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TRENDS IN RESEARCH ON THE HISTORY OF LABOR MOVEMENT IN JAPAN

KANAE IIDA

The history of trade union movement in Japan is characterized by the development of the "enterprise" unions and by the structure of labour market resulting from their outgrowth. As has been often pointed out, the history of labour movement in England shows that trade unions were first organized within a particular occupation groups as was the case in the so-called craft unions of industrial revolution period. In other words, with the accumulation of industrial capital, nation-wide craft-unions gradually solidified their foundation. In the Victorian Age, during which British capitalism flourished, the growth of craft unions reached its peak. However, with the start of the Great Depression in the late 19th century, beginning with the depression of 1873, and with the rise of monopoly capitalism, new unionism emerged mainly catered to unskilled or semi-skilled workers. With these new developments, general unions, and then industrial unions, gradually came to play major roles. The stages of the development of trade union movement can be depicted graphically. In response to the shift from industrial capitalism to monopoly capitalism, the forms of trade unions changed from craft unions to general unions and then still furthur to industrial unions.

In Japan, however, the trade union movement, though starting with the formation of craft unions at the beginning of this century, and though taking the course toward industrial unionism in the 1920's following the establishment of monopoly capitalism in Japan, came to develop a very strong tendency toward the establishment of enterprise unions at the same time. Even so, in the period before World War II, the trade unions retained, to some extent, the traditional structure of lateral unions, activities of which went beyond the confines of enterprises. Why, then, did this lateral unionism disappear completely to be replaced almost entirely by enterprise unions after the war?

These unique characteristics of Japanese trade unions and these structural changes have already been pointed out by various scholars and researchers. This article first introduces Professor Ohkochis' views on Japan's labour movement. Criticisms against this view held by several other representative scholars will then be introduced. After

examining these views the writer's own views on the issues will be presented.

Professor Ohkochi, a prominent Japanese scholar takes note, first of all, the process of the emergence of paid labor in Japan. He classifies Japanese paid labor as "emigrant labor."[1] It means that generally speaking, the people who supply labor have the nature of emigrant workers who are linked with the farm economy. In European nations, especially in England, agricultural population became superabundant during the period from the 16th through the 18th century. The progress of various social and economic changes, especially that of "enclosure movement" of the period, forced the redundunt population out of agricultural villages. These people forced out of the farms, wandering around the countryside, finally settled down in cities forming a separate class of the industrial proletariat.

In Japan, however, the industrial working class was not formed, generally speaking, through "mass exodus from farm villages" or through cutting the ties to the agrarian economy. "They worked for a certain time as paid workers, and then they returned to the agrarian activities. Thus, workers in Japan appeared on the labor market as paid workers while keeping one foot in the agrarian economy at the same time. This meant that not only was there a constant and strong flow of labor between agrarian villages and industrial zones, but more important, it meant that there was also high mental fluidity within the minds of the workers themselves."[2] Starting in this way, Prof. Ohkochi points out that "the feudalistic nature of Japanese paid labor"[3] manifests itself in the form of "emigrant workers." Prof. Ohkochi says, "Because of this, the consciousness of being modern proletariat is weak among Japanese workers, and active flow of labour between agrarian villages and industrial areas is hindering the formation of a uniform labor market. Consequently, the procurement of labor is carried out mainly by means of recruitment through connections, without recourse to the open labor market. As a result, it creates non-uniform labor conditions and a situation where, even though the workers do the same kind of work, labor conditions differ in each of the different enterprises."[4]

On the basis of these arguments, Prof. Ohkochi asserts that these unique characteristics of workers in Japan are what regulate and condition Japanese enterprise union—unique characteristics of workers being emigrant type of workers and of workers being in a feudalistic state of mind having excessive enterprise consciousness. But would

this statement be valid even today?

Professor Etsutaro Yajima also regards the "remnants of feudalism" as the major factor making the strongly rooted existance of enterprise unions in Japan inevitable. Nevertheless, he says, "Enterprise unions should logically have appeared most strongly in the Meiji Era when many aspects of feudalism still remained strongly, and forces of enterprise unions should have weakened with the gradual disappearance of the remnants of feudalism. If this was indeed the case, the enterprise unions would naturally be expected to disappear after World War II. However, the situation was completely the opposite.

What, then, does this phenomenon signify? This should be an important point in considering the factors which led to the formation of enterprise unions."[5] Professor Yajima reaches the following conclusion: "Though we call them enterprise unions, they are greatly different, for example, from the company unions in America. It seems that the character of paid labor based on the remnants of Asian-type village community, and a similar kind of consciousness on the part of the capitalists combine to create an industrial relation unique to Japan or to Asia."[6] In other words, his argument is that the various pre-modern, feudalistic relations which remain very deep-rootedly in all facets of Japanese community life, for example, in such organizations as schools, political parties, and local organizations also regulate enterprise unions.

As introduced in the fore-going, Professor Ohkochi regards the "emigrant type of paid labor" as the factor for the formation of enterprise unions, while Professor Yajima finds the cause in "the remnants of the Asian-type village community system." However, to define the basic cause as the "remnants of feudalism in paid labor" would be in contradiction, as very aptly painted out by Professor Yajima, to the fact of the development of enterprise unions becoming more marked in the 1930's and the fact of their becoming institutionalized in the midst of the democratization movement in the period following World War II. Therefore, there must be other reasons besides the "remnants of feudalism in paid labor" which made enterprise unions the special and dominating form in Japan.

The development of capitalism in Japan can be divided into the following four stages:

(1) 1868–1905 (from the Meiji Restoration to the Russo-Japanese War)

(2) 1905–1918 (from the Russo-Japanese War to the end of World War I)

(3) 1918–1945 (from the end of World War I to the end of World War II)
(4) From the end of World War II to the present.

As in the history of labor movements in all other countries, the labor movement in Japan also started in the period of the industrial revolution. Full-scale development of the working class movement started toward the end of the 19th century, in the course of the so-called industrial revolution which came after the end of the Sino-Japanese War. It was Fusataro Takano, who seeing with his own eyes the workings of the American Federation of Labor, led by Samuel Gompers, in the United States, introduced the idea to Japan. In 1890, Takano, together with Tsunetaro Jo, Hannosuke Sawada and several others, then living in San Francisco, formed a small research group called the Workers Volunteer Association. Takano returned to Japan. After working for ten years in the United States as a laborer. In 1897, he issued a document called "An Address to the Workers." The document, which is a memorable record in the history of Japanese labor movement, can vividly bring to the reader's mind even today the agonies of the period of the establishment of capitalism, troubled with labor problems. Takano immediately called for the establishment of the Association for the Formation of Trade Unions, and together with Sen Katayama and Hannosuke Sawada, was elected one of its secretaries. In response to Takano's call, the Iron Workers' Union, with 1,184 members, was formed in December, 1897. This Iron Workers' Union and also the Japan Railways "Kyosei Kai," a union organized by the steam locomotive engineers of Japan Railways Company, and the Printers' Union, were all craft unions, patterned after the organization of the American Federation of Labor. There were no moves at all for the formation of enterprise unions in those days. Nevertheless, the trend toward enterprise unionism became strong in the 1920's. To clarify the reasons for this, it is necessary to study the development of capitalism in Japan and the characteristics of Japanese labor movement during the period between 1900 and 1920.

Why was it not possible to develop steadily the movement for the formation of trade unions originally advocated by Fusataro Takano and others in 1897? If this movement had developed smoothly, the trade union movement in Japan would probably have grown in the direction of forming the craft unions modeled after the earlier patterns set by Takano and others. Actually, the craft unions failed to develop smoothy. Professor Hyman Kublin says about the effects of the Public

Order and Police Laws of 1900 on the Japanese labor movement that these laws were an expression of the weakness of Japanese capitalism, that it indicates the despotic nature of the Japanese state, and that it not only dealt a severe blow on the labor movement itself but also on Takano, forcing him to retire from the world of labor movement.[7] It need not be repeated here that the suppression by state power actually strangled the labor movement. But had the foundation of craft unions been firm, could have survived the ordeal. The examples of the British trade union movement under the Combination Laws and the resistance of the German labouring class under the Anti-socialists Laws designed to suppress socialism clearly demonstrate this. In considering the reasons for the rapid and complete collapse of the craft union movement started by Takano and others in Japan, we must not overlook the fact that, besides such outside forces as the Public Order and Police Laws, there existed, within the trade union movement itself, a basic weakness.

In many nation, in a period of suppression, trade unions continued their existence under the guise of friendly societies. Furthermore, the development of organization as such is usually the premise for the development of trade union movement. What was the situation in Japan in this regard?

The first modern trade union formed in Japan was the Iron Workers' Union, organized in December, 1897. It was organized by the workers of iron and steel industry, including machinists, metal workers, can-making workers, copper workers, *iron* shipbuilding and electric workers, all of whom accounted for the majority of the already formed Association for the Formation of Trade Unions. The Iron Workers' Union laid strongly emphasis on mutual-aid activities. At the time of its establishment, its members numbered over 1,000. In February, 1898, its membership rose to 2,000, in June, to 2,500, and by the end of the same year it is said that its membership numbered as many as 3,000. Furthermore, on the day that the Iron Workers' Union was formed, a labor movement organ paper, called *The Labor World*, edited by Sen Katayama, issued its first edition. As a member of the Association for the Formation of Trade Unions since its establishment, Sen Katayama showed great interests in the moves of the Iron Workers' Union, and he reported them in great detail in the organ paper.

This Iron Workers' Union, as repeatedly asserted by Sen Katayama in his *Labor World*, was not a class-struggle-type union; it was rather a union clearly favoring the labor-management co-operation. For

example, the *Labor World* of January 15, 1898, carried an article entitled "A Shipbuilding Company in Yokohama and the Iron Workers Union," which contained the following passages:

"Our Iron Workers' Union, from the beginning, was formed with the intention of promoting mutual-aid among the workers. We have never held such seditious thoughts as going on strikes or forcing negotiations. Since the workers and capitalists both benefited from our movement, we had hoped that our movement would receive the support from the capitalists of the shipbuilding company, who, after all, employ a large number of workers and whose work has close bearing upon us. We deeply regret, however, that they should rise in opposition to us, as they have done this time..."

In the background of the enactment of the Public Order and Police Laws, are the facts that, though the Iron Workers' Union adopted the policy of promoting the labor-management co-operation, it included many workers who belonged to the Government-operated heavy industries and the munitions production industry, such as the Yawata Iron and Steel Company and the Arsenal, and that the development of capitalism in Japan was consistently promoted with none other than a heavy Government protection. The enactment was also related to the fact that labor movement posed a serious threat to the capitalists who were extremely prejudiced against trade unions. In this connection, too, it must be pointed out that the labor movement came to be gradually linked with the socialist movement, and that the possibility of its becoming a serious threat to the Emperor system came to be recognized. Be that as it may, the working class was unable to defend its organization from such pressures and suppression. The subsequent fates of Fusataro Takano and Sen Katayama themselves indicate this fact. It is an important point to remember in considering the basic reasons for the collapse of Japan's first craft union that the cause lay not only in the severe pressure from the ruling class but also in the organization's lacking a strong system of mutual aid, strong enough to resist pressures and make it survive the ordeal. Therefore, this writer cannot agree with the theory of attributing the rise of enterprise unions in Japan solely to "the feudalistic nature of paid labor." The circumstances become clearer when we study the second period in the development of Japanese capitalism, that is, the period from 1905 to 1918.

This period coincides with the period when Japanese capitalism moved from the stage of free competition to the stage of monopoly capitalism. A small number of pioneers advocated socialism, and this move is

reflected in the fact that the *Labor World* changed its name to *Socialism* in 1903. The anti-war, socialist movement of Heimin-sha (Democratic Society), led by Shūsui Kotoku and Toshihiko Sakai, was unable to secure the workers' support, and its organ paper, *The Heimin Shimbun*, was only read by a handful of intellectuals, students, fairly well-to-do, or wealthy farmers and artisans. The forces opposing the Russo-Japanese War, Japan's first imperialistic war, were very weak. And, with the arising of the so-called High Treason case in 1910, the opposing forces were completely stifled.

After the Russo-Japanese War, with the depression growing more and more serious, large-scale strikes took place in several Government-managed plants—at the Ishikawajima Shipbuilding Yard in Tokyo in Feburuary of 1906, at the Tokyo Arsenal in August of the same year, and at the Osaka Arsenal and the Yokosuka Navel Arsenal in 1907. Riots also broke out at the copper mines in Ashio and Besshi. The police force was powerless in suppressing the riots and the army or the military police had to be called out for their suppression. Other points characterizing this series of disputes are: (1) that they were the masses' protest movements against the rising of commodity prices after the war, movements arising despite the Public Order and Police Laws; (2) that they arose mainly at government-operated munitions plants and at mines where working conditions were extremely bad; (3) and that the disputes took the form of riots and that there were no close liaison among them.

It is clear that the craft unions at the early stage of trade union movement had been wiped out mainly by the Government's strong suppression measures. Also the efforts of organizing workers into a fraternal organization in order to keep alive the craft union tradition was totally lacking.

The third period, that is, the period from 1918 to the end of World War II, was the period which saw the great flourishing of the labor movement and socialism, and also the dark control by fascism. Japan's capitalism attained the stage of monopoly capitalism, and with the rice riots, the effects of the Russian Revolution and the struggles between Anarcho-syndicalism and Bolshevism, labor movement reached a period of great upswing. However, it was also the period of great suppression, unprecedented in the world, under imperial militarism. From 1931 to 1937, the arresting, imprisoning and torturing of labor movement activists and socialists under the Public Order and Mainte-

nance Law reached the wildest peak. Communistic trade unions were ordered to disband, and the labor movement itself was turned into Government-controlled, extremely right-wing operations. Until the Allied Powers won the final victory in World War II, this medieval, uncivilized state ruled over the whole of Japanese society.

During this period the last vestiges of the tradition of craft unions, which had managed to survive from the end of 19th century, were completely wiped out. Also, it is interesting to note that in the 1930's the leaders of the craft unions themselves started to take the policy of shifting their unions to enterprise unions. After World War II, when Japan made its new start as a democratic nation, a trade union law, the first of its kind in Japanese history, was enacted, together with the new Constitution, leading to the advent of the new age of great prosperity for enterprise unions.

Currently the interests of Japanese researchers are directed to such questions as to why the trade unions of Japan today are enterprise unions and whether there exists any conditions which would shift enterprise unions to industrial unions. This is partly because this unique nature of labor movement in Japan, that is, the fact of its being centered on enterprise unions, is causing a lack of a lateral labor market, and also because it is closely connected with the problem of the difficulty of meeting the workers' common demands, which go beyond the scope of a single enterprise, such as the demand for a minimum wage system for all the workers.

Should not the cause of the establishment of enterprise unions be found in the process of the formation of Japanese industrial relations, which also gave birth to enterprise consciousness? In other words, the special and traditional relationship between the capitalists, who are the main bodies of Japanese capitalism, and the workers, who supply them with labor, is the prop on which the enterprise consciousness rests. And, where did Japan, which started on the course toward modern capitalism from the Meiji Restroration, seek its entrepreneurs? In Japanese capitalism, an overwhelmingly large part of the people, who came to display the spirit of entrepreneurship and who became the champions of industry, came from the former *samurai* class. They accounted for the large part of entrepreneurs in the early days of modern capitalism.[8] Japanese capitalism was not developed by the bourgeoisie'a upward thrusting force. Just as the majority of the men who pushed forward the construction of Japan as a modern nation

from the political aspects came from the lower-ranking *samurai* class, the men who took main charge of the construction of capitalism also came mostly from the lower and medium-ranking *samurai* class. These people had originally been fulfilling the role of reactionaries as supporters of the feudalistic system. However, the very facts that they were mentally, and physically solidly trained, that they had been acquired, organizational ability and leadership quality, and especially the fact that as lower-ranking *samurai* they had been in the position of the oppressed in the hierarchy of the feudalistic system, with almost all channels of promotion closed to them, led them to plunge into the world of business on the occasion of the Meiji Restoration. In this sense, the people who were liberated by the Meiji Restoration were the serfs and the lower-grade *samurai*'s.

These special circumstances of Japanese capitalism, being pushed forward by the lower-grade *samurai* class rather than by a newly raisen bourgeoisie, brought about as an inevitable result a certain backwardness in Japanese capitalism. In other words, herein probably lies the reason for the feudalistic sense of loyalty implanting its roots deeply in enterprises. After World War I, Japan became one of the world's top-ranking industrial nations. Nevertheless, this feudalistic sense of loyalty remained deeply rooted within enterprises and continued to be the spiritual support for the workers. This, in other words, is the concept that an enterprise is like a family. Loyalty to the Emperor can easily be converted into loyalty to the enterprise. To the workers, the enterprise did not appear as a place of a transaction contracted with the employer, in the sense that they offered labor and were paid wages as its price. Rather, between the employer and the worker, there was already prepared, statuswise, the concept of master and servant, and the concept that the employer and the worker were bound together in common destiny. Herein apparrently lies the roots of enterprise unions.

In the foregoing, I have studied the trends of research on Japanese labor union movement, centering mainly on the question of enterprise unions. If an enterprise union is an organizational form which has no parallel in the world, then we must assume that the time will eventually come when enterprise unions will be reorganized into industrial unions, precisely following the general trend of labor movements in the world. In this sense, too, it is very important to probe into the historical reasons for the formation of enterprise unions.

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