
The Current Status and Significance of General Unions: Concerning the Resolution of Individual Labor Disputes

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Japan's general unions (*godo roso*) have a long history, but they developed in earnest as unions to which individuals are affiliated after the emergence of community unions in the latter half of the 1980s. In addition to the national unions of the National Trade Union Council (*Zenrokyo*) that existed hitherto, the formation of the regional unions of the Japanese Trade Union Confederation (*Rengo*) in 1996 and the local unions of National Confederation of Trade Unions (*Zenroren*) in 2002, and the strengthening of their activities mean that general unions are in their prime. One of the most important activities of general unions is the resolution of individual labor disputes. The number of disputes resolved is increasing each year, with the independent resolution rate for disputes resolved by general unions through collective bargaining with companies climbing to 67.9%. While resolving disputes that have arisen as a result of violations or ignorance of labor law on the part of employers, general unions also provide opportunities for employers to learn about labor laws, as well as resolving disputes that cannot be resolved by government bodies. Official support for these activities would be desirable.

I. What Are General Unions?

Before defining general unions (*godo roso*), the following provides a simple description of enterprise unions, which are the predominant form of labor unions in Japan. Japanese enterprise unions are unions that exercise in regard to individual companies the three rights of labor recognized in the Constitution of Japan and the Labor Union Act, namely the right to organize, the right to negotiate, and the right to act. Under the enterprise union system, it is not possible to become a member of the enterprise union concerned unless one is an employee of that specific company (and in almost all cases, one must be a permanent employee). In addition, it is not possible to engage in labor-management negotiations or collective bargaining unless one is an official or member of the enterprise union. Enterprise unions also have the right to act. Looking at the actual status of enterprise unions, one can see that 76% of unions have concluded union-shop contracts with companies (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare 2005), and welcome people joining the company as union members. Moreover, 93.5% of unions have concluded checkoff contracts (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare 2006), which means that their union dues are deducted from their wages. The industrial unions, which are the umbrella organizations to which the enterprise unions belong, are basically unable to restrict the three rights of labor of the enterprise unions.

Given this situation, if we define general unions on the basis of a number of existing definitions developed hitherto (Central Labor Relations Commission 2008, 130; Sugeno

2010, 507; Watanabe 1963, 24; Ishikawa 1963, 215), general unions can be summarized as labor unions that “are based in a particular region,” “which individuals can join” “irrespective of the confines of company, job type or industry,” in which mainly “workers at small or medium-sized enterprises” are enrolled.

II. The Historical Development of General Unions and Their Spread

1. The Full-Scale Development of General Unions

Looking at the situation historically, the full-scale development of labor unions began with the holding of the inaugural conference of the National Union of General Workers (NUGW) in July 1955 in Tokyo, which brought together regional general unions scattered across various parts of the country, focusing primarily on industrial unions in local timber industries. In addition, in the same year, at its 6th Regular Conference, the General Council of Trade Unions (Sohyo), which was the national center of trade unions at the time, proposed a “¥10 contribution per union member, in order to organize non-unionized workers at small and medium-sized enterprises”; the following year, based on this contribution, Sohyo deployed 100 organizers across the country. In 1961, that number apparently exceeded 250 (Matsui 2010). Furthermore, the Japanese Trade Union Congress (Zenrokaigi) and the national center, called the National Federation of Industrial Organization (Shinsanbetsu), decided on a unionization policy that “general unions are the most desirable format” for promoting organization amongst small and medium-sized enterprises, as a result of which, the formation of general unions progressed. With regard to general unions before 1960, there were 296 industrial general unions, which were formed with industries as their organizational unit, accounting for 63% of all general unions. In the case of craft general unions, which are organized for particular professions, there were 84 such unions, accounting for 18% of the total, while there were 92 ordinary general unions,¹ which are unions that do not stipulate a particular industry or profession, accounting for 19% of the total.

It was during the first half of the 1960s that general unions were established from a legal perspective as well as from the perspective of labor-management relations, as a result of the right to collective bargaining being recognized. In 1961, Sohyo defined “unions that mainly organize the workers of micro-enterprises as a union independent of and external to their company, on an individual membership basis” as a form of general union, and undertook organization on an individual membership basis, but in reality, many general unions were formed due to the fact that there was no industrial union to which the enterprise union could be affiliated. Thereafter, many general unions were formed and the number of union members also increased.

¹ It is believed that the term “ordinary” was used in order to distinguish these from industrial and craft general unions (mainly collectives of enterprise unions), and express the sense that they had purely individual membership (Numata 1963).

2. The Formation and Expansion of Community Unions

Sohyo had many district labor union councils/district labor union congresses (Chikuro), the autonomy of which was recognized. Amidst this situation, the Edogawa District Labor Union Council in Tokyo (Edogawa Chikukyo) formed the Edogawa Union in 1984 as a union that even individuals could join, which would protect and enhance their rights, having been consulted by part-time workers (Obata 1993a, 1993b); this is said to be the first example of a community union. Subsequently, many community unions were formed as an organization to which part-time workers could be channeled.

With the formation of the Japanese Trade Union Confederation (JTUC, known as Rengo) in 1989, it was decided to disband Sohyo, so it was inevitable that the Chikuro, which were the regional branches of Sohyo, would also be disbanded as a result, but in the latter half of the 1980s, many district labor union councils and congresses appeared that sought to incorporate the Edogawa Union movement. The community unions formed by the district labor union councils and congresses expanded the scale of their organizations, organizing non-regular workers such as part-time workers, while fulfilling a role as a safe haven for workers. With the disbanding and contraction of district labor union councils and congresses, an additional movement developed, aimed at making community unions autonomous. Such community unions gathered together, holding national meetings from 1989, and formally creating the Community Union National Network the following year. From 1990, it has held the Community Union National Meeting, attended by 300-400 people annually, thereby increasing its presence. Moreover, as well as the National Meeting, block conferences are held each year in Hokkaido, Tohoku, Tokyo Metropolitan Area, Tokai, Kansai, Hyogo and Kyushu.

Many unions moved away from the National Union of General Workers (NUGW), which were general unions, towards participation in the community union movement, and community unions with special features also emerged, such as unions for those in managerial positions, women's unions, and unions for part-time workers.

Based on the above, one can say that there are three main currents in community unions (Kurosaki 2003). Firstly, there are the "district labor union-type" community unions, which were formed with a district labor union council or congress as their parent body, as typified by the Edogawa Union, the Kobe Workers' Union, and the Rengo Fukuoka Union. Secondly, there are the "NUGW type" community unions, which originally acted as the National Union of General Workers; these have a comparatively large membership, such as the Sapporo General Union, Tokyo Union, and Tokyo Managers' Union. Thirdly, there are the "citizens' movement-type" community unions, such as the Women's Union Kanagawa, which was formed when the necessity for a labor union arose while working on issues such as the women's movement.²

² Yoshitake Obata, who created the Edogawa Union, divides community unions into the following five types. Specifically, these are "the district labor union council or congress basis type," "the small

As of September 2010, the number of community unions had reached 73 nationwide, with 15,000 union members.

3. The Heyday of Unions with Individual Membership and General Unions

Rengo Japanese Trade Union Confederation (JTUC-RENGO)

Amidst a situation in which the social presence of unions is waning, due to such problems as the decline in union membership and the inadequacy of their handling of various labor problems, Rengo, which emerged primarily from the industrial union movement, has been under pressure to respond to the intensification of regional union activities, expand the organization, and better deal with non-unionized workers. As a means of responding to these issues, Rengo's 22nd Central Committee, which met in June 1996, established a "policy of expanding organization for the time being" and decided to form regional unions based on its regional councils, as organizations to receive the members who joined as a result of the unionization and expansion activities. In order to encourage this, the committee decided to establish the "organization expansion promotion grant"³ system. As a result, from 1998, the regional councils established a free labor consultation phonenumber and a system of regional advisors. The activities via the free labor consultation phonenumber were assigned a role in linking labor consultations to active unionization, and striving to connect this to unionization within regional unions and membership of component organizations. Moreover, the regional advisors were assigned roles such as gaining an understanding of information relating to non-unionized workers and unions not affiliated to industrial unions, providing information to relevant industrial unions, expanding organization through collaboration and joint actions with component organizations, implementing initiatives linking the permanent free labor consultation phonenumber to unionization, and providing support for activities focused on regional unions.

In November 2001, a meeting of Rengo's Primary Organizational Finance Review Committee recommended the drastic strengthening measure of proactively deploying regional unions centered on regional councils and congresses, with the approach to regional unions being based on the premise that "regional councils will proactively unionize individuals and small-scale local companies, while taking as their basis the approach of 'industry-based membership', which is the unionization policy of Rengo." More specifically, the framework involved (i) promoting membership of unions consisting of individuals and units

and medium-sized enterprise ordinary labor union type," "the mutual aid type," "the local citizens' movement type," and the "part-timer workers' union type." For further details, refer to Obata (1993a, 1993b).

³ Amongst these grants were "grants for expanding regional unions." In addition, "regional union special funds" were introduced as funds for forming regional unions and expanding unionization, which were distributed as required, on the basis of applications featuring plans for and/or actual results of the formation and expansion of regional unions.

of fewer than 100 people (unit unions); (ii) setting affiliation fees at a level in proportion to the annual dues for industry unions; and (iii) handling the rights and obligations in regard to regional councils in the same way as regional organizing bodies. Based on this thinking, Rengo decided upon a policy of considering its approach to regional unions with a greater emphasis on regional councils⁴. Incidentally, Rengo stipulated that regional unions are “‘labor unions with a regional community within a specific range as their organizational unit’, different from ‘regional labor unions’ such as district labor union congresses or district federations, which serve as consultative bodies for enterprise unions, and are labor unions with a mixture of individuals and groups with differing job types, industry types, workplaces, and forms and types of employment” (Rengo 2000). It is said that community unions had a significant influence on the decision concerning the policy on forming regional unions, with the aim of increasing unionization.

As a result of such initiatives, as of March 31, 2010, there were 67 unions which even individuals could join, located in 45 of Rengo’s regional councils. Within those regional unions were 458 member unions, with 15,551 union members (Rengo 2010); individually-affiliated union members accounted for 1,672 of these. The number of labor consultations is increasing by the year, reaching 10,940 in 2009 (Rengo Center for Non-Regular Employment 2010). Moreover, the number of regional advisors had increased to 98 as of September 2010.

The National Confederation of Trade Unions (Zenroren)

Zenroren, which was formed in 1989, first devised a plan to form local unions, which individuals could join, at its 20th conference in July 2002 (Terama 2010).⁵

In November of that year, Zenroren held the first National Assembly of Local Unions and decided that: (i) it would construct local unions as organizations under the direct control of regional organizations that are not affiliated to a specific unit industrial union; and (ii) it would not have a vision of mobilizing local unions to create a single unit industrial union. Thereafter, for three years from 2004, as well as deploying 12 organizers, Zenroren decided upon a mid-term strategy of expanding and strengthening the organization and clarified the positioning of local unions at its 22nd regular conference in July 2006. At that conference, Zenroren ascribed the credit for the tremendous nationwide progress achieved by local unions to the fact that “(i) workers’ mutual aid (workers helping each other out), (ii) the estab-

⁴ Rengo website (<http://www.jtuc-rengo.or.jp/news/weekly/no691/03.html>).

⁵ According to records showing the agenda for the 20th conference, Zenroren advocated that “the formation of ‘local unions’ in all prefectures should be pursued, as a way of creating unions to organize non-unionized workers that transcend industrial sectors. ‘Local Union Assemblies’ will be held to facilitate interaction, the exchange of information, and learning about the experience and practice of others.” At the 19th conference, although it was stated that “through labor consultations and negotiations focused on achieving a resolution, we will proactively mobilize workers at small, medium and micro-enterprises and retail businesses into ‘regional labor unions’ and ‘community general unions,’” but the term local union was not used (Zenroren 2000).

lishment of permanent labor consultation services, and (iii) the establishment of local unions were positioned as a ‘three-piece set’ that was consciously pursued in many regional organizations.” In 2008, union dues were raised by ¥5 per member, with the increase being assigned to a special account for maintaining the expansion of the organization, from which funds were allocated to initiatives focused on strengthening regional organizations, including local unions, and measures to unionize non-regular workers.

As of June 24, 2009, Zenroren had 135 local unions that individuals could join; of these, there were 34 unions with a prefecture as their unit and 101 with a region as their unit, covering a total of 10,355 union members (Zenroren 2009a). The number of labor consultations has been in excess of 10,000 each year since 2002. The number of dedicated consultants dealing with labor consultations has been increased from 150 in 2002 to 235 in 2008. Factors behind this progress in the field of local unions include (i) the effect of mass advertising; and (ii) the establishment of labor consultation centers and workers’ mutual aid schemes (Zenroren 2009b).

Seiji Terama, who is the Director of the Organizing Bureau at Zenroren, has summarized the roles of local unions as follows: (i) to ensure that there are no “solitary” workers in workplaces or regions and to translate their requests into reality; (ii) to strengthen the movement aimed at education and learning promoted by the labor union and cultivate people who can take on a leading role in the community movement; (iii) to unionize those in non-regular employment, such as temporary agency workers, contract workers, temporary workers and part-time workers, especially women and young people (Terama 2009). Moreover, Terama (2010) classifies local unions into three categories: (i) the insider union model, which satisfies the requirements for labor unions with a focus on collective bargaining (e.g. Shinjuku Union, Iwate Local Union, Tokyo Metropolitan Youth Union), (ii) unions with a unionization model focused on seeking to provide a place for people who have nobody to talk to and nowhere that they fit in, while providing practical benefits and real advantages through such initiatives as workers’ mutual aid (e.g. Fushimi Fureai Union, Community Union Tokyo), and (iii) a “hybrid model,” which emphasizes both of these aspects (e.g. Yui Sapporo Local Union, Local Union Osaka).

National Trade Union Council (Zenrokyo)

Zenrokyo emphasizes that, “general unions play a critically important role in creating a forum for non-regular workers and workers at small, medium-sized and micro-enterprises in which both regular and non-regular workers within a company can present a united front, as well as in accepting individual members” (Zenrokyo 2009).

The general unions of Zenrokyo are grouped together under the umbrella of the National Union of General Workers (NUGW, also known as Zenkoku-Ippan); as of September 2010, 43 organizations were affiliated to this body, with approximately 7,000 union members. Since its inauguration in 1989, Zenrokyo has advocated the strengthening of the small and medium-sized labor movement, but specific activities have been left up to the compo-

nent organizations.

Since the latter half of the 1980s, community unions have been formed in succession and the labor movement has expanded. As a result of this, there were many examples of general unions, which hitherto had tended to give a strong impression of being federations of small and medium-sized labor unions, experiencing a resurgence as general unions for unions with individual members. Subsequently, in 1996, Rengo decided upon a policy of forming and strengthening regional unions for unions with individual members, while Zenroren also sought to strengthen unions with individual members from 2002 onwards. Consequently, both national centers have experienced an upward trend both in the number of unions and the number of union members. The general unions can truly be said to be in their heyday.

III. The Current Status of General Unions: Concerning the Resolution of Individual Labor Disputes

Amidst the increase in individual labor disputes in recent years, the Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training has conducted surveys concerning the resolution and prevention of disputes; as part of this, it has also conducted a survey concerning the role of labor unions. The survey involved visiting community unions that were deemed to be playing a major role in the resolution of individual labor disputes, and not only examining the content of the union's activities, but also conducting interviews with workers whose disputes had been resolved via the union, in order to clarify the background to the dispute, the resolution process and the union's role in that process (JILPT 2009). At the same time, a survey concerning initiatives to resolve and prevent individual labor disputes (referred to below as the Monitor Survey; the author was in charge of conducting this survey) was conducted in regard to community unions, Rengo's regional unions, Zenroren's local unions, and Zenrokyo's national ordinary unions (the National Union of General Workers [NUGW]). Let us now examine the current status of general unions, focusing primarily on the results of those surveys.

The Monitor Survey was conducted between January 2009 and March 2010,⁶ in regard to general unions affiliated to the aforementioned four organizations. With regard to the survey methodology, officials with overall responsibility for community unions, general unions of Rengo, Zenroren and Zenrokyo were asked to cooperate in the survey and select suitable targets for the survey, after which they drew up written requests to the relevant unions for cooperation in the survey, which were sent to the unions along with the questionnaire. The survey was carried out on two occasions; details of the number of valid response forms and the response rates are as follows. In the case of the first survey, 41 forms were

⁶ However, the survey of Zenrokyo's ordinary unions was only carried out for the period November 2009 to March 2010.

Table 1. Number of Union Members, Proportion of Men, Proportion of Permanent Employees, Number of Individual Members and the Fluctuations Thereof

	Number of union members	Proportion of men	Proportion of permanent employees	Number and proportion of individual members
2006	201.5	62.5	58.7	51.0 (25.3%)
2007	216.8	61.5	58.6	56.1 (25.9%)
2008	240.2	60.3	56.7	65.2 (27.1%)
2009	234.4	63.5	57.7	77.2 (32.9%)
2010	221.2	63.0	57.2	61.1 (27.6%)

Source: Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training, results of the *Monitor Survey on the Resolution and Prevention of Labor Disputes by Labor Unions*. The tables below are all derived from the same source.

received from community unions (out of 73 distributed, giving a response rate of 56%), 42 forms were received from Rengo's regional unions (out of 47 distributed, giving a response rate of 89.4%), 18 forms were received from Zenroren's local unions (out of 41 distributed, giving a response rate of 40.9%), and 7 forms were received from NUGW (out of 41 distributed, giving a response rate of 17.1%). In the second survey, the figures were 26 forms from community unions (35.6%), 22 forms from Rengo's regional unions (46.8%), and 15 forms from Zenroren's local unions (34.1%).

1. The Organizational Composition of General Unions: Trends in the Number of Union Members

The number of members of general unions is in the lower half of the 200 range per union on average. The number increased from 201.5 people in 2006 to 240.2 people in 2008, but subsequently declined, reaching 221.2 people as of 2010. Amongst the union members, the proportion accounted for by men was in the lower 60% range, which was lower than the proportion of men amongst all union members across Japan as a whole, which was 70.9% (2009); consequently, one can say that these unions had a comparatively large number of female members. The proportion of permanent employees was in the upper 50% range, which is quite low compared with the proportion of permanent employees amongst all union members across Japan as a whole, which was 93% (2009).⁷ Amongst the union members, the proportion accounted for by individual members is around 30% (Table 1).

In terms of which unions have the highest number of union members per union, the union types in descending order are regional unions, community unions, the National Union

⁷ This figure was obtained by subtracting 7%, the proportion of all union members accounted for by part-time members, from 100.

Table 2. Number of Union Members by Affiliation and the Proportion of Individual Union Members (%)

	Community unions	Regional unions	Local unions	National Union of General Workers (NUGW)
2006	187.2 (33.4)	304.3 (9.3)	52.4 (66.4)	175.0 (85.3)
2007	196.4 (36.4)	322.8 (8.5)	65.8 (74.2)	189.1 (81.2)
2008	209.5 (42.9)	356.6 (10.8)	80.4 (74.3)	183.9 (85.4)
2009	232.8 (41.0)	340.5 (18.5)	91.2 (78.3)	188.7 (83.1)
2010	204.6 (41.2)	341.6 (15.2)	83.1 (67.5)	

of General Workers (NUGW) and local unions. Moreover, in terms of which unions have the highest proportion of union members accounted for by individual members, the union types in descending order are NUGW, local unions, community unions, and regional unions (Table 2).

If we look at fluctuations in union membership figures during the three years from 2006 to 2008, one can see that the proportion accounted for by “The number of people joining the union is greater than the number leaving the union and the total number is increasing” was the largest, at 41.1%, while 25.2% responded “The numbers of those joining and those leaving the union are both low and the total number is more or less steady,” 11.2% responded “The numbers of those joining and those leaving the union are both high and the total number is more or less steady,” and 9.3% responded “The number of people leaving the union is greater than the number joining the union and the total number is decreasing.” If we look at the situation by labor union, we can see that in the case of both local unions and community unions, the largest proportion was accounted for by those responding “The number of people joining the union is greater than the number leaving the union and the total number is increasing.” In the case of NUGW and regional unions, there were many who responded that “The numbers of those joining and those leaving the union are both low and the total number is more or less steady,” but in the case of regional unions, there were about the same number who responded “The number of people joining the union is greater than the number leaving the union and the total number is increasing.”

2. The Resolution of Labor Disputes, the Background to Those Disputes and Dispute Prevention Measures

One of the most crucial activities of labor unions is providing labor consultation and dispute resolution services. As an overall average, the number of labor consultations each

Table 3. Number of New Applications for Collective Bargaining

	Overall average	Community unions	Regional unions	Local unions	National Union of General Workers (NUGW)
2006	13.6	18.1	11.8	10.9	9.8
2007	14.5	19.7	14.0	11.1	5.3
2008	17.4	23.9	15.5	13.8	7.0
2009	22.4	23.9	26.0	20.1	7.0

year was 245 in 2006, 303.4 in 2008, and 293.5 in 2009. If we look at the situation by affiliation, we can see that community unions, regional unions, and local unions are all demonstrating the same trend as the overall trend, but the amplitude of fluctuation in the case of NUGW is large each year.⁸ In terms of the number of consultations, the union types in order of size are NUGW, regional unions, local unions, and community unions. With regard to the workers who sought labor consultations, men accounted for 50-60%, slightly higher than the figure for women, while non-regular workers accounted for slightly more than permanent employees, the latter accounting for 46-47%. There was almost no difference between years.

Table 3 shows the number of verbal or written applications for collective bargaining by general unions in order to resolve labor disputes. The national average has been increasing annually, from 13.6 in 2006 to 14.5 in 2007, 17.4 in 2008, and 22.4 in 2009. Community unions, regional unions, and local unions are all demonstrating the same trend as the overall trend, but there are both increases and decreases in the case of NUGW. With regard to new requests for collective bargaining, community unions had the largest number, but the fact that the number of requests by regional unions and local unions increased sharply in 2009 is striking. With regard to the composition of workers who were party to new requests for collective bargaining, men outnumbered women, accounting for 53%-59%, while permanent employees accounted for 48%-56%, figures which have been on the increase of late. From this, one can see that labor disputes are spreading, even amongst permanent employees. With regard to the parties to disputes, in 2008, solo workers accounted for the largest proportion, at 72.3%, while multiple workers accounted for 17.0%, and labor unions such as branches accounted for 10.6%. Almost all applications for collective bargaining are made in order to resolve the problems of individual workers.

⁸ Amongst the figures for NUGW, the number of consultations sought with the Tokyo Tobu labor union was in the thousands, whereas the national average was in the hundreds, with Tokyo Tobu receiving 4,840 requests in 2006, 2,914 in 2007, 4,085 in 2008, and 4,647 in 2009; consequently, the large amplitude of fluctuation in the case of NUGW is due to the impact of this union.

Table 4. Dispute Resolution Methods by Share (Status Over the Year of 2008)

	Overall average (number of cases)	Community unions	Regional unions	Local unions	National Union of General Workers (NUGW)
Dispute resolved by collective bargaining between the general union and the employer	67.9 (14.8)	74.5	67.4	48.9	64.4
Dispute resolved with the Labour Relations Commission as an intermediary	6.9 (1.5)	6.2	9.5	2.3	6.3
Dispute resolved with a labor tribunal as an intermediary	6.4 (1.4)	5.0	7.4	8.6	4.4
Dispute resolved with an ordinary court as an intermediary	4.1 (0.9)	3.9	3.7	7.2	6.3
Dispute resolved with a labor bureau or labor standards inspection office as an intermediary	3.7 (0.8)	3.1	3.7	4.5	3.1
Dispute resolved with the local government as an intermediary	0.9 (0.2)	0.4	0.5	4.5	0.0
Ended without resolution	10.1 (2.2)	7.0	7.9	24.0	15.6

Note: In the case of the options “Carried over to the following year” and “Other,” the resolution method was unknown, so they have been excluded. The figures for such cases were 4.1 and 1.6, respectively.

Table 4 shows how the applications for collective bargaining for resolving disputes that were made over the course of the year of 2008 ultimately ended. The proportion of disputes that were “resolved voluntarily” by general unions through collective bargaining with employers was quite high, at 67.9% of the total. In the event that a general union cannot voluntarily resolve a dispute due to the employer refusing an application for collective bargaining, for example, it is possible to use a dispute resolution organization such as the

Labour Relations Commission; if we look at the proportion of disputes resolved using such organizations, we can see that 6.9% were resolved with the Labour Relations Commission as an intermediary, 6.4% were resolved with a labor tribunal as an intermediary, 4.1% were resolved with an ordinary court as an intermediary, 3.7% were resolved with a labor bureau or labor standards inspection office as an intermediary, and 0.9% were resolved with the local government as an intermediary. 10.1% ended without being resolved. The voluntary resolution rate was the highest amongst community unions (74.5%).

The voluntary resolution rate for general unions (67.9%) can be said to be high, even in comparison with the success rates for conciliation and mediation undertaken by other organizations involved in the resolution of individual labor disputes. According to Gaku Watanabe (2008), the success rate for conciliation and mediation was 49.6% in the case of ordinary court cases, 41.5% in the case of provisional ruling procedures, 68.8% in the case of labor tribunals, 38.4% in the case of dispute coordinating committees operated by labor bureaus, 43.5% in the case of the Equal Opportunity Conciliation Conference, 67.6% in the case of the Labour Relations Commission, and 73.5% in the case of the Tokyo Metropolitan Labor Consultation Center; accordingly, the voluntary resolution rate for general unions was the third highest, following the cases of the Tokyo Metropolitan Labor Consultation Center and labor tribunals. The proportion ultimately resolved by general unions through bodies such as the intervention of courts, the Labour Relations Commission, or labor bureaus was very high, at 90%.

Figure 1 shows the background to and reasons for labor disputes, as identified by senior officials of general unions. The biggest proportion of respondents (65.4%) selected violations of labor laws by the company, while other issues commonly selected were ignorance of labor laws on the part of managers, at 45.8%, excessively authoritarian management on the part of managers, at 43%, declining corporate performance, at 40.2%, and lack of communication between labor and management, at 23.4%. Those cited as the biggest factors in the background to and reasons for labor disputes were violations of labor laws on the part of companies, at 24.3%, and ignorance of labor laws on the part of managers, at 13.1%. One could say that most labor disputes arise from violations of labor laws on the part of companies and ignorance of labor laws on the part of managers.

Incidentally, if one looks at the various business-related situations on the part of companies that give rise to labor dispute, a strikingly large proportion is accounted for by "There are many companies and groups experiencing declining business performance" (92.5%). Moreover, the issue "Monetary labor conditions, such as wages, lump-sum payments and bonuses, are deteriorating" was seen at the majority of companies (86.9%). Next, the companies experiencing the issue "Non-monetary labor conditions, such as working hours, job transfers, and redeployment" accounted for 68.2%. Moreover, what was characteristic was the fact that more than half (52.3%) pointed out that "There are many disputes at companies where the company president is a relative of the founder, such as their child or wife," while only 29.9% responded that "There are many disputes at companies where the



Figure 1. The Background to and Reasons for Labor Disputes

company president is the founder.” One can see that labor disputes occur more frequently at companies where the founder’s child or wife is the company president than at companies where the founder is the president. The proportion of general unions which were aware that “An increasing number of companies do not respond sincerely to collective bargaining” was around half, at 49.5%. There were comparatively few responses that “There are many disputes at companies that have undergone reorganizations or the transfer of business operations” (30.8%) or “There are many labor disputes in the public sector” (27.1%).

3. The Activities of General Unions and the Status of Members Remaining with the Union

This survey asked what activities the general unions undertook, how their activities

Table 5. Status of Parties to Disputes Remaining in the Union after Dispute Resolution (Select up to 3)

	Overall average	Community unions	Regional unions	Local unions	(%) National Union of General Workers (NUGW)
There are many people who consciously remain in the union because the union helped them, so they want to contribute to union activities.	32.7	41.5	23.8	33.3	28.6
There are many people who remain in the union because the union helped them, so they feel it would be inexcusable to withdraw straight away and will remain in the union for a few months.	55.1	65.9	38.1	77.8	28.6
There are many people who remain in the union because there is a provision that one remains in the union automatically for a certain period of time if one pays settlement money.	9.3	14.6	7.1	0.0	28.6
There are many people who withdraw immediately after paying the settlement money.	26.2	36.6	16.7	27.8	28.6
There are many people who withdraw immediately, without paying the settlement money.	10.3	4.9	11.9	16.7	14.3
There are many people who are treated as though they have withdrawn because they do not pay their union dues.	42.1	51.2	23.8	72.2	28.6
There are many people who are treated as though they have withdrawn because they cannot be contacted.	25.2	29.3	14.3	50.0	0.0
Other	18.7	22.0	21.4	5.6	14.3

are evaluated by the local community, and to what degree union members participate in union activities. Firstly, more than half of general unions take pride in the fact that “We make a big contribution to improving the working environment for local workers” (52.3%), and “Local understanding of union activities is increasing” (54.2%), while almost half responded that “The activities of the union are often reported in the mass media, such as the newspapers” (44.9%). The largest number of respondents selecting these options was accounted for by community unions. All general unions undertaking these kinds of activities responded that “We would like official support,” with the proportion reaching at 58.9%.

At the same time, how long do union members who were facing labor disputes and who joined general unions seeking their resolution remain in the union after their disputes were resolved? If we look specifically at the question of whether workers remain in the general union after their dispute is resolved or whether they withdraw from it (Table 5), firstly, they can be broadly divided into “the group that remains” and “the group that withdraws.” Among “the group that remains” are “those who proactively remain,” who “consciously remain in the union because the union helped them so they want to contribute to union activities,” accounting for 32.7%, and this type of member supports general unions a great deal. Moreover, there are “those who remain out of obligation,” because “the union helped them, so they feel it would be inexcusable to withdraw straight away and will remain in the union for a few months” (55.1%) and “those who remain because they are dependent on rules,” because “there is a provision that one remains in the union automatically for a certain period of time if one pays settlement money” (9.3%). On the other hand, among “the group that withdraws” are “those who withdraw by failing to pay union dues or settlement money,” which includes “those who are treated as though they have withdrawn because they do not pay union dues” (42.1%), “those who withdraw immediately without paying the settlement money” (10.3%), and those who not only do not pay union dues, “but who are treated as though they have withdrawn because they cannot be contacted” (25.2%); in addition, there are “those who withdraw after paying union dues or settlement money,” namely “those who withdraw immediately after paying the settlement money” (26.2%). For general unions, increasing the number of those in “the group that remains,” particularly members who are “those who proactively remain” is a major issue; the union type with the largest number of such members is community unions, at 41.5%.

4. Union Leaders

The number of full-time general union officials is 1.1 on average overall.⁹ If one looks at the number of full-time general union officials, the figures in descending order are

⁹ On the survey form, respondents were asked to fill in the total number of full-time officials and to divide them up into full-time executives and employees/part-timers, filling in the relevant numbers on the form. The results showed that there were 1.5 full-time executives and 0.8 employees/part-timers. Adding the two figures together, the total number of full-time officials is in excess of 1.1 people.

Table 6. The Actual Status of Union Activities on the Part of General Union Leaders

	(%)	
	Overall average	Full-time officials
Generally spend in excess of 8 hours on activities every day	50.5	77.6
Often spend more than 5 days a week on activities	58.9	83.7
Often spend more than 22 days a month on activities	62.6	87.8
Deal with union activities even outside working hours if contacted by a union member	90.7	100.0
Often conduct activities on days off (Saturday, Sunday, public holidays)	80.4	93.9
It would be no exaggeration to say that, as a general rule, every day—24 hours a day, 365 days a year—is labor union time	38.3	46.9

1.5 people at local unions, 1.4 at the National Union of General Workers (NUGW),¹⁰ 1.0 at community unions, and 1.0 at regional unions.

The average age of general union leaders was 53.8 years, the proportion of men was 82.2%, and the number of years of experience was 11.9.

If we look at the status of changes in the number of full-time officials at general unions since 2000, we can see that as a nationwide average, the proportion of unions where there was “no change” is 64.5%, the proportion reporting an “increase” is 18.7%, and the proportion reporting a “decrease” is 2.8%. In descending order by union type, those reporting an “increase” were local unions (27.8%), community unions (22%), and regional unions and NUGW (14.3%). Local unions accounted for the largest number of unions experiencing increases, had no decreases, and had the biggest increase in the number of full-time officials.

If we look at the actual status of the union activities of general union leaders (Table 6), dividing them into the overall average and full-time officials, we can see that 50.5% of leaders (full-time leaders: 77.6%; the same format applies below) “generally spend in excess of 8 hours on activities every day,” 58.9% (83.7%) “often spend more than 5 days a week on activities,” and 80.4% (93.9%) “often conduct activities on days off (Saturday, Sunday, public holidays).” Furthermore, most leaders—90.7% (100%)—“deal with union activities even outside working hours if contacted by a union member,” while as many as 38.3% (46.9%) of general union leaders devote their whole lives to union activities, res-

¹⁰ The fact that one union has six full-time officials pushes up the figures for NUGW as a whole.

ponding that “it would be no exaggeration to say that, as a general rule, every day—24 hours a day, 365 days a year—is labor union time.”

Among the general union leaders conducting such rigorous union activities, 89.7% (93.9%) state that they “feel that union activities are worthwhile,” but 48.6% (51.0%) confess that, financially speaking, “it is hard to make ends meet from the remuneration paid by the union alone.” One wonders how general union leaders are seen by their families. 75.7% (79.6%) think that “their family demonstrates understanding of union work,” but 24.3% (24.5%) perceive that “their family feels that their own work is a nuisance in terms of family life.” Moreover, the lowest share—6.8% (18.4%)—was accounted for by those who responded that they “want their children to do this job as well.” Based on the responses above, the biggest factors in this are believed to be financial reasons.

IV. The Significance of the Existence of General Unions

Looking at the general unions targeted by this survey just in terms of the number of union members, they have no more than 50,000 members, making them smaller than larger unit unions or company federations. However, if we look at the different aspects of the situation, we can see that there is great significance in their existence.

1. People Who Can Take on a Leading Role in the Labor Movement

Amongst the number of new pending cases of coordination by the Labour Relations Commission, the proportion accounted for by general unions climbed to 68.7% in 2008,¹¹ and that share is increasing almost every year. Amidst a situation in which the number of cases of industrial disputes in Japan (strikes lasting at least half a day) has decreased consistently, recently tracking at around 50 cases annually, the status of general unions in the labor movement certainly is not low.

General unions do not simply take on a role as a safe haven for individual workers. They also actively raise legal issues relating to workers placed in a weak position and non-regular workers, such as part-time workers and temporary dispatch workers. The starting point for the community union movement was the opening of the helpline for part-time workers, called “Part-time 110,” which sought to resolve problems affecting part-time workers. Moreover, to a considerable degree, the recent moves focused on amending the Worker Dispatching Act have resulted from general unions such as the Haken Union, which

¹¹ The proportion accounted for by general union cases has been demonstrating an upward trend, rising from 55.2% in 2002 to 57.1% in 2003, 57.4% in 2004, 59.6% in 2005, 58.9% in 2006, and 65.2% in 2007. In the case of general unions, almost half of new pending cases are “last-resort” cases (cases in which the worker joins the general union after the situation that could become a case for coordination has arisen, and where there has been an application from the union in question for the matter to become the subject of coordination); the share of such cases was 31.7% in 2002, 37.9% in 2003, 44.7% in 2004, 49.5% in 2005, 43.0% in 2006, 46.9% in 2007, and 48.3% in 2008 (Central Labor Relations Commission 2008).

focuses on temporary agency workers, raising pertinent issues.

Since 2000, through the revision of labor agreements with companies, enterprise unions have been unionizing part-time workers; factors behind this include their intention to maintain sound labor-management relationships and to defend their organizations (Oh 2004). The relevant enterprise unions are unionizing part-time workers by concluding labor agreements to expand the scope of union members, after persuading companies that they would be unable to maintain sound labor-management relationships if a proportion of employees join a general union and the company is made to accept requests from the general union for collective bargaining. The recent progressive unionization of part-time workers has also been brought about by intensive activities on the part of general unions, albeit indirectly.

Some employers say that they were bewildered by a sudden request from a general union for collective bargaining, but surely they should take it positively, as an opportunity to verify whether they have constructed a workplace environment in which a worker, who joined the general union as a last-resort, could say what he/she thought. Moreover, some enterprise union executives are critical of general unions, but actually, the general union movement is passive rather than active. To be more specific, rather than going to seek out workers who are facing problems in terms of enterprise-based labor-management relationships, the general union movement is one in which they accept workers who come to them in search of a solution to the problems that they are facing.

There are both advantages and disadvantages to the enterprise union and enterprise-based labor-management relationship system in Japan. One is that if labor-management cooperation goes too far, the union can become a “company-controlled union.” Amidst this situation, there are cases, infrequent though they may be, in which a union member or employee of the company concerned who is at a disadvantage joins a general union so as to resolve the problem. In some aspects, general unions, requesting that companies engage in collective bargaining, may have encouraged improvement or revitalization on the part of enterprise unions that have a sense of crisis in regard to labor-management relationships. The existence of general unions, which are outside the company structure, has significance all the more in Japan, where activities by enterprise unions are at the heart of the union movement.

2. Strong Ability to Resolve Individual Labor Disputes

General unions play a role of the utmost importance in resolving “last-resort” labor disputes, where a worker seeks assistance. As described earlier, the voluntary resolution rate in regard to disputes resolved by general unions through collective bargaining with the employers of the workers concerned is 67.9%, which is a high level compared with the success rate of conciliation and mediation undertaken by other government or judicial institutions focused on the resolution of individual labor disputes. The powerful ability of general unions to resolve disputes is based on the professionalism of the union executives, their

wide-ranging networks both within and outside their communities and the exchange of information with members of those networks, the firm faith and zealous spirit of the union executives, and the technique of joint struggle (JILPT 2009, 2010).

General unions not only have a powerful ability to resolve disputes, but also resolve a large number of disputes. During the year 2008, it is estimated that general unions resolved 2,387 disputes¹² voluntarily through collective bargaining with employers. Although this is lower than the 3,234 cases resolved by the dispute coordinating committees of the labor bureaus (2,647 cases of successful mediation and 587 cases withdrawn [Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare 2009]), it is higher than the 271 cases resolved by the Labour Relations Commission (212 cases resolved and 59 cases withdrawn), 1,028 cases resolved by labor tribunals (2007), and 1,114 cases resolved by means of ordinary court cases concerning labor relations (2007).

Hitherto, in many cases there were no accurate statistics concerning the individual labor disputes in which general unions were involved, and it tended to be the case that only examples were taken up. In this survey, responses were not obtained from all general unions, so it is difficult to ascertain the whole picture, but the high voluntary resolution rate and large number of individual labor disputes resolved by general unions is evident, with the results comparing favorably with those of government and judicial institutions. Moreover, it is not unusual for disputes that cannot be resolved by government bodies to ultimately be resolved by general unions.

3. Making Labor Problems Visible

General unions are open unions in two senses. They have both an open entrance and an open exit. Basically, they are open organizations that anyone can join as long as they are a worker, and the people who come to and join general unions have information about a variety of labor problems. Consequently, general unions have a great deal of information about real-life labor problems that exist in society. On the other hand, they are open organizations from which union members can withdraw with hardly any restrictions, and general unions proactively disclose information about unions, both within the union and outside it. The disclosure and visualization of information is undertaken proactively because while it is an internal measure that must be carried out in order to facilitate an understanding of union members, of whom there is a high turnover, it is also a social measure that must be disclosed to many mass media outlets in order to improve the actual situation with regard to various outrageous labor problems. General unions play a major role in making labor problems visible, and make no small contribution to the formation of more desirable labor rules and the elimination of labor problems. Because general unions are open in terms of their leaders as well, there is constant renewal and reform from within the organization, which

¹² These figures are based on the average number of new applications for collective bargaining made by general unions during the year 2008 (17.4 cases) × the number of general unions targeted by the survey (202 unions) × the voluntary resolution rate (67.9%).

increases these unions' ability to make labor problems visible.

V. Proposals for the Government, Labor and Employers Based on the Results of Research into General Unions

Finally, I would like to make some proposals to the government, labor and employers, based on the findings of this paper and research carried out hitherto. Firstly, the government should give specific consideration to its approach to official support for general unions. General unions, which deal with many individual labor disputes, resolve disputes through collective bargaining with employers, on behalf of workers who have suffered unfair treatment caused by violations or ignorance of labor law, and who seek refuge with a union in order to find a solution. There are not a few cases in which issues that government bodies could not resolve have been solved by general unions. In the process of resolving issues, general unions provide employers with opportunities to learn about labor law, including the principles of case law. One could say that ensuring thorough knowledge of and compliance with labor law is the role of government, but general unions take on this task. Furthermore, they respond to countless labor consultations from workers, and provide information about labor problems and issues relating to labor administration. Consideration should be given to providing proactive official support to general unions, which fulfill such roles.

In the meantime, employers should strive for smoother communication between management and labor. Labor-management communication is a management resource that decreases management crises and increases the morale, skills, labor efficiency, and teamwork of employees (Oh 2009). In almost all cases, workers who visit general unions cannot raise issues within their companies because of a lack of communication between labor and management. Moreover, as pointed out by the executives of general unions, the emergence of disputes results from either violations or ignorance of labor law on the part of employers, but if employers do not reject the general unions that point out such problems, but respond with integrity, disputes will be resolved swiftly and smoothly. All organizations face problems. What is important is whether or not one notices them and can resolve them. From this perspective, it would be desirable for employers to proactively utilize the raising of problems and applications for collective bargaining by general unions as a good opportunity to strive to build better communication between labor and management, and to refine its management resources.

Finally, there is a suggestion for labor unions. Amidst globalization, labor unions are undertaking intensive international exchange, but it appears that interaction between domestic unions, particularly with general unions, is surprisingly sparse. There are many labor and social problems that one does not notice in the arena of labor-management relationships within companies, and general unions have an abundance of information regarding these and are striving to resolve these problems. Moreover, in the process of negotiating with many companies, general unions have developed great insight into more desirable ap-

proaches to corporate management and labor-management relationships. It is possible to learn a lot from interaction with general unions, and to utilize this knowledge in improving labor-management relationships within companies and constructing a better society. Interaction with general unions, whose door is always open, could become an opportunity to revitalize the labor movement in Japan.

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