

# Decline or Revival?: Japanese Labor Unions<sup>1</sup>

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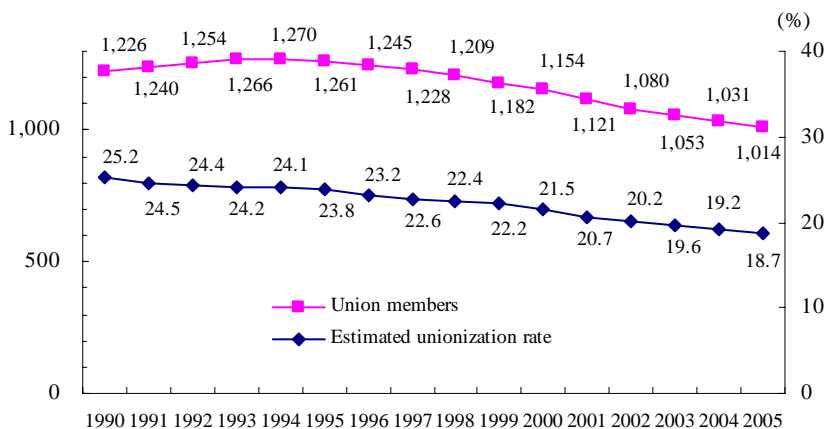
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## 1. Signs of Decline

Since the 1990s, there have been signs indicating that Japanese labor unions are on the decline.

First, the number of union members has been showing an absolute decline since 1994 as indicated in Figure 1. It is widely known that the unionization rate has been declining: the rate, which had been 34.3% in 1975, dropped to 18.7% in 2005. However, the following facts are not as widely known. The number of union members has been decreasing after reaching the postwar peak of 12.7 million in 1994. In 2005, the figure dropped to 10.14 million. This means that the number of union members has been declining at the average

**Figure 1. Number of union members and unionization rate**



**Sources:** Ministry of Labour/Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare, *Rodo Kumiai Kiso Chosa Hokoku* [Basic Survey on Labor Unions] (the 1993 and 2005 versions). The number of union members is calculated on the basis of single union membership per person (numbers were rounded off to the nearest thousand). The estimated unionization rate is calculated by dividing the number of union members by the number of employees as of June in a given year as indicated in *Rodoryoku Chosa* [Labor Force Survey].

<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed analysis, see Nakamura and Rengo Sogo Seikatsu Kaihatsu Kenkyujo, ed. (2005) which this essay is based on.

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rate of just over 2% each year. Japanese unions have been shrinking since the mid-1990s.

Second, labor unions no longer appear to play a significant role in reducing the turnover rate according to a study which has used data from the mid-1990s (Tsuru 2002, 200-201). In other words, the function of labor unions as the representative of worker interest has been weakened. The role of labor unions has traditionally been understood in the following fashion. Unions can transmit grievances and demands at the workplace level to management. When workers become dissatisfied with their work conditions, the manner in which work is done, management policy, or management style, they can communicate their discontent to their companies via unions without having to leave their jobs. The presence of unions thus leads to a low turnover rate which in turn reduces various costs (Freeman and Medoff 1984). Several studies on the effects of Japanese labor unions also have supported such interpretation (Muramatsu 1984; Nakamura, Sato, and Kamiya 1988, 47-69; Tachibanaki and Rengo Sogo Seikatsu Kaihatsu Kenkyujo 1993, 173-93). However, Tsuru (2002), in a study of effects of unions in 1995, rejects the notion that unions reduce the turnover rate. Since the study examines the time in which Japan was in the middle of the Heisei recession, one could argue that this was a temporary phenomenon. But there is no guarantee that this was indeed the case.

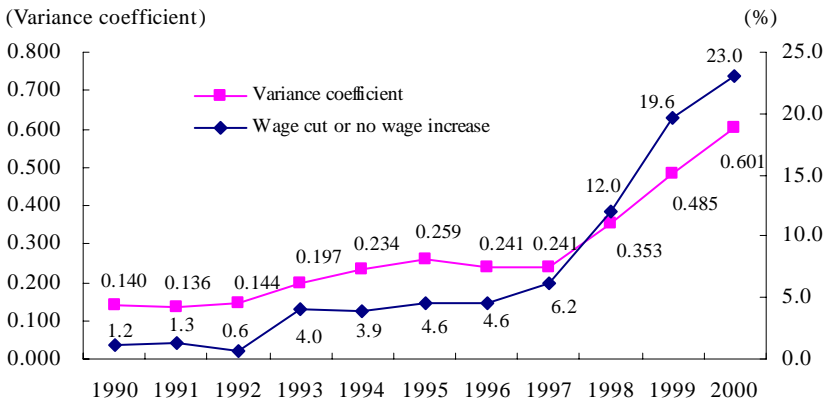
Third, *Shunto*, or the annual spring labor offensive, has collapsed. Wage effects of unions in Japan have never been clearly demonstrated even in studies based on data from the 1980s (Nakamura, Sato, and Kamiya 1988, 29-30; Tachibanaki and Rengo Sogo Seikatsu Kaihatsu Kenkyujo 1993, 195-207). A study based on data from 1992, the time when the Heisei recession began to fully start, has not demonstrated wage effects of unions either (Tsuru 2002, 94-101). However, I did not view this as a problem. There were two reasons for this. First, it is only in the United States where the wage effects of unions become clearly visible. In other nations such as Britain, (West) Germany, Austria, Australia, and Switzerland, unions do not display dramatic wage effects (Blanchflower and Freeman 1992), and Japan is no exception. Second, I attributed the invisibility of wage effects of Japanese unions to *Shunto*'s success. In *Shunto*, unions won wage increases by negotiating with companies. The media would report the results of the negotiations, and socially acceptable de facto wage standards (*seken soba*) would be established. Managers of nonunion companies felt compelled to at least meet such standards. As a

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result, wages of nonunion workers also increased. This was a process where unions alone worked hard while nonunion workers enjoyed the fruits of the unions' labor for free. One can describe *Shunto* as a socially enforced wage-hike mechanism.

However, *Shunto* collapsed in the late 1990s. Figure 2 shows changes in the variance coefficient of average wage increase rates and the proportion of companies with no wage increase (including those which gave wage cuts) between 1990 and 2000. In this figure, the variance coefficient shows how variant wage increase rates are. When the variance coefficient goes up, the variance of wage increase rates also increases. *Shunto* was in essence a collective effort to establish socially acceptable wage standards. Thus, it should have functioned to limit the variance of wage increase rates and lower the variance

**Figure 2. Variance of wage increase rates and proportion of companies without wage increases**



**Sources:** Ministry of Labour, *Shiryō Chin Age no Jittai* [Survey on Wage Increase] (1991-2000) and Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare, *Shiryō Chin Age no Jittai* [Survey on Wage Increase] (2001). The variance coefficient here is a quartile variance coefficient which is calculated in the following manner. First, average wage increase rates of companies are grouped into the upper quartile (A), the lower quartile (B), and the median (C). The variance coefficient is computed by the formula  $(A-B)/2C$ . The variance coefficient increases as the difference between A and B widens. “Wage cut or no wage increase” indicates the proportion of companies with wage increases of 0 yen or less. In 1998, the scope of the survey was expanded to include more companies in the service sector. However, data for the same group of companies surveyed in the pre-1998 surveys are used with respect to both the variance coefficient and “wage cut or no wage increase.”

coefficient. Figure 2 clearly demonstrates how *Shunto* has ceased to function as a socially enforced wage-hike mechanism particularly after 1998. The variance coefficient rapidly began to increase after 1998, and the number of companies refusing to give wage increase also began to skyrocket. According to the surveys used for creating Figure 2, the proportion of companies without wage increases was 24.4% in 2001, and the figure rose to 36.1% in 2002.

*Shunto* has collapsed, and the notion of socially acceptable wage standards has disappeared. For this reason, studies on the wage effects of unions began to appear after around 2000 (Hara 2003; Noda 2005).

The absolute decline in the number of union members, the diminished role of unions as the representative of worker interest, and the collapse of *Shunto* are all indications that Japanese unions have begun to decline. However, these are not the only challenges that confront Japanese unions.

## **2. A Formidable Barrier: Policy Participation**

Expanding labor's political participation was one of the goals in the founding of Rengo (the Japanese Trade Union Confederation), the biggest national center of Japanese unions. To paraphrase Omi (1994, 316), the "founding of Minkan Rengo (the Japan Private Sector Trade Union Confederation) in 1987 and Rengo two years later as the entity unifying government and private-sector unions brought to fruition the long-standing campaign for increased policy participation continuing from the Policy Promotion Council and Zenmin Rokyo (the Japanese Private Sector Trade Union Council)". Around the time of Rengo's founding, this campaign achieved a significant measure of success as exemplified by the full implementation of a 40 hour limit on weekly working hours (Nakamura and Miura 2001, 398-455).

However, Rengo's policy participation began to face a serious challenge in the mid-1990s. The challenge came from the Deregulation Subcommittee (the Regulatory Reform Committee from 1998 to 2001 and the Council for Regulatory Reform from 2001 and 2004) established in 1995 (Nakamura and Miura 2001, 455-544; Miura 2005; Nakamura 2006).

Prior to 1995, labor law revision bills were normally submitted to the Diet only after the deliberation council in the Ministry of Labour consisting of public, labor, and management representatives had discussed them and reached some consensus. Rengo in effect participated in the policymaking process in a substantial fashion. However, the initiative over labor law revisions shifted to

the Deregulation Subcommittee in the cabinet (and its successors) in 1995. Now the subcommittee sets agendas and overall direction of revisions first, and then the cabinet approves revision bills including their timetables for introduction to the Diet. Only then are revision bills introduced to the deliberation council. The deliberation council is no longer a forum for discussing and shaping revision bills through consensus; it has become a place for discussing revision bills handed down from above. Much of the power of the deliberation council and Rengo to shape policy has been taken away.

The 1998 revision of the Labor Standards Law (the introduction of the discretionary work system), the 1999 revision of the Worker Dispatching Law (deregulation of worker dispatching with a negative list of work types that need to be regulated), the 2003 revision of the Labor Standards Law (legal stipulation of rules for dismissal), and the 2003 revision of the Worker Dispatching Law (further expansion of the worker dispatching industry) are all representative cases in which Rengo was confronted with a serious challenge.

In each of the cases, representatives of labor and management clashed with each other intensely in the deliberation council. In all cases, Rengo opposed revision while management supported it. In the 1998 and 2003 revisions of the Labor Standards Law and the 2003 revision of the Worker Dispatching Law, the deliberation council could not effect any change to the revision bills. Only in the case of the 1999 Worker Dispatching Law revision, Rengo was able to win an amendment with respect to worker dispatching to production line jobs by resorting to boycotting the council.

Having lost its ability to participate in the policymaking process through the council, the only means left for Rengo was to realize amendments in the Diet. Rengo's only strategy was to prepare alternative revisions and approach sympathetic political parties in order to realize favorable amendments while closely cooperating with the Democratic Party. This strategy paid off in the 1998 and 2003 revisions of the Labor Standards Law and the 1999 revision of the Worker Dispatching Law but did not lead to any substantial amendment in the 2003 revision of the Worker Dispatching Law.

In reality the victories of Rengo in the Diet were of a rather negative and reactive nature because these were not cases where Rengo realized policies it actively supported. Rather, the goal of Rengo's legislative campaign was to reduce the effectiveness of policies which it opposed and limit their negative effects on workers. Rengo was able to achieve success only to that extent.

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The policymaking process in labor policy thus went through a dramatic change in the 1990s. The deliberation council has been displaced from the policymaking process while the cabinet's Deregulation Subcommittee has come to dictate agenda-setting. Rengo has been able to participate in the substantial debate over labor law revisions only through the Diet. Rengo has been pursuing the campaign for increased policy participation, but it is now faced with a challenge.

### **3. One Path to Revival**

Japanese labor unions are faced with a crisis. How can they find a way out of the crisis and move toward revival? First, they must make an earnest effort to expand their organizations. Organizational expansion is necessary in order to counter the decline of unionism, revive the mechanism of *Shunto*, and overcome the challenge to labor's policy participation.

Enterprise unions are the basic constituents of Japanese unions. The fortunes of unionized companies therefore greatly affect the total number of Japanese union members. In other words, the number of union members almost automatically increases when unionized companies are performing well and hiring new employees. By the same token, membership will drop almost automatically when unionized companies are not performing well. According to Nakamura (2005), the continuing decline in union membership in Japan since the mid-1990s is attributable to a major reduction of union members caused by corporate restructuring. On average, about 60,000 workers become union members as a result of unionization of new enterprises each year. However, this increase is hardly sufficient for unions in keeping up with the speed in which they are losing their existing members.

Unions have only two choices if they are to stop the decline in membership and start expanding. One is simply to hope that the Japanese economy will come out of the recession allowing companies to increase employees. In other words, it is to hope for salvation through changes in external circumstances. Another is to intensify their organizing efforts much further. Unions must pursue the strategy below if they are to find a way out of the crisis on their own.

According to Rengo Sogo Seikatsu Kaihatsu Kenkyujyo (2003, 98), 67.9% of 1,072 surveyed nonunion workers replied unions were necessary. 32.1% replied unions were unnecessary. The group that believed unions were

necessary was twice the size of the group that did not. Compared to nonunion workers who do not believe unions are necessary, those who do tend to believe more strongly that unions bring positive benefits to society, companies, and individual union members. These workers are placing high hopes on labor unions.

However, their hopes do not easily translate into actions. Table 1 shows responses of nonunion workers to a question measuring their interest in union membership. 3.2% replied “I want to join” while 10.2% responded “I may join if recruited.” This means only 13.4% showed interest in joining unions. Even among the nonunion workers believing unions are absolutely necessary, only 32.5% – a combination of those who responded “I want to join” (14.1%) and “I may join if recruited” (18.4%) – showed interest in joining.

**Table 1. Interest in union membership among nonunion workers**

	“I want to join”	“I may join if recruited”	“I do not want to join”	“Not sure”	No response	Total
Absolutely necessary	14.1	18.4	17.8	39.9	9.8	100.0 (163)
Somewhat necessary	1.4	11.5	23.4	51.5	12.2	100.0 (565)
Unnecessary	0.9	4.1	39.5	47.4	8.1	100.0 (344)
Total	3.2	10.2	27.7	48.4	10.5	100.0 (1,072)

**Source:** Rengo Sogo Seikatsu Kaihatsu Kenkyujo (2003, 104). There is a significant deviation at the one-percent level between each group (Pearson’s Chi-squared test).

The reason why even nonunion workers who support the idea that unions are necessary hesitate to act is because they are very concerned about what they see as the downside of organizing and joining unions (Nakamura 2005). They are concerned if their “managers might censure” them, their “relationships with others at work might suffer”, or they “might be perceived as having an ideological bias” as a result of becoming a union member. They also believe that they might “have to dedicate a lot of time to union activities”, “be bound by obligations and responsibilities”, and “be mobilized for electoral campaigns.”

Unions will be able to bridge the huge gap between the high expectations nonunion workers have toward unions and the actual behavior of nonunion workers if they approach nonunion workers, provide them with support against possible censure by management, mitigate their misperceptions and fears, and

inform them about the responsibilities that union membership entails.

In reality, however, unions rarely provide such assistance (Nakamura 2005). Out of the 187 enterprise unions that were created between the 1970s and the 1990s in Tokyo, a mere 21.4% were unions that were founded as a result of initiatives taken by labor unions.<sup>2</sup> The remaining 80% or so were founded as a direct result of initiatives by one or more nonunion workers who held grievances over work conditions or management style. Predominant among such grievances are issues related to working hours such as long hours, unpaid overtime, and difficulty in taking day-offs and breaks and issues related to communication between labor and management such as non-disclosure of managerial information and dictatorial managerial styles. Clearly, unions can increase their opportunities for expansion by addressing these grievances of nonunion workers, but they rarely try to reach out to them.

This does not mean that labor unions are not taking any measures to organize at all. Industrial unions, headquarters of national centers, and locals are responsible for carrying out organizing efforts. With respect to locals, the unions that can fully fulfill this responsibility are those with personnel specially in charge of organizing efforts. Table 2 and 3 indicate organizing activities of Tokyo-based 70 locals. As Table 2 clearly shows, unions with personnel for organizing activities are maintaining active organizing campaigns by making a list of nonunion enterprises, approaching managers and workers of nonunion enterprises, and offering consultation concerning unionization.

Table 3 shows results of organizing activities of the 70 unions over the past five years. The unions with organizers have been able to create 4.56 unions and organize 205.3 workers on average over the past years. On the other hand, those without such personnel have only been able to create 0.33 unions and organize 7.15 workers on average. The unions with organizers have had much more success in organizing nonunion workers than those without such personnel.

There is a ray of hope for the revival of unions. The key is to assign personnel for organizing and focus on efforts to organize nonunion workers. Industrial unions have already begun improving their systems for organizing nonunion workers (Nakamura 2001). In the meantime, Local Rengo, Rengo's

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<sup>2</sup> 10.7% were those formed by organizers of industrial unions. 10.7% were those organized by unions of parent companies.



**Table 2. Organizing activities (multiple response)**

	With organizers	Without organizers	Total	Test
None	6.3	9.1	7.1	
Making a list of nonunion enterprises	33.3	27.3	31.4	
Contacting managers and workers of nonunion enterprises	35.4	4.5	25.7	***
Making a list of existing unaffiliated unions	45.8	40.9	44.3	
Contacting existing unaffiliated unions	68.8	54.5	64.3	
Street campaigns and distribution of pamphlets	45.8	36.4	42.9	
Consultation on unionization	64.6	18.2	50.0	***
Inducing workers who come seeking for advice on other matters to organize	39.6	22.7	34.3	
Others	10.4	9.1	10.0	
Unknown	2.1	0.0	1.4	
Total	100.0 (48)	100.0 (22)	100.0 (70)	
Cumulative	343.7	213.6	302.9	

**Source:** Nakamura (2005). \*\*\* indicates that Pearson's Chi-squared test showed a statistically significant deviation at the one-percent level.

**Table 3. Results of efforts to organize nonunion workers**

	Average (unions, persons)	Standard deviation	Number of surveyed unions	F-ratio	
Number of unions	With organizers	4.56	8.35	45	5.318 **
	Without organizers	0.33	0.48		
Number of union members	With organizers	205.3	421.96	44	4.369 **
	Without organizers	7.15	16.2		

**Source:** The same as Table 2.

local centers, are supporting these efforts (Nakamura and Miura 2005).

Unions need to take the following steps. First, they need to improve their systems for organizing workers. Then specially assigned organizers will contact nonunion workers to address their grievances over working hours and labor-management communication. Furthermore, unions will need to support workers against any possible pressure from managers, mitigate their fear and misperception that union membership will negatively affect their relationships with others at work, and inform them of the obligations and responsibilities accompanying union membership.

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#### **4. Targets for Organizing Efforts**

One strategy for organizing nonunion workers has been described above. Who are the targets of this strategy? As pointed out, 2/3 of nonunion workers believe that unions are necessary. What are the attributes of these workers? The study by Hara and Sato (2005) has clarified the profile of the targets with its quantitative analysis of data in the Rengo Sogo Seikatsu Kaihatsu Kenkyujo (2003). Some of its findings contradict the conventional wisdom.

Let us look at the individual attributes of the target groups. The older a workers is, the stronger his/her belief in the need for unions will become. Since workers generally increase their influence at the workplace as they get older, it is necessary to win over older workers first. Seniority is the only single attribute that counts. Educational backgrounds and gender do not make any difference. Higher educational backgrounds do not cause workers to distance themselves from unions.

Let us now turn to workplaces, occupations, and forms of employment. Attitudes of workers toward unions are not influenced by which sector they are in. The growth of the service economy is not a cause of the decline in union membership. The number of nonunion workers believing in the necessity of unions will increase with company size. Companies of medium or larger size should be targeted since large companies already have a high organization rate. The blue-collar/white-collar distinction is also a non-factor. The growth of white-collar employment cannot explain the decline in union membership either. Surprisingly, differences in form of employment do not influence attitudes of workers toward unions either. There is no difference between regular workers and non-regular workers such as part-time or dispatched workers in their view on the necessity of labor unions. The diversification in forms of employment is not a cause of the decline of labor unions either.

Let us examine work conditions and work environments. Workers with a low annual income are more likely to support the view that unions are necessary. Nonunion workers who are insecure about their work environment and work conditions are more likely to support such view. Regardless of type of workplace or employment status, workers will strongly believe that unions are necessary as long as they are underpaid and working in an unstable work environment. These workers are waiting for unions to reach out to them.

Let us look at attitudes toward labor unions. Nonunion workers who believe that unions have positive effects upon society, companies, and

individual union members are more likely to hold the view that unions are necessary. Nonunion workers who are concerned about the negative impact of union membership are less likely to support such a view. These are both logical and understandable results. As pointed out already, however, the key is that unions can resolve many of the concerns of nonunion workers about the negative impact of union membership by persuading and providing them with support. These obstacles can be somehow overcome by the persuasion and support provided by unions.

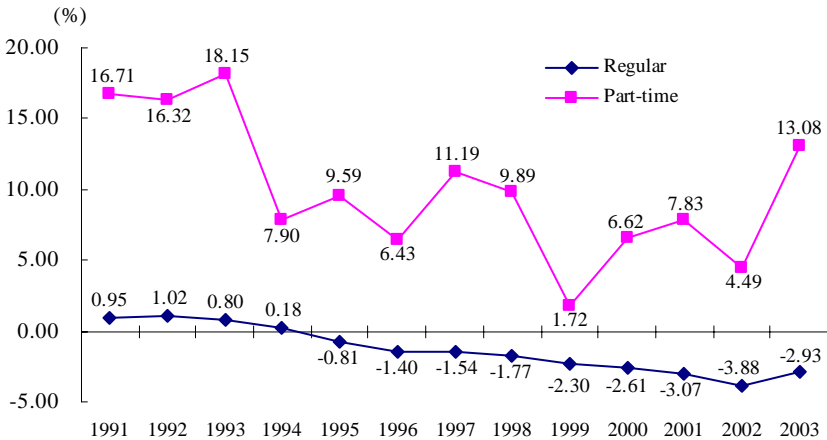
The last issue is how knowledge of workers' rights might make a difference. Nonunion workers who know the legal rights of workers are more likely to believe unions are necessary. Because they understand their rights, these workers can recognize when their rights are violated. Fearing that management might censure them or their relations with others at work might suffer, however, they might hesitate to confront management individually even if their rights are violated. But if they have someone to stand together with them, they might be able to stand up to their managers and communicate their grievances. This is probably why they believe unions are necessary.

Contrary to the conventional wisdom, the growth of the service economy, the increase of white-collar employment, the increasingly high educational backgrounds of workers, and the diversification in forms of employment are not causing nonunion workers to distance themselves from unions. Figure 3 compares the rates of change in the number of unionized regular workers and the number of unionized part-time workers between 1990 and 2003. "Unionized regular workers" in this figure refers to union members who are not part-time workers.

The number of unionized regular workers was showing an increase until 1994, but the rate of increase stayed around 1%. The number has been sliding since 1995. In contrast, the number of unionized part-time workers has been increasing each year. The largest annual rate of increase was 18.15% while the smallest was 1.72%. The number of unionized part-time workers has been increasing at the average rate of 9.99% each year.

Older workers, workers at mid-size or larger companies, and workers with a good grasp of workers' rights are important targets. Those who work in unstable work environments under unfavorable work conditions are also an important target.

**Figure 3. Rates of change in the number of union members:  
Regular workers and part-time workers**



**Sources:** Ministry of Labour, *Rodo Kumiai Kiso Chosa Hokoku* [Basic Survey on Labor Unions] (1993), Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare, *Rodo Kumiai Kiso Chosa Hokoku* [Basic Survey on Labor Unions] (2003), and Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare website. The number of union members is calculated on the basis of single union membership per person. The number of unionized regular workers is calculated by subtracting the number of unionized part-time workers from the total number of union members. A part-time worker is a worker who works shorter working hours compared to regular workers at a given workplace. Workers who work fewer workdays per week are considered part-time workers even if their daily working hours may be identical to those of regular workers. Workers who are called “part-time workers” or “part-timers” are also considered part-time workers.

For unions, these targets are a given. On the other hand, there are targets that unions can work to transform. They are workers who have negative images of union membership and workers who do not have a strong grasp of workers’ rights. Unions can influence the former group by contacting and talking to them directly. With regard to the latter too, unions can improve their understanding by making direct contacts as well as organizing street campaigns. Unions can expand their targets through such efforts.

## 5. Conclusion

Japanese labor unions have been confronted with a crisis since the 1990s. The absolute decline in the number of union members, the diminished

influence of unions as the representative of worker interest, and the collapse of *Shunto* are all signs that Japanese labor unions are beginning to decline. At the same time, Rengo's long-standing campaign for increased policy participation has come to face a major obstacle.

Organizational expansion is one of the ways in which unionism in Japan can be revived. According to the data used in this essay, 2/3 of nonunion workers believe that unions are necessary. These workers are placing great hopes on labor unions. However, their hopes do not easily lead them to take action. Existing unions, such as industrial unions, will first need to improve their systems for organizing and directly contact nonunion workers in order to close the gap between their hopes and behavior.

The targets for unions' organizing efforts have been clearly identified now. The growth of the service economy, the predominance of white-collar employment, the increasingly high educational backgrounds of workers, and the diversification in forms of employment are not causing nonunion workers to distance themselves from unions. Older workers, workers at mid-size or larger companies, workers who hold positive views of unions, and workers who understand their rights as workers are important targets. People who work in unstable work environments under unfavorable work conditions constitute another important target group.

Even with respect to workers who have negative perceptions of union membership and workers with poor understanding of their rights as workers, unions can change their perceptions and raise their level of awareness by directly contacting them.

Using data from the 2001 House of Councilors election, Bessho and Hara (2005) have conducted a quantitative analysis of the influence of union membership on voting behavior. According to this study, union membership increases the probability that a worker will vote. This is so even if factors such as individual attributes and interest in the election are taken into consideration. Even if the possibility of reverse causation that those workers who are more likely to vote belong to unions is considered, the presumed result is the same. Union membership also influences which party a worker is likely to vote for. Here too, union membership increases the probability that a worker will vote for the Democratic Party regardless of individual attributes, political orientation (conservative or progressive), and party the worker supports. Those who support the Democratic Party naturally are more likely to vote for the

Democratic Party. Even if workers are not supporters of the Democratic Party, however, their union membership alone will increase the probability that they will vote for the Democratic Party.

Unions can significantly influence electoral results. By extension, an absolute decline in the number of union members can negatively affect the parties supported by unions. This can in turn magnify the challenge to Rengo's policy participation. In respect to this issue too, unions can overcome the challenge by expanding their organizational base.

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