

Labor Pains

By Takashi Iwase

May Day is supposed to be a celebration of labor solidarity, but this year's May Day festivities illustrated the present fragmented state of the Japanese labor movement. For the first time in more than six decades, separate gatherings were organized by competing factions in all 47 prefectures. This splintering reflects the restructuring of the labor force in late 1989 into three major federations: the Japanese Trade Union Confederation (JTUC-Rengo), called Rengo; the National Confederation of Trade Unions, or Zenroren; and the National Trade Union Council, known as Zenrokyo.

May Day festivities took place in 1,200 locations nationwide, including a massive gathering at Tokyo's Yoyogi Park, and were attended by almost 4 million people. After the gatherings, the participants marched to demonstrate for their causes.

Notable gathering

At its gatherings, Rengo, Japan's largest trade confederation with 8 million members and representing two-thirds of organized labor in Japan, distanced itself from both the Liberal Democratic Party and the Japan Communist Party (JCP) and reaffirmed its support for the four mainstream opposition parties: the Japan Socialist Party (JSP), Komeito, the Democratic Socialist Party and the United Social Democratic Party. At the same time, it called for greater efforts to achieve more leisure time, prosperity and social justice. The gathering at Yoyogi Park was also notable in that it was the first time the incumbent labor minister had been invited to such a labor gathering.

Separate rallies were held by the 1.4-million-strong Zenroren, which is influenced strongly by the JCP, and the 300,000-member Zenrokyo, which is dominated by the left wing of the JSP.

Despite this splintering and its indications that the recent retrenching of the movement has not brought all workers



This year's May Day parades symbolized the present fragmented state of the Japanese labor movement.

Photo: Nihon Keizai Shinbun

into the union camp, there was on the whole a very upbeat, festive mood at this year's celebrations thanks to the fact that the economy continues to be doing very well.

Until recently, the Japanese labor movement had been divided into four separate confederations: the General Council of Trade Unions of Japan, or Sohyo; the Japanese Confederation of Labor (Domei); the Federation of Independent Unions (Churitsuroren); and the National Federation of Industrial Labor Organizations (Shinsanbetsu). During the past quarter-century, many people had expressed the hope that the movement could be unified, but little progress was made.

Yet the patient efforts of unity-minded activists finally paid off and the idea of organizing a free and democratic aegis for the labor movement surfaced and, in the fall of 1987, the Japanese Private Sector Trade Union Confederation, or Zenmin-rokyo, was founded as an umbrella organization for private unions and as the predecessor to the present Rengo. This confederation consisted of 5.6 million workers. After a two-year transitional period, public-service unions joined the confederation and the name was changed to Rengo (Fig. 1).

Concerned that this new confederation signaled a shift to the right, groups such

as the Japan Federation of Medical Workers' Unions and the left wing of the Japan Teachers' Union banded together to form Zenroren. Other groups opposed to Rengo, such as the National Railway Workers' Union (NRWU) and the Federation of Tokyo Metropolitan Government Workers Unions, joined hands to create Zenrokyo.

Thus Rengo did not succeed in bringing all of Japan's unions under its wing, but it did manage to put together the largest labor federation in the history of the labor movement in Japan. Compared with labor organizations in the West, its 8 million members rank it third in size behind the 12.7 million-strong AFL-CIO (American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations) in the United States and the 9.25 million-member TUC (Trades Union Congress) in Britain. Rengo is thus an organization with some weight, and considerable attention is being paid, both at home and abroad, to its activities.

Rengo policies

What does Rengo intend to do? Some answers can be found in its 10-point platform.

1. Propose and work for the realization of policies and systems that benefit workers, including welfare policies and tax reforms, from the medium- and long-term perspective to chart a new course for Japan.
2. Strive for the comprehensive enhancement of workers' lives to attain the free time, prosperity and social justice commensurate with Japan's position as an advanced industrial country.
3. Assure employment and create vibrant industrial communities.
4. Work for the full restoration of fundamental labor rights for civil service personnel and workers at governmental enterprises.
5. Increase membership to 10 million by

連合と官公労組との統一大会 日本労働組合総連合会



Rengo, which includes public-service unions, has 8 million members, comprising two-thirds of Japan's organized labor.

- encouraging non-affiliated labor organizations to join and by promoting the unionization of part-time workers and other unorganized laborers.
- Contribute to the international labor movement through membership in the ICFTU (International Conference of Free Trade Unions).
 - Support national movements for peace, human rights and other just causes.
 - Work for the unrestricted participation of women in all fields and the realization of a society that treats men and women equally.
 - Cooperate with like-minded national organizations and political parties.
 - Ensure that there are adequate welfare and other programs for workers as Japanese society ages.

Reflecting these priorities, Rengo is committed not only to the cause of improved working conditions but to broader improvements in the Japanese economy and society and the international community.

Why has Rengo chosen this course? First, it has learned the lesson that there will be no qualitative enhancement of workers' lives unless policies and systems that benefit workers are forthrightly proposed and implemented. Historically, the Japanese labor movement has fought for economic gains such as wage increases, but despite winning wages that are among the highest in the world, Japanese workers are still strapped with long working hours, high prices and a difficult housing situation. Their actual lives are still not that prosperous.

Second, it realized that the labor movement would stagnate unless efforts were made to stem the erosion of organized labor's position by strengthening labor solidarity. The percentage of the total labor force that belongs to unions has been decreasing since 1975, and it will do Rengo no good to bring more unions together unless these unions are also strong and can attract more members.

Third, it recognized that any viable labor movement must have strong grassroots support and thus saw the need to eliminate squabbling among the top officers of rival factions. Thus by involving

ordinary workers and clearly stating its shared commitment to the principles of social democracy cherished by unions in the other industrial countries, it hoped to avoid the rigid ideologies and political divisiveness of the past.

Labor trends

Yet this explanation may be somewhat obscure without a quick review of the postwar labor movement. The legal framework for the labor movement was created in the three major postwar reforms: agrarian land reform, dissolution of the *zaibatsu*, and liberation of workers. Actual activity started with the establishment of Sohyo in July 1950.

The early 1950s were a time of confusion as the labor movement's policy directions were still very much in flux. Although Sohyo was originally set up as an umbrella organization for the democratic labor movement, its 1951 national conference rejected plans to join the West European-controlled ICFTU and it supported protracted strikes by the electrical workers and coal miners, and organized strikes to protest the passage of the 1952 Subversive Activities Prevention Law.

In essence, the labor movement was

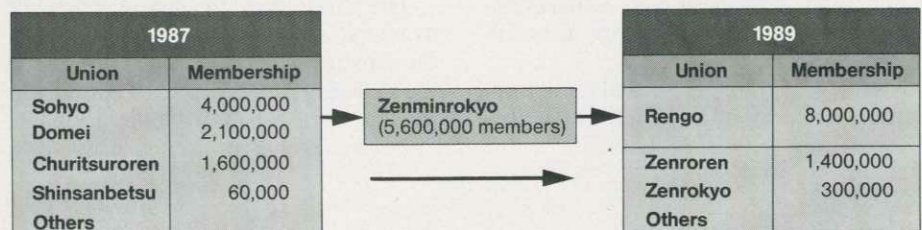
gradually tilting to the left, changing from a creature of the Occupation toward an independent confederation taking positions highly critical of American and Japanese government policy. International developments such as the outbreak of the Korean War and the heightening East-West tensions contributed to this politicization of the labor movement.

However, not all of its member unions were happy with this transformation, and a number of them, including the All Textile Workers' Federation and the All Japan Seamen's Union, decided to break from Sohyo and to found the All-Japan Trade Union Congress, which later developed into Domei.

The next period, starting in the mid-1950s and lasting for almost 15 years, was a developmental period in which individual trade unions worked together and joined forces once a year to battle it out with management for wage hikes in what was called the spring offensive (*shunto*). Initiated in 1955, the joint spring offensive has become a permanent and distinctively Japanese union stratagem.

This emphasis on the economics of the situation has been said to characterize Japanese trade unionism. The rapid economic growth of this period made for

Fig. 1 Reorganization of the Japanese Labor Movement



some very successful spring offensives, but this same growth was also behind more demanding working conditions, pollution and even the housing problem. Labor unions responded with protests, such as the protracted strike at Mitsui's Miike mine against layoffs, with an anti-pollution May Day, and with efforts to prevent the erosion of living standards. The strident opposition to the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty was also typical of the unions' activism as their concern and influence broadened throughout this period to include social and political, as well as economic, issues.

In the early 1970s, however, private-sector unions such as the Japanese Federation of Iron and Steelworkers' Unions and the Japan Confederation of Automobile Workers' Unions became more vocal in their criticism of the broad-based activism advocated by such public-employee unions as the NRWU and the Japan Postal Workers' Unions. Instead, these private-sector unions argued that unions should again concentrate on economic issues.

With the oil crisis and the subsequent skyrocketing inflation, the Japan Federation of Employers' Associations called for a cease-fire and emphasized the need to support industry. Significantly, the 1975 *shunto* was widely considered a management victory. From then on until the turnaround sparked by the yen's appreciation in the mid-1980s, it was all downhill for the labor movement.

One reason for this decline was that union leaders were unable to respond appropriately to the fact that companies were scaling back operations in the face of global economic stagnation. While it is true that some private-sector unions reined in their wage hike demands during these years, this did not spread to the labor movement as a whole. The decline was further accelerated when a protracted strike by the Council of National Enterprise Workers' Union, or Korokyo, demanding that civil service personnel be granted the same basic labor rights as private-sector workers, ended unsuccessfully in November 1975.

With the slower growth and the administrative reforms after 1975, the inflexibil-

ity of both private- and public-sector unions lost them the support not only of workers but also the general citizenry. Their influence was further eroded by the economic downturn triggered by the yen's appreciation in the mid-1980s, which made job security the prime issue. This was, in many ways, the unions' winter of irrelevance.

Yet even as things were looking bad for the unions, there were behind-the-scenes moves under way to revive the labor movement—moves that resulted in the dissolution of the four major confederations and the formation of Rengo. While Rengo has not been able to unify the entire movement under one umbrella organization and still faces competition from Zenroren and Zenrokyo, it has put together a potent organization and is expected to embark on a number of ambitious policies for the future.

This revival is also being helped domestically by the economic recovery and internationally by the new-found respectability of social democracy in Eastern Europe.

Looking ahead

Heady though this new organizational strength is, it is imperative that union leaders remember that unions exist to protect the worker, who is relatively powerless on his own, and that national federations are merely unions of unions. The realignment is not an end in itself but simply a means to better protect the rights of workers and to improve their living standards. All too often, this principle has gotten lost in the politics of the labor movement. At the same time, it is important to realize that organized labor is now an accepted constituent in Japanese democracy and, as such, is expected to accept certain responsibilities within the system.

Given these two basic precepts, there are a number of new issues that the labor movement must come to terms with.

The phrase that "the nation is rich but its people are poor" succinctly expresses the Japanese condition. Japan has one of the strongest economies in the world, but the individual Japanese worker is unable

to benefit fully from this affluence. Even though it has long been assumed that economic prosperity would translate into individual prosperity, the Japanese case disproves this assumption. Frustration is building, and the time is ripe for the emergence of a new labor movement that will concentrate on winning higher real wages, a sensible balance between work and play, and greater tolerance of life-style diversity.

Despite the publicity given to the unions' reorganization, the fact remains that organized labor is a minority group in Japan. Only 25.9% of the work force is unionized. (In 1989, the total work force was 47.2 million and the number of union members 12.3 million.) In fact, organized labor always has been a minority, peaking at 34.4% in 1975.

There are many causes that could be cited for organized labor's eclipse, but prominent among them are (i) the fact that changes in the industrial structure have reduced the percentage of workers in manufacturing and full-time workers, who were a bastion of union strength, (ii) the way the rapid expansion of the service sector has created more difficult-to-organize part-time employees, and (iii) the prevailing assumption that company employees will automatically belong to the company's own union and there is thus no need for the union to make active efforts to organize workers.

In response to these changes, it is imperative that the unions begin to speak more forcefully for all of society's disadvantaged members—a stance that has drawn support in numerous public opinion surveys. In effect, the job ahead is to organize the unrepresented groups such as workers at smaller companies where working conditions are still primitive, older workers who have less and less job security, and the rapidly increasing number of part-timers. If the unions can represent and support all of these people, the labor movement can once more be a powerful force for social justice in Japan. ■

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