

# A New Force in Japanese Organized Labor

**Interview with  
Toshifumi Tateyama,  
chairman of JPTUC  
by Yuji Koido**

Toshifumi Tateyama, chairman of the Japanese Private Sector Trade Union Council (JPTUC), is at the very top of the Japanese labor movement, both in theory and in practice. Leadership of the Japanese labor movement is shifting from the public-sector unions which support the Japan Socialist Party to the apolitical JPTUC. Bringing together a diverse collection of private-sector unions, the JPTUC has approximately five million members and can be expected to play an increasingly important role both within Japan and internationally.

**Question:** *Where is the Japanese labor movement headed today, and where do you see the JPTUC within this?*

**TATEYAMA:** The Japanese labor movement has had strong socialist leanings, and it was highly ideological even before the war. There was an element of class warfare that is inappropriate to today's situation. With the economy shifting from a period of rapid growth to an era of slower growth, labor can no longer simply demand higher wages. Labor's priorities should be on improved working conditions and sounder labor policy. These demands have to be made in line with national and international economic trends, and they should be demands that the general public can understand and support. If labor is to be able to stand up to management with convincing demands, unions must come together to act in concert. We get nowhere by always being divided against each other. The consolidation of the private labor unions into the JPTUC was a first step toward this unity.

We now have approximately five million members, and the fact that we have succeeded in combining all of these people into a single organization is historically a major achievement.

**Q:** *The JPTUC has very quickly become the central focus of Japanese labor. What are the future prospects for total unification of Japanese labor, including the public-sector unions?*

**TATEYAMA:** Japan's private sector labor unions have also been a very diverse lot, but now we have combined forces in the JPTUC and are working to create a unified policy front on taxes, pensions, job security, and other issues. There is still some disagreement on energy policy and government restructuring, but I believe that the experience we are gaining and the agreements we are reaching will pave the way for public and private sector unification. I realize that it will be very difficult to get those few holdout unions that are opposed to the JPTUC idea to join, but it will



JPTUC Chairman Toshifumi Tateyama advocates private and public sector unity.

*Yuji Koido is an editorial writer of the Nihon Keizai Shimbun who specializes in Japanese politics and labor affairs.*



P R O F I L E  
be impossible to protect the working person's interests in today's difficult environment unless we create a truly unified organization able to wield the full might of the labor movement.

**Q:** *With the current trade friction, there has been considerable international criticism of Japanese working conditions and labor unions. How are you responding to this criticism?*

**TATEYAMA:** The JPTUC intends to strengthen its ties with the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions and its many member unions throughout the Free World. We are also making a special effort to exchange opinions with labor unions in other countries. At the various international conferences of labor union leaders, which included representatives from the developing countries, we agreed that retrenchment and protectionism are no answer to the unemployment problem. Protectionism can only serve to intensify the recession and aggravate unemployment.

The American economic recovery is sparking a global recovery, but there are still problems. We Japanese unions have championed the cause of free trade, both in our discussions with overseas unions and in urging our own government to simplify import procedures and otherwise facilitate access to the Japanese market. We have also urged management to refrain from concentrating exports of particular products to particular markets and have stressed the need for export moderation.

Part of the trade friction stems from European and American criticism that Japanese labor practices do not conform to international labor standards. But we cannot resolve this issue without some kind of agreement among the world's labor unions. Still, I believe the fact that the world's labor unions are able to talk to each other despite our disagreements has helped to keep trade friction from getting even worse.

**Q:** *With the massive deficit in the United States' trade with Japan and the grim unemployment situation there, American unions have tended to take a very protectionist stance. How are your talks with these unions going?*

**TATEYAMA:** Japanese and American labor unions have been talking with each other for a long time. Electrical unions, for example, have a continuing dialogue going back to the television trade problems of the late 1960s. Union leaders in both countries are basically agreed on the undesirability of protectionist trade measures, and the American unions have been arguing not against imports *per se* but against disorderly and immoderate imports. Yet American unions have undeniably become more protectionist of late, and we need to have more discussions in more depth on this. This is not the sort of problem that we can solve in election-year terms. Economic friction can only be solved through thorough discussion between the two countries' governments, businesspeople, and labor leaders.

**Q:** *In addition to trade friction, there has also been considerable flak from overseas about labor conditions in Japan, including the long hours the Japanese work.*

**TATEYAMA:** There are two things that have to be considered in deciding whether or not Japanese labor conditions comply with international standards. First is the question of wages. There has



Wage levels in Japanese export industries are being brought up to international standards.

been considerable understanding of the efforts which we are making in our annual spring offensives to bring Japanese wages up to international standards. You no longer hear people say that Japan uses low-wage labor to produce cheap goods which it then dumps on the global markets. International wage disparities are being eliminated in the export industries as we all try to get level with the United States. Of course, even within this wage structure, there is criticism that Japan has a dual or even three-tier labor structure. This is something we are working on.

The second thing to consider is working hours. While there has been considerable improvement in negotiating shorter working hours, overtime and other unscheduled working time means that the average worker still works 200-400 hours more per year in Japan than in the United States or West Germany. Little wonder, then, that the other industrialized countries are calling on Japan to shorten its work week. Japanese also have less paid vacation than workers in other countries—and they do not take all that they have. We have been arguing to the government and management that there can be no fundamental solution to trade friction unless everybody cooperates to shorten the Japanese work week and make Japanese practices equivalent to those in other countries. The West German unions' call for a shorter work week is highly significant for Japanese labor as well. We need to have all of the unions in all of the industrialized countries working together to win shorter work weeks for everybody.

**Q:** *Japan is increasingly being called upon to play a role in the international community. How does this affect labor?*

**TATEYAMA:** The Japanese economy both is affected by and affects the world economy, and it is obvious that Japanese economic management has to take the international situation into consideration. This means not only working with the other industrialized countries to ease trade friction but also making a determined effort to alleviate the North-South problem. It is impossible to have stable growth for the world economy so long as the North-South problem festers unresolved. The industrialized countries need to make a major effort in economic cooperation with the developing countries, including across-the-board cooperation for these countries' development. At the meeting of trade union leaders of advanced industrial countries in May 1984 (the 7th labor

**"We get nowhere by always being divided against each other."**

**"Protectionism can only serve to intensify the recession and aggravate unemployment."**



P R O F I L E

“...that labor unions are able to talk to each other despite disagreements has helped to keep trade friction from getting even worse.”

“It is wrong to say industrial relations are good simply because there is no outward conflict between labor and management.”

summit), the Japanese delegation pointed out anew the problems inherent in the unending arms race and proposed that all countries cut their military spending by a certain percentage and devote that money to infrastructure improvements and assistance for the developing countries. I think there was general agreement among all of the industrialized countries' union leaders on this point.

**Q:** *The spread of microelectronics is creating a major upheaval in the Japanese industrial structure. We are also witnessing a rapid graying of the population. How does labor intend to meet these social changes?*

**TATEYAMA:** The Japanese demographic shift toward older age is much faster than anything that has ever happened in the other industrialized countries, and the spread of microelectronics to create new industries is also moving faster than in Europe or North America.

The graying of the population demands a response not just in employment but also in pension arrangements, medical care, housing, and all other social services. Many people have pointed out that this graying may mandate changes in the traditional Japanese industrial relations characterized by enterprise unions, seniority-based rewards, and lifetime employment (generally until retirement at age 55–60). Industrial relations in Japan will obviously have to adapt to this new situation.

At the same time, the spread of microelectronics is fundamentally altering the industrial structure, employment patterns, and labor conditions. There is a basic questioning of industrial relations as they have been constituted over the years. This is nothing less than a social revolution. Although the increasing use of microelectronics has not adversely affected employment in Japan yet, I do not see how it can avoid having some impact as innovation incorporates microelectronics through the industrial structure. We have to work out a viable response to this issue before it becomes a real problem.

**Q:** *Japanese industrial relations have been much-praised overseas, but I wonder if this praise is based upon an accurate understanding of the Japanese reality.*

**TATEYAMA:** The distinctive features of Japanese industrial relations are, as I mentioned earlier, enterprise unions, seniority-based rewards, and lifetime employment. Overseas, this tends to get simplified as labor-management co-operation, which in turn is misunderstood by some people as implying company unions subservient to management. Yet it is our contention that labor and management should be able to co-operate on an equal footing. Stable labor-management relations can only exist when the union is able to fulfill all of the functions you expect of a union and to be an equal partner in working out shared concerns with management. It is wrong to say industrial relations are good simply because there is no outward conflict between labor and management. Japanese industrial relations have both their good points and their bad points. Just as I believe overseas observers should learn from the strengths of Japanese industrial relations, I am also doing my best to rectify the shortcomings. I hope people will take a fresh look at Japanese

labor relations beyond the myths and stereotypes.

**Q:** *Given that the labor population is growing older, and that there are more and more women in the labor market, do you think Japanese companies will be able to maintain their international competitiveness?*

**TATEYAMA:** There should be equality of employment opportunities between the sexes. Saying that sexual discrimination in employment is acceptable because it is needed to maintain the company's competitive position just will not wash internationally. Industry has to be able to compete while observing the accepted standards of behavior, and employment equality is one of them. Japan cannot be an exception to the rule, and the government, business, and labor all have to work to rectify any inequities or other problems with labor conditions here before they draw a flood of criticism and complaints from overseas. Rather than waiting for the onslaught, we should take the initiative to make sure we are blameless.

**Q:** *At 2.8%, Japan has a much lower unemployment rate than the other industrialized countries. How do you explain this?*

**TATEYAMA:** The first point to remember is that there is considerable disparity in the way unemployment statistics are compiled in the different countries. Everyone is not measuring the same thing. The feeling within the Japanese labor movement, for example, is that Japanese unemployment is actually about twice what the government figures show. The main mandate of any labor union is to ensure job security. We are doing our best to make sure the lingering recession does not exact too great a toll in terms of labor sacrifices. As part of this effort, we have gotten away from simply clamoring for better terms of employment and have tried to formulate our own industrial policy and to play a constructive role participating in management for our mutual good. Unions have to be constantly on the alert to safeguard labor's interests in the government-, industry-, and business-policy contexts.

**Q:** *Finally, and given all that you have said, what is the JPTUC's stand on industrial robots and automation?*

**TATEYAMA:** There is no holding back the wave of industrial robots and microelectronic automation. Realizing the inevitability of scientific and technological innovation, the important thing is to alleviate the impact on society and labor and to make sure that this innovation works in the best interests of the entire international community. In that sense, I think we need to work out a global framework and rules for coping with the rapid pace of industrial innovation.

At the same time, since individual developments have a profound effect on the total climate of industrial relations, labor-management consultations are needed when new equipment is going to be installed. Part of these consultations, of course, should be on ways of guaranteeing job security, including retraining and possibly shorter hours. We also need greater safety-mindedness in the introduction of new equipment. If all of these things are done in all of the countries concerned, I think we will see a framework emerge for new international guidelines that will turn innovation to everyone's advantage. ●