

Beyond corporations

The nurturing of human resource talent over a long period of time within the company itself, and avoiding layoff of regular employees to the maximum extent possible: this was the long-term employment system that was practiced in Japan. It can be said that the organizational structure of the enterprise unions that are the majority in Japan are suited to this type of domestic labor market. This is precisely the reason why any fluctuations in the long-term employment system can bring forth problems that exist in these enterprise unions.

Let us seek to have employees learn occupational skills beyond the corporation. In the year 2003, the Japanese Electrical Electronic and Information Union started the “Activity of Electrical Industry Career Academy” to develop the occupational skills of union members. The academy will train 600 “career development and advancement specialists” in the span of three years. These specialists will plan and run human resource development and career development-related training programs for the other members of the respective labor unions that they belong to.

A further step is to make it possible for union members from other companies to participate in training courses conducted by a company belonging to an affiliated union. There are several companies, including Hitachi, Ltd. and Matsushita Electronic Industrial Co., Ltd., that have already consented to providing such training courses. The idea is to develop this endeavor, and create a qualification system in the future for a cross-sectional industry-wide evaluation of technical skills. The idea seeks to break the confines of a corporation. This could be said to be a groundbreaking attempt for the labor unions of Japan.

A labor union that organizes people belonging to the same trade over and above the confines of an organization is known as a craft union. The Nippon Careservice Craft Union (NCCU) prides itself on being the first such labor union in Japan. The union conducts negotiations with industrial associations

etc., and seeks to establish a wage system across all companies with the purpose of improving working conditions for careservice workers. It began in 2000 with 7,000 union members, a number that expanded to 45,000 by the year 2003.

A “representative system” that cuts both ways

The Japanese Trade Union Confederation is setting up “regional unions” where part-time workers can join as individual members in prefectural offices across the county. They are now studying the possibility of expanding such unions. This is also a strategy for offsetting the defects of enterprise unions.

Labor organizations are also seeking out many different experiments. However, re-empowerment is not simple for labor unions. In such scenarios, employee representation is the system that comes to mind. It differs from labor unions in the sense that employees select representatives from each business site. Under this system, they are legally obliged to set up a committee for holding talks with the employer. The Japanese Trade Union Confederation is in the process of putting together an essential structure for the legal outline of this system.

The Confederation’s proposal is to make this system legally binding for business establishments which do not have labor unions, where membership would include more than half the workforce, and to dissolve the committee once such a union is established. This committee also has possible intentions for creating labor unions.

However, there is no cohesive opinion within the Confederation. Committees that are established through the employee representation system do not enjoy the right to engage in labor disputes. If this system is institutionalized, a need for labor unions may not be felt. Because of this, there is also a deeply-rooted opinion for playing it safe.