
INTRODUCTION

This volume of the Japan Labor Review features the “Current Situations of Work Hours and Vacations in Japan”. As I believe and as the readers are already aware, working hours in Japan are extremely long and that quite a few workers do not take all the paid holidays they are granted. The first article, by Kazuya Ogura, entitled “Contemporary Working Time in Japan – Legal System and Reality” classifies the current issues pertaining to working hours in Japan into two aspects, and clarifies legal problems and the actual facts in each case. Here, the first problem concerns overtime itself. In Japan, the proportion of workers doing overtime is considerably higher than in any other advanced country; in this sense, Japan shows the characteristics of a “non-advanced” country. While the Japanese legal system sets weekly working hours at 40 hours, workers are subject to unlimited overtime once labor and management in their firm have reached an agreement allowing overtime. Although the government in an administrative guideline officially places the upper limit at 360 hours per year, this involves no penalties, allowing long overtime with no limit in practice. At the same time, the overtime premium rate commonly adopted in Japan is extraordinarily low by international standards, having no mechanism to curb prolonged overtime. Ogura carries out a questionnaire survey aimed at approximately 2,500 employed workers across the country, and the results show that the monthly average overtime is 43.2 hours for males, and 30.2 for females. The term “overtime” here includes unpaid overtime.

The article by Takashi Fujimoto, as a member of the survey team headed by Ogura, focuses on fact-finding, with particular reference to the correlation between long working hours and stress-related problems. It is well known that the proportion of those who feel under stress or tired tends to increase sharply when their overtime exceeds 50 hours per month. In this regard, Fujimoto has found that different outcomes can be observed among firms which take measures against long working hours. It has been found that workers in companies which provide measures against long working hours do less overtime than those working for companies without any such measures. It has also been shown that workers in the former type are less under stress. The

article gives a clear account of the fairly strong correlation between long working hours and stress.

As referred to in the article by Ogura, overtime in Japan includes quite a large amount of unpaid overtime, which means, literally, overtime for which workers are not paid overtime premiums. The practice of unpaid overtime seems to arise from various factors, primarily due to the fact that the performance-based pay system has become common and has resulted in excess workloads, while the prevailing long working hours have led to an increase in workers who are not paid premiums even if they have done overtime. Many workers vulnerable to unpaid overtime are white-collar workers engaged in, for example, sales, planning, and research and development.

Then, does unpaid overtime done by white-collar workers have no meaning at all and result, for them, in a mere wasted effort? Yoko Takahashi has tackled this question head-on, showing that workers doing unpaid overtime tend to eventually receive, “*ceteris paribus*”, a higher total amount of remuneration. As a result, her article suggests, unpaid overtime by white-collar workers is likely to be rewarded in bonus payments or other ways. In this sense, unpaid overtime by white-collar workers neither has no meaning nor is a mere wasted effort.

Another serious problem pertaining to working hours in today’s Japan is related to paid holidays. Related laws in Japan stipulate that 10 paid holidays are granted per year for new employees, and the number of holidays increases as they serve the company longer, up to a maximum of 20 days per year. Even so, the legal system is not equipped with the requirement that workers should take a successive long holiday, so that it is common for Japanese workers to take a single day off at a time, the idea of a “vacance” as in France being unknown. For many Japanese workers, a summer holiday is just a one-week vacation, while for quite a few busy businessmen, it is just a three-day vacation including a Saturday and Sunday. The article by Susumu Noda explores the background behind the establishment of the Japanese legal system concerning paid holidays allowing workers to take one day off at a time. In the article, Noda pointing out that the current system attaches emphasis to the right of workers to take one day off at a time, (rather than taking consecutive days-off),

suggests that Japanese workers will never take paid holidays more readily unless the system is redesigned and posited, as in other countries, on long, holidays that consist of consecutive days off. I believe this to be correct.

The article by Eiichi Ohki is unique, reflecting his speciality, ability development. He propounds that the time created in the form of long holidays should be effectively made use of so as to foster a “viewpoint,” something which has been absent in the field of ability development. According to his article, the type of ability development which many Japanese firms have traditionally considered to be important is to “seek the reasons.” However, what should be emphasized more from now on, it is quoted, is to “seek the purposes.”

As referred to above, this volume of the Japan Labor Review features various articles shedding light from various angles on the issues concerning working hours in today’s Japan – overtime and paid holidays. The important findings, the shift from the conventional viewpoints and the assertions of individual authors presented in these articles are all worth reading. I wonder just when Japan, seen from the viewpoint of “working hours, will be able to join the club of advanced countries? The answer remains uncertain. Even so, I believe that to overcome the problems and issues presented in these articles undoubtedly represents the shortest path of all.

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