, the usefulness of having a more broadly based union was underlined along with the need to revise the trade union law which currently places lower level managers outside the domain of the labor union (Anonymous 1997d and 1997e).

5.3 Unions for Women

Another group of employees not well served by the male-dominated enterprise union's

focus on core employees is women. In February 1995 six women formed the Tokyo Women's Union (Josei Union Tokyo). The membership grew to 250 by May 1997. Its members are aged from 20 to 70. They come to the office to chat and to other women (members and non-members alike). They lend support to each other. In its first two years, the union advised about 1000 women on retrenchment, forced retirement owing to maternity and childcare commitments, sexual harassment and other forms of intimidation, shortfalls in pay and pay cuts, and difficulties in taking annual leave (Shidara, Ito and Kawahito 1997).

The first year of participation in the women's union was an eye-opener for many of the union's members. For the first time they studied Japan's labor laws and engaged in some form of bargaining with management. They also received advice from the Labor Lawyer's Association of Japan and from various women lawyers. Commenting on the role of such unions, Ms. Nakano Mami, a lawyer assisting the union, notes that male-female wage differentials have widened rather than narrowed over the ten years since the implementation of Japan's employment equal opportunity law in April 1986 (Anonymous 1996b). In 1994 twelve women in Osaka formed their own union and obtained a court ruling that male-female wage discrimination was unlawful (Anonymous 1994b). Upset that their own union would not concern itself with the dismissal of non-regular [women] workers who had been given employment status as "semi-employees", in the same year five women working in the Osaka office of Japan Railways Shikoku formed their own minority enterprise union and obtained a court ruling which overturned the dismissals (Anonymous 1994a).

6.0 Toward a More Ambivalent Appraisal of Enterprise Unionism

The evaluation of the enterprise union has evolved through several periods. From the late 1940s to the Miike Strike in 1960, the concern was primarily with the democratization and modernization of Japanese society and the need to establish an independent consciousness in workers (Hidaka 1974: 21-22). Such goals were conceived primarily in American and West European terms (Ariga 1967: 119), and a number of "feudalistic" aspects were identified by Okochi (1952: 9; 1964: 17-18), Sumiya (1950) and others who pointed to the extent that agricultural workers who worked seasonally in urban industries were unable to articulate their interests *vis-a-vis* management. They emphasized the excessive role played by client-patron relations in the labor market, the failure of the union movement to achieve true parity with management, and the segmentation of the labor force.

From the early 1960s to the mid-1970s familialistic relations at work came to be seen as integral to the maintenance of social cohesion and high levels of motivation and commitment within the firm. This shift was reinforced by the growing ideological concern with economic development. Matsushima (1962) concluded that the Japanese approach to employee relations had injected certainty into the hand-to-mouth existence of many workers. Hazama (1964) argued that the ability of a managers to transplant the vocabulary of the family to the firm produced high levels of motivation and commitment among Japanese workers.

This view was given currency in the West by two OECD reports (1972 and 1977) and by Dore (1974). While the first assigned great significance to life-time employment, the seniority wage system and the enterprise union, the second emphasized the importance of the Japanese value system in underpinning such practices. With Japan continuing to generate large current

account surpluses following the oil shocks, a succession of books presented Japan's employment practices as a model for the other advanced economies (Vogel 1979, Reischauer 1979; Ouchi 1981; and Athos and Pascalli 1982). A number of writers highlighted the dynamics of the internal labor market in Japan's large firms (Shirai 1980; Koike 1977; and Koshiro 1982 and 1994). Tsuda (1980 and 1981) emphasized the superiority of Japanese-style management as a mechanism which had promoted both efficiency and democratic involvement. In this literature the enterprise union was described as a support for the internal labor market which was seen as being linked to the development of the high levels of skill needed in economies moving to higher levels of technological sophistication. By the late 1980s many were portraying human resource management practices in Japan as postmodern or post-Fordist (Womack *et al.* 1990; Florida and Kenny 1993; and Coriat 1991).

Many of the trade-offs built into the Japanese approach to union organization were overlooked. When the economic bubble burst, some of its demerits became more apparent. Although the material standard of living had improved considerably over the previous 40 years, it was argued that the system had still not produced a satisfactory life style for the ordinary employee and his family. Housing was still inadequate and expensive. Hours of work were seen as being excessively long and regimented. As attention shifted from lean production and product processes (e.g., in terms of zero defects, the large number of product lines, QC circles and the *kanban* system) to the state of human processes, the failure of the enterprise union to curb excessive authoritarianism at work became more apparent.

7.0 Future Directions for the Union Movement in Japan

The future of unions in Japan has by no means been cast. In some ways the competitiveness of the Japanese economy in the 1970s and 1980s tended to vindicate the enterprise union, lending it a *raison d'etre* and its proponents a false sense of security. Seen as universal best practice overseas certain aspects of 'Japanese-style management' (e.g., outsourcing, just-in-time, enterprise bargaining) have come to be widely accepted by managements abroad as part of the global drive to improve international competitiveness as Japan's major industries racked up record surpluses for Japan's balance of payments. In the 1990s, however, global changes have been accompanied by a renewed push for international competitiveness which has taken work organisation far beyond the horizons of Japanese-style management. The future of the Japanese union movement will be shaped (i) by the dynamic interaction of the megatrends associated with global capitalism and the peculiarly Japanese social milieu and ethics, (ii) by the power relationship in Japan between labor and management--both in the political/organizational strength of the union movement *vis-a-vis* management bodies and in the labor market, and (iii) by the changing consciousness of Japan's employees.

While some attention must be paid to changes in technology and to the structure of the economy, the movement of workers from one industry to another has not been a major cause of the drop in unionization rates. However, technology has had an impact across the full range of industries in terms of work ways and the nature of the labor market which is now becoming more segmented with the demand for increased flexibility. This has placed increased pressure on the enterprise union (i) to broaden its membership to incorporate many non-core employees, (ii) to examine a broader range of issues relevant to the peripheral labor force as the core labor

force becomes more diverse, and (iii) to move from the enterprise base to a *keiretsu* or other multi-firm basis for defining its membership.

The cultural/ideological shift accompanying embourgeoisement, the restratification of Japanese society, higher levels of affluence and of education are affecting (i) notions of what the good life (the desired standard or mode of living) is, especially in terms of the role of male household heads within the family, and (ii) the sense of fairness or social equity. Left-wing unionism has given way to more "mature" or "sophisticated" dialogue between labor and management. Nakamura's case study (1996) of the privatization of Nippon Telegraph and Telephone Public Corporation in 1985 provides an optimistic assessment of how such dialogue has developed out of "economic necessity". The cooperation of enterprise unions have often facilitated the successful implementation of "voluntary" retirement programs at many companies. How this will affect the awareness of the cleavages which stratify Japanese society remains to be seen.

The need to be tentative here is underlined by the complexity of political alignments at the present time. How the labor movement will ultimately align and interface with the multitude of political parties is not clear. During the 1990s unions have tended to support whoever supports labor, an approach which is unlikely to produce a cohesive political force for the union movement.

The internal dynamic of the union movement itself is between different levels of organization: the national centers, the industrial federations and the enterprise union. While all three levels function in their own right, the symbiotic interrelationships between the levels will critically determine the Japan's labor movement as a whole. National centers have the highest profile in the national political arena and will ultimately shape the images which ordinary Japanese have of unionism. The movement as a whole must eventually be seen as legitimate in philosophical or megatrend terms if ordinary employees are going to step forward to join. The industrial federation will likely continue to play a major role in setting standards and norms for working conditions. The enterprise union is likely to retain its prime interest in the implementation of work rules and in the regulation of work practices on the shop floor.

A trade-off between the concern for social justice and that for productivity occurs when progressing from the national center to the enterprise union. Despite the Union Identification Movement and its goal of broadening the base for enterprise unionism in Japan (Fujimura 1997: 305-311), it is unlikely that the tension between those two ideological concerns will be easily accommodated. Minority unions or special sector unions will continue to be driven from the center or to arise from the grassroots outside the enterprise union. The UI Movement itself comes from the top down. While some enterprise union leaders give the movement lip service, progress has been slow and the commitment of many aristocratic enterprise unions to the movement can still be questioned. If change is to come to the enterprise union, it is likely to be driven by two forces. One would be the injection of professional leadership at the enterprise level. The other is further segmentation of the core labor force.

In this regard some consideration might be given to the suggestion made earlier by Kawanishi (1992: 423-440) and Mouer (1992: xxv-xxvi) that functional specialization with competing or cooperating union movements might be a viable outcome. In the 1960s and 1970s two competing enterprise unions existed at up to twenty percent of Japan's unionized firms. One was a left-wing union concerned largely with social justice issues. The other was a

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conservative union concerned mainly with productivity issues. Each competed to keep its set of interests at the fore. While many competing unions have merged over the past twenty years, in many such cases a delicate balance has been maintained among union members who support one thrust and those who support the other.

With the world of work and Japan's internal and external labor markets changing, there is an opportunity for three types of union. One type would evolve out of the enterprise union as we know it today, draw largely from the elite of the labor force, and function as a fairly closed organization. A second type would include those currently in the permanent core labor force who have specialized skills (but who will come in the near future to be hired on medium-term contracts). This type of organization would have a strong professional orientation and perhaps be national in scope. The third type would include many of those currently in the peripheral labor force. It would be organized on an industry-wide or regional basis, and supersede the firm.

The first type would be most concerned with productivity; the third type with the social justice issues.

While reflecting cleavages in the labor market, the coexistence of the three types of union organization could well result in rising union density. Any arrangement whereby the less skilled could be represented in a collective manner would have huge implications. However, unions are meant to have political ramifications. Moreover, without new types of unions, it is likely that the trend toward greater social inequality will continue and release another set of dynamic forces. Despite prophecies about the end of ideology and the end of history, there are still a number of chapters to be written before the story of Japanese capitalism is completed.

Table 1 Long-term Trends in the Unionization Rate in Japan: 1946-1996

Year	A Number of Unions	B Number of Unionists (in 1000s)	C Number of Employees (in 10,000s)	D Unionization Rate (100B/C)	E Average Number of Members Per Union Organization (C/A)
1946	12,006	3,680		40.0	306.5
1947	23,323	5,692	1256	45.3	244.1
1948	33,926	6,677	1259	53.0	196.8
1949	34,688	6,655	1193	55.8	191.9
1950	29,144	5,774	1251	46.2	192.1
1951	27,644	5,680	1336	42.6	205.5
1952	27,851	5,720	1421	40.3	205.4
1953	30,129	5,927	1447	41.0	196.7
1954	31,456	6,076	1534	39.6	193.2
1955	32,012	6,286	1578	39.8	196.4
1956	34,073	6,463	1742	37.1	189.7
1957	36,084	6,763	1825	37.1	187.4
1958	37,823	6,984	1954	35.7	184.6
1959	39,303	7,211	2168	33.3	183.5
1960	41,561	7,662	2316	33.1	184.4

1961	45,096	8,360	2361	35.4	185.4
1962	47,812	8,971	2477	36.2	187.6
1963	49,796	9,357	2594	36.1	287.9
1964	51,457	9,800	2701	36.3	190.5
1965	52,879	10,147	2810	36.1	191.9
1966	53,983	10,404	2939	35.1	192.7
1967	55,351	10,476	2999	35.2	189.3
1968	56,535	10,863	3159	34.4	192.1
1969	58,812	11,249	3196	35.2	191.3
1970	60,954	11,605	3277	35.4	190.4
1971	62,428	11,798	3388	34.8	189.0
1972	63,718	11,889	3469	34.3	186.6
1973	66,448	12,098	3659	33.1	182.1
1974	67,829	12,464	3676	33.9	183.8
1975	69,333	12,590	3662	34.4	181.6
1976	70,039	12,509	3710	33.7	178.6
1977	70,625	12,437	3746	33.2	176.1
1978	70,868	12,383	3796	32.6	174.7
1979	71,780	12,309	3899	31.6	171.5
1980	72,693	12,369	4012	30.8	170.2
1981	73,694	12,471	4055	30.8	169.2
1982	74,091	12,526	4102	30.5	169.1
1983	74,486	12,520	4209	29.7	168.1
1984	74,579	12,464	4282	29.1	167.1
1985	74,499	12,418	4301	28.9	166.7
1986	74,183	12,343	4383	28.2	166.4
1987	73,138	12,272	4448	27.6	167.8
1988	72,792	12,227	4565	26.8	168.0
1989	72,605	12,227	4721	25.9	168.4
1990	72,202	12,264	4875	25.2	169.9
1991	71,985	12,397	5062	24.2	172.2
1992	71,881	12,541	5139	24.4	174.5
1993	71,501	12,663	5233	24.2	177.1
1994	71,674	12,698	5279	24.1	177.2
1995	70,839	12,613	5309	23.8	178.1
1996	70,699	12,451	5367	23.2	176.1

Note: The figures in Column A represent the number of independent union organizations (including the federations and all of their subordinates). Accordingly, at a firm with four enterprise unions and one company federation to which they all employees belong four unions would be counted. However, the figures in column B include all members in the four enterprise unions plus the officials in the federation, as well as officials in the industrial federations, other confederations and the national centers.

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