
Japan's Labor Unions: Past, Present, Future

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Enterprise unions have been viewed as one of the Japanese-style employment systems; following the harsh labor disputes of the 1950s and 60s, the labor-management consultation system was improved and relationships based on collaboration and cooperation with those in management were created. As a result, although enterprise unions have contributed to increases in productivity at companies, they also face problems such as the organizational format centered on regular employees and the decline in the unionization ratio that this has brought about, as well as the difficulty in union participation rate that transcends the boundaries of individual companies, a decrease in organizational strength due to the replacement of union officials within a short period of time, and the stagnation of activities at the workplace level, due to the lack of full-time officials. The Institute for Industrial Relation and Labor Policy, Chubu conducted a survey of the actual situation in 2008-2009, which revealed the actual status of labor-management relations in the workplace and issues relating to this; specifically, this included the fact that there is an awareness that there are good relations between labor and management, but interest in labor union activities among union members has declined, discussions at workplace union meetings are sluggish, and one can see a reduction in workplace labor union activities. What is required is for enterprise unions to alter the style of their activities to suit changes in society, by such means as issuing statements to management from a broader perspective and a medium-to long-term viewpoint.

I. The Objective of This Article

Enterprise unions have been taken up as an example of Japanese-style employment systems. The fact that the organizational unit of labor unions is the “company,” rather than the industry, occupation or region, has been understood as “something typically Japanese,” which differs from labor unions in the USA and European countries. Moreover, the basic stance toward their activities is focused on cooperation and discussion between labor and management, and only a very small minority of labor unions engages in labor-management negotiations based on a position of conflicting interests between the two sides from the outset.

Such labor-management relations have been highly praised as one element shaping the competitiveness of Japanese companies. However, with the union participation ratio having fallen to 18.5%, the presence of labor unions is becoming dilute not only amidst society as a whole, but even within companies.

After providing a broad overview of the current status of Japanese labor unions, this article summarizes the problems faced by enterprise unions. In addition, it analyzes the current status of labor union activities at the workplace level and issues relating to these, based

on knowledge gained by the author from a survey in which he participated, and discusses the best approach to enterprise unions in Japan in the future.

II. A Few Facts about Labor Unions

1. The Decline in the Union Participation Ratio

According to the 2010 Basic Survey on Labour Unions, there are around 26,000 labor unions in Japan (single labor unions), with about 10 million people being affiliated to a labor union. The majority of these are labor unions organized in individual companies, while labor unions with other organizational formats are limited to the minority, such as the National Federation of Construction Workers' Unions and the All Japan Seamen's Union.

After reaching a record high of 55.8% in 1949, the union participation ratio remained in the low 30% range from the 1950s until the mid-1970s. However, as a result of the first oil crisis in 1973 and the belt-tightening that followed, the increase in the number of regular employees was curbed, so the rate continued to fall from 1975 until 2008. In 2009, due in part to the fact that there was growing unionization of part-time workers, the rate increased by just 0.4 points on the previous year, and remained the same in 2010. However, one still cannot say whether this has halted the 34-year decline in the unionization rate.

Having said that, the unionization rate of part-time workers is growing steadily. If one looks at the estimated unionization rate of part-time workers, one can see that it has doubled, from 2.6% in 2000 to 5.6% in 2010. Moreover, the proportion of union members accounted for by part-time workers rose from 2.3% in 2000 to 7.0% in 2009.

2. The Roles of Industrial Unions and National Centers Are Also Important

It is reasonable to say that enterprise unions are a feature of Japan's employment system, but, as pointed out by Nakamura (2009) and Nitta (2008), it is not necessarily the case that enterprise unions act independently. Three-quarters of enterprise unions, accounting for 90% of union members, are affiliated to an industrial union. This fact indicates that enterprise unions recognize the significance of acting in collaboration with other unions.

3. The Reduction in the Number of Strikes

Strikes are used by labor unions as a means of negotiating with management and passing on requests to them. The Survey on Labour Disputes investigates the number of man-days lost each year as a result of strikes. The post-Second World War peak was 15.1 million days in 1952. Subsequently, the number ranged from 3.5 to 6 million days, falling continuously after recording a figure of 8.016 million days in 1975, reaching just 7,492 days in 2009. With regard to labor disputes in 2010, the number of cases fell by 10 (20.8%), with the number of people participating in industrial action falling by 1,149 (31.7%); although the number of man-days lost to strikes doubled to 15,752 days, there was no change in the fact that it was still a rather low level.

Strikes are an effective means of negotiating when the economy is good, but when corporate performance is poor, they actually please management. The decline in the number of strikes is partly due to the fact that relationships of trust between labor and management in Japan have improved, and it has become possible to reach an agreement without resorting to force in the form of a strike, but one could also say that the stagnation of the economy has also had an impact.

However, the problem is that the number of union members with experience of going on strike has declined considerably, so the transmission of the skills for holding a strike is being disrupted. This situation applies not only to labor unions, but also to the management side. In holding a strike, there are proceedings and actions that both the labor union and management must implement. The fact that this has not adequately been conveyed means that the “trump card” that is a strike will become unable to be used. It would be wonderful if it was not necessary to go out on strike, but it is necessary to ensure that this is possible when needed.

4. The Stagnation of Labor-Management Consultation Organizations

Labor-management consultation organizations have played an important role in communication between labor and management. They provide a place where representatives of management executives and ordinary workers can exchange opinions directly, making it possible to share information when communication through conventional organizational channels may become bogged down. In this sense as well, they should be a powerful forum for information-gathering for management executives, but from looking at the Survey on Labour-Management Communications, one would have to say that these organizations have been in decline since the latter half of the 1990s. At the time of the first survey in 1972, they had been established in more than 60% of offices, but the proportion has declined steadily, to 58.1% in 1989, 55.7% in 1994, 41.8% in 1999, and 37.3% in 2004. The figure recovered slightly to 39.6% in 2009, but it is still only around the 40% level.

Labor-management consultation organizations were established in 83.3% of undertakings with labor unions as of 2009, but the figure for undertakings with no labor unions was 19.9%. This proportion has declined steadily from 38.7% in 1989, to 17.1% in 1999, and 15.0% in 2004. One can see that there is a big difference in the establishment of labor-management consultation organizations, depending on whether or not there is a labor union.

5. It Took Many Years for Relationships of Trust to Develop between Labor and Management

Collaboration between labor and management, which has been referred to as one of the Japanese-style employment systems, did not emerge immediately after the Second World War. The period from the latter half of the 1940s through to the 1950s was one of

complete conflict between labor and management.¹ However, from the latter half of the 1960s, the situation gradually began to change. One factor in this was the shift among union leadership from a focus on conflict with management to an approach centered on collaboration. There was also the fact that some labor unions had experienced severe internal power struggles. As a result, labor unions, which had opposed every suggestion from management up to that point, began to come to the table with an unbiased attitude.²

Another change was one that occurred on the management side. Noticing that productivity did not increase amidst a situation in which there was conflict between labor and management, the number of companies changing their approach to workplace management began to increase, based on guidance provided by the Japan Productivity Center. Starting with training for those in managerial posts, training was implemented for those in supervisory positions in workplaces (many of whom were union members) and those in managerial positions were made to understand the importance of workplace management based on relationships of trust between labor and management. As a result, strikes, which had been very common at factories, declined considerably and some companies began to experience dramatic increases in productivity. Seeing this, other companies in the same industry also began to receive instruction from the Japan Productivity Center, and the productivity movement began to spread like wildfire.

The Japan Productivity Center is an organization established in 1955 with three guiding principles: expansion of employment, cooperation between labor and management, and fair distribution of the fruits of productivity. One of its objectives was to stabilize relationships between labor and management by popularizing the labor-management consultation system, thereby achieving improvements in productivity. In the 1970s, when this organization had been active for more than 15 years and more than 25 years had passed since the end of the Second World War, relationships of trust between labor and management had at last become established in Japanese companies.³

Those were a few facts about labor unions in Japan. Other important points include the relationship between labor unions and political parties, how ordinary workers view labor unions, and how union members view labor unions. Due to space constraints, such matters have had to be omitted, but readers should refer to the detailed analysis provided in Nakamura and RENGO-RIALS (2005).

III. Issues Concerning Enterprise Unions

The majority of enterprise unions have built good relationships with management. It is certainly the case that, in terms of creating relationships of trust between labor and management, Japan's enterprise unions have built up a considerable record of achievement.

¹ Nitta (2008) describes the labor union movement during this period in detail.

² Hisamoto (1998) has conducted a detailed analysis.

³ For further details, please refer to Fujimura (2009).

However, there are also many challenges facing labor unions in Japan. This section seeks to summarize the issues relating to enterprise unions.

1. The Organizational Framework Is Limited to Regular Employees

Enterprise unions in Japan have primarily been organized around regular employees. During the era when 85% of employed workers were regular employees, it was possible to represent a workplace even with an organization centered on regular employees. However, today, when one-third of employed workers are workers on fixed-term contracts, one can no longer say that an organization that is solely for regular employees is a “representative of the working people.” Since a few years ago, an increasing number of labor unions have been accepting employees on fixed-term contracts, in the form of part-time workers and contract workers. However, this development is still restricted to certain unions. Unless those working in the same workplace are organized, irrespective of their employment status, it will be difficult to claim that the union “represents the workplace” when engaging in discussions with management. The expansion of the organization is a pressing issue.

2. It Is Difficult for Workers to Engage in Lateral Solidarity

It has already been stated that most enterprise unions are affiliated to an industrial union or national center. At the time of the *Shunto* Annual Spring Wage Offensive, each industry lists its demands and strives to elicit even a small improvement in working conditions from management. However, apart from in the case of some industrial unions, this has not gone as far as standardizing the activities of enterprise unions.

Labor unions should fundamentally have the power to restrict the supply of labor. They are organizations which can refuse, saying, “We cannot work more than this,” if management says, “We want you to do more overtime.” At most Japanese companies, the long hours worked by regular employees are a problem, and even companies with labor unions are no exception to this. The actual situation is that unions do not deal with this adequately, even if the request to “do something about the long working hours” emerges from the workplace.

In negotiations with management, if unions request that “We want you to do something to rectify the long working hours,” management executives indicate some level of understanding. However, when management says, “What if we lose out in competition with other companies?” union leaders weaken, and many years have passed without a radical solution being reached. The normalization of long working hours causes mental health problems. Even at companies where labor unions have been organized, there is a problem in that there is no sign of a decline in the number of workers who are forced to take long-term leaves of absence as a result of poor mental and/or physical health.

3. It Is Difficult to Pass on the Experience of Union Officials

Officials at enterprise unions are usually selected from among the employees and

serve for a fixed period. Since the collapse of the economic bubble in the early 1990s, until the present day, managers have run their companies without a significant increase in the number of regular employees. As a result, the pool of workers from which to supply labor union officials has become rather sparse.

At the same time, one can see a tendency for the period of activity as a union official to become shorter. Previously, there were many people who served as full-time union officials for ten years or more. However, since officials who have graduated from university have become the mainstream, the number of officials changing after four to six years has been increasing. Through their experience, union officials acquire various knowhow. In the age when people served as full-time officials for long periods of time, it was easy for senior union officials to pass on their experience to their junior colleagues, but as the time period has become shorter, this important knowhow has ceased to be conveyed adequately just by engaging in activities together.

The author calls this situation “the amateurization of union officials,” and it is difficult for amateurs to engage in discussions and negotiations with veteran management executives on an equal footing. It would seem that this is one of the reasons why labor unions are said to have become weaker than before.

4. The Level of Activity of Unions at the Workplace Level Is Falling

Labor unions are democratic organizations and set great store by accurately reflecting the opinions of their rank-and-file members in their activities. Officials at the workplace level (works committee members and union representatives) form the cornerstone of this. They are part-time officials who engage in labor union activities in between their normal work.

Following the collapse of the economic bubble, personnel numbers have been reduced and many employees are working in an environment in which there is no leeway, with overtime having become the norm. Amidst this situation, it is not easy to combine one's work with activities as a workplace official. Even if one were selected as a workplace official, one must prioritize one's work, so it is frequently the case that union activities end up being neglected. At some companies, when allocating work, consideration is given to enabling staff to fulfill their roles as workplace officials, but such companies are very much in the minority.

The fact that activities at the workplace level, which form the foundations of union activities, are stagnating hints at the possibility that the probability of individual labor disputes arising is increasing. If workplace officials are able to identify at a very early stage those people who have complaints about the management of the workplace or the application of systems by engaging in close communication with rank-and-file union members, it is possible to resolve those issues before they become a major problem. However, if those activities are thin on the ground, there is an increasing risk that individual complaints will build up and eventually explode.

Workplace activities form the foundation upon which labor unions can fulfill their role as labor unions. If this foundation becomes weakened, their ability to negotiate with management will also decline. It is often said that it is necessary to establish a solid footing in order to strengthen an organization, and this also applies to enterprise unions.

5. There Is No System for Dealing with Consolidated Management

Since companies have been obliged to adopt consolidated accounting, management has engaged in actions that seek to maximize profits across the group as a whole. Despite the fact that the behavioral patterns of management have changed, labor unions still retain their old organizational formats, namely organizations focused on companies as individual units. Right now, what is needed is to form an organization that brings together and can negotiate on behalf of all of the companies subject to a particular consolidation (for example, a corporate group union federation), and to establish a forum for discussions with management. At present, the labor union for the parent company keeps an eye on the group as a whole, but it is not established systematically, so in many cases, it ends up engaging only in unofficial talks. The establishment of group union councils and group union federations and the deployment of substantive activities on their part are required.

There are many challenges facing enterprise unions. From among those challenges listed above, this article focuses on activities at the workplace level. This is because activities at the workplace level have hitherto not been explained in any detail overseas, and because the enhancement of labor union activities in the workplace is thought to be the most important task in order to revitalize enterprise union activities in the future. The data on which this article is based are derived from a survey implemented by the Institute for Industrial Relation and Labor Policy, Chubu in 2008 and 2009.⁴

⁴ This survey was primarily carried out in the form of a questionnaire. As a preliminary survey to draw up the questionnaire, six labor union officials, three managers in clerical divisions, and three manager in technical divisions were interviewed. Based on the outcomes of the interviews, the questionnaire was finalized after three rounds of discussion by a specialist committee consisting of labor and management from the Toyota Group, and the questionnaire was conducted in February and March 2009. The subjects of the questionnaire were managers and workplace officials (works committee members, heads of workplace officials, and councilors) in clerical and technical workplaces in six companies in the Toyota Group. The distribution of the questionnaires to those in managerial positions was carried out through the human resources division, with 570 forms being distributed to managers in the technical and clerical divisions. The distribution of the questionnaires to workplace officials was carried out through each company's labor union, with 1,090 forms being distributed and 1,028 valid responses being received. The response rate to both questionnaires was high, at 93.9% and 94.3% respectively.

IV. The Actual Situation Concerning Labor-Management Relations at the Workplace Level and Related Issues

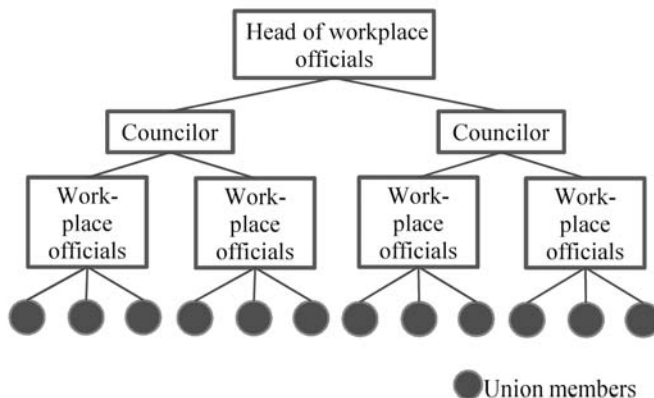
1. Research Framework

Changes in the business environment have a major impact on the workplace. A succession of issues will emerge that must be dealt with promptly. Cooperation between labor and management is essential in order to resolve each and every one of those issues and implement sound workplace management. Close cooperation between front-line management and union officials⁵ makes it easier to resolve issues in the workplace. As shown in Figure 1, those in managerial positions in the workplace carry out their everyday workplace management tasks, while sharing information with workplace officials of the labor union. There are people in the workplace who are not affiliated to a labor union, so both those in managerial positions and workplace officials must take such people into consideration in their actions.

Recently, the opinion has been aired that the ability to resolve problems in the workplace is falling. Problems that would previously have been resolved within the workplace are now being referred to the human resources division. This is believed to be due not only to a lack of ability on the part of those in managerial positions, but also to a lack of ability on the part of workplace officials of labor unions. There are also those who point out that the sight of heated discussions has disappeared, and both management and workplace officials have ceased to engage in discussions that get deep into the heart of their counterpart's position. In addition, some express doubts that those in managerial positions lack the knowledge of how to interact with union officials.

As a result of an interview-based survey and a questionnaire, it was possible to confirm that the research points of the issues shown in Figure 1 is fairly accurate. Both

⁵ The organization of the unions at each company in the Toyota Group is basically as shown below.



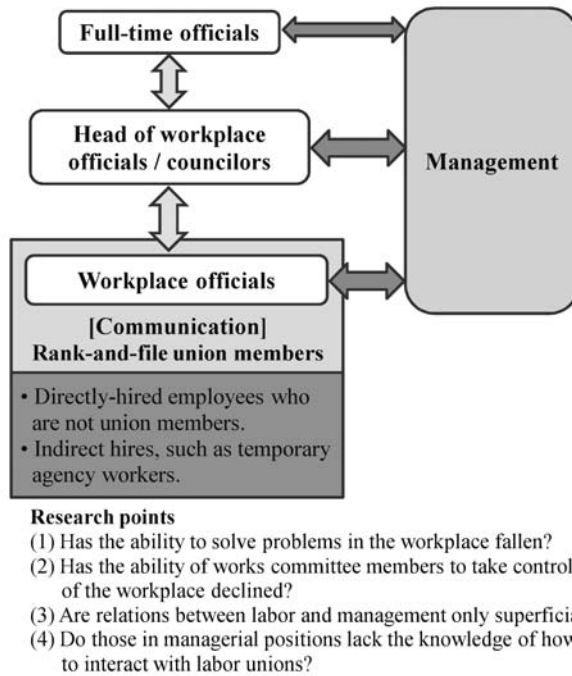


Figure 1. The Strengthening of Union Activities at the Workplace Level and the Construction of Sound Relationships between Labor and Management

workplace officials and those in managerial positions had the awareness that labor-management relations have improved overall, but many issues were pointed out, such as the fact that there is little interest in union activities among union members, and the fact that adequate discussions are not carried out because workplace meetings are held infrequently and the time allocated for them is too short. It became clear that concerns that activities at the workplace level have become weak were real.

2. The Necessity of Workplace Officials Who Can Clearly Articulate Issues to Management

The most common method of choosing workplace officials at present is “Being asked to take over by one’s predecessor.” About 60% of heads of workplace officials and councilors, and exactly 50% of workplace officials in clerical sections responded that they had been asked by their predecessor. One also often hears people saying, “I cannot step down from being an official until my replacement is decided”; in the case of heads of workplace officials and councilors in particular, it is the custom not to step down until one’s successor has been determined. It is not necessarily the case that it is a bad thing for a predecessor to designate their successor, but the issue is against what standards they choose their successor.

The survey did not ask about this matter.

With regard to what triggered their becoming a workplace official, those responding "According to some kind of sequence" were in the minority. In the case of workplace officials, the figures were 15.9% for those in clerical sections, 12.4% for those in technical sections, and 14.3% for those in professional sections. On the other hand, among heads of workplace officials and councilors, those who selected this option were an exception, as the figures were 0% for those in clerical and technical sections, and just 6.1% for those in professional sections. Heads of workplace officials and councilors play an important role in workplace management, so it appears that they are not determined according to a sequence.

What was comparatively common when workers were appointed as workplace officials was "I was ordered to do it by my boss at work." 48.3% of workplace officials in professional sections and 34.7% of heads of workplace officials and councilors in professional sections responded that they had been ordered to do it by their boss at work. The same response was seen among 26.1% of workplace officials in clerical sections, 26.9% of workplace officials in technical sections, 20.0% of heads of workplace officials and councilors in clerical sections and 31.1% of heads of workplace officials and councilors in technical sections.

At first glance, being ordered to become a labor union official by one's boss at work seems bizarre. In fact, labor union officials go through a process, in which they sound out those in managerial positions in advance and if the manager consents, they notify the person concerned. From the perspective of the actual workplace official, it looks as though they were "ordered to do it by their boss at work." It is a phenomenon resulting from stable relations between labor and management.

However, the question remains as to whether this is actually a good thing. Cooperative relationships between labor and management are important and it is necessary to resolve problems by working in partnership. Nevertheless, this does not mean that labor should comply with every single request from the company or those in managerial positions. If something arises that is contrary to the agreements and established practices cultivated over the history of the labor-management relationship, the union must push back emphatically and discuss the issue. If they cannot do that, the working conditions of its members will deteriorate and it will not be able to fulfill its responsibilities as a labor union.

It would seem less than desirable for someone who is supposed to say the things that need to be said to management as a representative of those in the workplace to have the awareness that they "became a workplace official because of an order from the boss at work." In order to clearly assert the opinions of the union to management, it is necessary to have an awareness of the role as a position for which one was selected by the members of the union in the workplace.

3. Workplace Officials Have Little Ability to Take Control of the Workplace

The source of the influence of labor unions is the workplace. It is difficult for em-

employees to convey their true feelings to management. This is because it is usual for employees not to disclose their true feelings to those in managerial positions who are in the position of appraising them, while those in managerial positions are unwilling to convey to their bosses anything inopportune that is occurring in the department that they lead. As well as carefully picking up on the true feelings of employees and ascertaining the approach to workplace management of those in managerial positions, labor union officials assume a role that involves conveying issues arising on the workplace directly to management executives and asking them to improve the quality of management.

What forms the cornerstone for undertaking these activities is the ability of workplace officials to take control of the workplace. However, looking at the survey of those in managerial positions, one can see results that suggest that workplace officials have weaknesses in this area. In response to the question "Do you think that workplace officials understand what is occurring in the workplace and have an accurate grasp of the problems?" only 7.9% of those in managerial positions answered "Yes." The responses were particularly low in production technology divisions, and research and development divisions, at 2.9% and 5.1% respectively. If one includes those who responded "If I had to give an answer, then I would say yes," a total of 58.9% of those in managerial positions gave favorable responses, but it does seem that those in managerial positions generally feel the weakness of workplace officials in terms of their ability to take control of the workplace.

On the other hand, if looking at the survey of workplace officials, the results that emerge make it hard to say that active communication is taking place between workplace officials and rank-and-file union members. With regard to the frequency of workplace meetings, these take place around twice a month even at the time of events such as the *Shunto* Annual Spring Wage Offensive, and around once a month normally. Moreover, the number of workplaces that hardly ever have workplace meetings is as high as around 30%. The time of day when workplace meetings take place tends to be during lunch-breaks in the overwhelming majority of cases, so the time allotted for these meetings is up to 30 minutes. The actual situation is that members only discuss messages from the headquarters or local branch while eating their lunch and then they run out of time, so it is not the kind of environment in which things can be discussed thoroughly.

With regard to the status of attendance of workplace meetings, whereas the proportion of those in professional sections responding "almost everyone attends" was around 70%, the proportion of workplace officials in technical sections responding "almost everyone attends" was just one-quarter. The figure for those in clerical sections was about half-way between the figures for those in professional and those in technical sections. As well as the low frequency with which workplace meetings, which form the foundation for labor union activities, are held, the fact is that the time allotted for them is short and they are a long way from achieving full attendance by all members.

In order to improve this situation, the only thing that can be done is for workplace officials to increase the number of opportunities for them to meet and speak directly with

rank-and-file union members. However, it is not necessarily the case that there are many workplace officials who place great importance on meeting members directly. The survey of workplace officials asked about means of communication with rank-and-file union members, and the results showed that workplace officials in clerical and technical sections frequently use e-mail for this purpose.

With regard to the situation when a senior union official asks them to convey something to the workplace members, the proportion of those responding "I use e-mail every time" was 45.1% among workplace officials in clerical sections, 40.0% among workplace officials in technical sections, 48.0% among heads of workplace officials and councilors in clerical sections, and 45.9% among heads of workplace officials and councilors in technical sections. Moreover, the figures for those responding "Not every time, but frequently" were 31.9%, 30.8%, 36.0%, and 31.1% respectively. E-mail is a convenient means of conveying information, but it entails the risk that it will end up being a one-way provision of information. What is important is to consistently and repeatedly convey things while directly looking at the faces of the people to whom you are speaking, and ask their opinions, but there is a strong possibility that this is not taking place adequately in clerical and technical workplaces.

4. It Is Necessary to Clearly Indicate the Activities Required of Workplace Officials

As stated in the previous paragraph, workplace officials in clerical and technical sections often use e-mail to convey information to workplace members. However, they do use e-mail differently according to the content of what they are conveying. Although they use e-mail to notify people of workplace union meetings, they do try to tell people verbally about events, as much as they possibly can. Moreover, it was ascertained from this survey that they strive to convey directly to union members the things that were decided upon in workplace union meetings.

The practice of using e-mail or verbal communication according to the content is preferable. The problem is the standards for judging what information will be sent by e-mail and what information will be conveyed directly at a mass meeting. If one dismisses this matter, individual workplace officials will use e-mail in their own fashion. In that situation, inconsistencies will emerge in the way in which information is conveyed. If categories are set forth in advance, such as (a) information that can be disseminated by e-mail; (b) information that is preferable to be conveyed directly but can be disseminated by e-mail; and (c) information that should be conveyed directly, without fail, disparities between individual workplace officials will become smaller. It would seem to be effective to present guidelines on the use of e-mail to convey information, during the training that workplace officials receive upon their appointment.

5. Cooperative Relationships between Management and Workplace Officials Are Weak

In response to the question, “Do you think that the labor union at your company is useful in making your company a better one?” those in managerial positions who answered “Yes” or “If I had to give an answer, then I would say yes” was 88.9%. Even among those in managerial positions in research and development divisions, who had a tendency to give comparatively low evaluations, 82.0% responded that they believed the union was useful in this respect. The vast majority of those in managerial positions have a high regard for the role of labor unions.

This result demonstrates that the relationships of trust that the labor and management at the various companies of the Toyota Group have built up over many years have also permeated the managerial level in the workplace. Labor and management are said to be two halves of the same whole, but only when they are both working hard together is high-quality corporate management achieved. The fact that those in managerial positions who responded to this survey have a clear awareness of the importance of the existence of labor unions is profoundly significant.

Next, turning one’s attention to the workplace level, one can see that there is a disparity in terms of the presence of unions in workplace management. In response to the question, “Do you think that labor unions are useful in the management of your workplace?” 71.1% of those in managerial positions answered in the affirmative. However, looking at the situation by division, whereas 79.9% of those in manufacturing divisions answered “Yes,” the figure was 54.4% in production technology divisions, so the difference was around 25 points between the two divisions. Workplace officials play a part in workplace management on the labor side, so the issue is the degree to which they are active in the workplace.

Even when looking at the free text responses to the survey of those in managerial positions, one can see numerous opinions that demonstrate the expectations in regard to workplace officials.

I would like workplace officials to have an awareness of themselves as representatives of the workplace, and to pick up on all of the problems in the workplace and individual problems about which workers cannot talk to their boss but can talk to their workplace official or colleagues, and to consult me about them. (*Production management and manufacturing division*)

After sharing with the company the style of workplace management and operation for which we are aiming, I would like workplace officials to pick up on the workplace problems and true feelings of union members, which workplace managers cannot grasp, and convey them appropriately to the company. By understanding the front line of labor-management relations in the company, I would like workplace officials to use this as a means of cultivating themselves as future managers (broadening their horizons,

improving their communication skills, and developing and improving their sense of responsibility and sense of mission, etc.) (*Clerical division*)

In order for workplace officials to become entities respected by those in managerial positions, it is necessary for them to be able to point out what management does not know or has not noticed. This is certainly not difficult. As pointed out in the remarks by those in managerial positions, ordinary employees just do not disclose their true feelings to management. Even if they are not convinced by their boss's instructions, subordinates passively accept them. If people bear grudges in their hearts, it throws teamwork into disorder and the subordinates themselves can develop mental health problems.

Workplace officials are people who work alongside members of the workplace, and are in a position in which they can gain an understanding of those workers' true feelings. By talking directly to members of the workplace, they can find out about what those workers really feel to be problems, and deal with them at an early stage. It is necessary for workplace officials to be aware that they are on the front line of creating a better workplace.

6. Creating a Forum in Which Managers and Workplace Officials Can Regularly Exchange Information

Workplace officials are required to meet with managers on a daily basis to exchange information and to cooperate in workplace management, but the fact is that the level of activity differs according to the person. In order to improve this situation, it would be effective to institutionalize a forum for the regular exchange of information between both parties. In the free text section, one manager wrote the following opinion:

Reflecting on my own actions, I have noticed afresh that I am not normally aware of the role of "workplace officials" and do not communicate with them. They are people who often hear the true opinions of those in the workplace, so in the future, I would like to strive and take care to make time for communication that seeks to be conscious of our positions as manager and workplace official, rather than as boss and subordinate. (*Production management and manufacturing division*)

Even if union leaders strongly insist that "Everyday exchanges of information are important," there will be no actual progress unless workplace officials and those in managerial positions are aware of their importance. The only way to understand the effectiveness of everyday exchanges of information is to actually put it into practice. It is effective to hold regular meetings between managers and workplace officials, around once a week or once every two weeks. Workplace officials have to report on something there, so they are compelled to listen to what workplace members have to say and to strive to gain an understanding of the current situation in the workplace. Managers also become sensitive to the things that are problems in day-to-day workplace management and prepare to apprise workplace

officials of their own awareness of the problem. The institution of regular meetings for the exchange of information can be anticipated to increase the awareness of both parties, and improve the quality of workplace management.

7. The Necessity of Education for Managers in Developing Relationships between Labor and Management in the Workplace

According to the survey of those in managerial positions, managers who have workplace officials with whom they can exchange opinions on a daily basis in close proximity and have opportunities to meet them frequently are able to maintain good communication with them, which they believe works positively for workplace management. Conversely, managers who do not have any workplace officials with whom they can exchange opinions on a daily basis seldom have opportunities to meet and communicate with them. As a result, they tend to consider that the exchange of information with workplace officials is not useful to workplace management.

Various problems arise every day in the workplace. Problems occur even in places where managers do not see them. It is the workplace officials of labor unions that pick up on them and cooperate in resolving them. There can be no doubt that if managers exchange information frequently with workplace officials and share their awareness of problems, it makes workplace management easier.

Nevertheless, there do seem to be many in managerial positions who do not know how to create good relationships with workplace officials and how to interact with them. It is the role of the human resources division to resolve this issue. It is necessary to encourage them to make proactive use of cooperative relationships with labor unions, by such means as including the theme “How to interact well with labor unions” in management training, and holding presentations in which more experienced managers discuss their own experiences that demonstrate how advantageous it is to create good relationships with labor unions in terms of workplace management.

8. The Necessity of Increasing the Frequency with Which Informal Workplace Discussions Take Place

Workplaces are the basis for relationships between labor and management. Both the survey of workplace officials and the survey of those in managerial positions investigated whether or not the workplace had an atmosphere in which one could say what one wants to say. In the survey of workplace officials, the total number of those who responded “Yes” or “If I had to give an answer, then I would say yes” was the highest in the case of heads of workplace officials and councilors in clerical sections (84.0%), while the figure was lowest in the case of heads of workplace officials and councilors in technical sections (68.9%). Somewhat negative responses were received from those in technical sections. 29.3% of workplace officials and 31.1% of heads of workplace officials and councilors responded, “I cannot say either way,” “If I had to give an answer, then I would say no” or “No.” On the

other hand, of those in managerial positions, 21.8% answered “Yes,” while 61.4% answered “If I had to give an answer, then I would say yes,” giving an overall figure for the two responses in excess of 80%. Looking at the situation by division, the figure was only rather low in the case of production technology, at 74.8%, while in the other divisions it was in excess of 80%.

The basis of an atmosphere in which one can express oneself freely is a relationship of trust between the people of whom the workplace consists. Relationships of trust are formed through everyday work. By exchanging the information that individual employees have, areas of deficiency are supplemented and new ideas are born, thereby forging solid relationships of trust. Through progress in IT, various information has come to be transmitted at a low costs, but the really important information is only conveyed via people. In this sense, meeting and talking directly is an activity that should be valued more than anything else.

This point was made in many of the opinions written in the free text box in the surveys of both workplace officials and those in managerial positions. Some of those opinions are introduced below.

This is something that one could say not only to the union executive members, but also to the managers—I would like them to come out onto the floor more often and walk around. There are many good things and bad things. The best thing is for them to see things with their own eyes, hear things with their own ears, and feel things for themselves. (*Head of workplace officials and councilor, professional sections*)

We should listen properly to the thoughts and opinions of union members. I think it is important to take the time to discuss things. Activities will not be enhanced unless we gain an understanding of people's real thoughts, feelings and the actual situation. I think that this is the basis of many objections to the company. (*Manager, production management and manufacturing division*)

Recently, it feels as though there have been few workplace union meetings. It is not a case of the more, the better, but rather than communication from the union taking place only by e-mail or on paper, they should convey things verbally via the workplace officials more often. (*Manager, production management and manufacturing division*)

In the workplace, various meetings are held every day. One could imagine that the sharing of information that takes place in these meetings would be sufficient, but it is better to set aside a separate period of time to discuss issues such as the way of managing the workplace and the coordination of labor-management relations in the workplace and labor-management relations in the company as a whole. There are workplaces where informal workplace discussions are held regularly; ensuring that these take place regularly for the

company as a whole is believed to promote lively discussions between labor and management at the workplace level, and to have a positive effect on workplace management.

9. Increasing the Interest of Union Members in Labor Union Activities

In the survey of workplace officials, when they were asked about interest in union activities among union members, the proportion of those responding that “There are many people who are highly interested” was very low, and among heads of workplace officials and councilors in clerical sections, it was 0%. If one adds the response “If I had to give an answer, then I would say that there are many people who are highly interested,” the only group that exceeded 40% was the heads of workplace officials and councilors in professional sections. Moreover, looking at the responses to the question about problems in conducting union activities, the biggest problem listed among all of the positions was that “Union members do not demonstrate any interest in union activities.”

The fact is that ordinary union members are not interested in the activities of labor unions. People demonstrate an interest in the things that concern them, but do not react to anything else. If labor unions ceased their activities at this point, union members would be unlikely to experience any problems straightaway. However, it is anticipated that the impacts of this would gradually emerge, such as communication between labor and management ceasing to go smoothly, information that should be conveyed not being conveyed, and information important from a compliance perspective being overlooked. It is best to notice and deal with problems before they arise. In this sense, labor unions play an important role.

In the free text field, one respondent wrote the opinion that, “If the union executive members came to mass workplace meetings and created more opportunities to explain things directly, understanding of union activities among union members might deepen.” As has already been pointed out, it will likely only be possible to increase interest among rank-and-file union members by building up such initiatives as increasing the opportunities for the union executive members and workplace officials of the union to meet the employees directly, for the union executive members to address the rank-and-file union members directly, for the union to create and run a forum for discussions between the management and members of the workplace. The key phrase is “the development of direct dialogue.”

10. Labor Unions Provide Management with a Social Perspective, as Well as a Medium- to Long-Term Viewpoint

When the business is threatened, management becomes introverted and there is an increasing tendency to demand internal optimization. At that stage, if labor unions also engage in introverted discussions with them, it will not lead to a true solution to the problem. Such opinions regarding this point were also written in the free text box of the survey of those in managerial positions.

I hope that the union will consider things from a broad perspective, focusing not only on Toyota's employees, but also on its subcontractors, while being aware of its status as one of the world's top companies, and that it will think deeply about the happiness of the workers and the development of the company and society as a whole, with union activities being conducted based on this. (*Research and development division*)

I would like the union to gain an accurate understanding of the problems that arise when there are changes in the environment, as well as the circumstances and situations around us, and to make proactive, swift proposals (because there are problems that do not come up through the company organization). In addition, when profits deteriorate, perspectives tend to become narrower, so I would like the union to provide advice on the company's social roles and responsibilities, taking into consideration its impact on society as a whole. (*Production technology division*)

One of the roles of labor unions is to remind management executives of the role that the company should fulfill in society as a whole. Although management executives invariably used to say that "companies are a public institution for society," when business performance deteriorates and the pressure is on, managers are tempted to behave in ways that differ from what they usually preach. In those situations, the role of labor unions is to go back to the basics of the company's existence and check the behavior of its management executives. The automotive industry is an industry with a broad base and it is not possible for the final assembly manufacturers alone to flourish. It is the responsibility of the core company to manage things while taking into consideration the future of its subcontracting companies. The words of the manager in the research and development division quoted above emphasize this point.

V. Conclusion

The above described the current state of enterprise unions in Japan, the issues that they are facing and the status of labor-management relations at the workplace level. There are no organizations or systems in existence that have no problems whatsoever. Even where something is ideal at some point, as the environment changes with the passage of time and the people of whom it is composed change, it ceases to be ideal. Japanese enterprise unions are no exception.

Japan is facing major socioeconomic changes in the form of the further graying of society and decline of the birthrate, and the market shrinkage that arises from a decrease in the population. Labor unions organize around 20% of all employed workers, but what can they do—indeed, what must they do—in this situation? This is an issue that must be considered not only by national centers and industry unions, but also at the level of enterprise unions. However, no clear answer has emerged in regard to this question as yet.

Rather than empty theories about what they should do, in order to engage in down-to-earth discussions, it would be more effective to take as the starting point the actual situation of labor-management relations at the workplace level. It is the author's hope that this article will be of some assistance in enabling readers to gain a more accurate understanding of the true situation with regard to the enterprise unions of Japan.

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