

KEY TOPIC

Rengo Wavering in Party Support and Joint Struggle by Opposition Parties

Voting for the Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly elections, seen as a major barometer of national political forecasts, was held on July 2. The result was an overwhelming success for “Tomin First (Tokyo Residents First)” Party led by Tokyo Governor Yuriko Koike, which increased its share to 55 seats from 6 seats when the election had been announced. Combined with other candidates they supported as well as Komeito and other parties, the pro-Koike camp now holds a majority in the Assembly. Conversely, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) suffered a disastrous defeat; 57 seats before the election have halved to 23 seats. The Democratic Party (DP) supported by the Japanese Trade Union Confederation (JTUC-Rengo, hereinafter Rengo)* is the largest opposition party at national level, but saw its presence in the Assembly fall from 7 to 5 seats. This will likely have an impact on future election cooperation at national level as well.

The 88th Central May Day Rallies reflect electoral cooperation

Before the election, rallies to mark the 88th May Day workers’ festival were held from the end of April to May. The lineup of guest speakers at these rallies reflected the recent electoral cooperation, joint struggle by opposition parties, joint action against the proposed Legislation for Peace and Security,¹ and expectations for those in the future. The Central Rally of Rengo-affiliated unions was held on April 29 and that of the National Confederation of Trade Unions (Zenroren)* on May 1, respectively, in Tokyo’s Yoyogi Park. On May 1, executive committees of the National Trade Union Council (Zenrokyo)* and others also organized the Hibiya May Day event in Hibiya Park in central Tokyo. The Tokyo Local of Rengo, a supporting body of the Democratic Party, decided to back the Tomin First formed by assembly members who support Tokyo Governor Koike at the beginning of April, and she

gave a guest speech at the Rengo Central Rally. The leaders of both Zenroren and Zenrokyo made speeches at each other’s rallies on May Day, and as well as exchanging calls for future solidarity, they shared the same slogan (“Down with the War Bill!¹ No! to the Anti-Conspiracy Bill!² No Revision of the Pacifist Constitution!³”) for the first time.

*JTUC-Rengo, Zenroren, and Zenrokyo are the national centers of trade unions in Japan.

Congratulatory speeches by MHLW Minister, Tokyo Governor, and DP President at Rengo Central Rally

The May Day slogan of Rengo was “Stop long working hours, realize decent work; now is the time to raise and support minimum standards and eliminate disparity!” The rally was attended by 40,000 supporters (figure provided by the organizers), including union members under the Rengo umbrella as well as members of Labour Bank (Rokin), the National Federation of Workers and Consumers Insurance Cooperatives (Zenrosai), and other related organizations. Guest speeches were given by Yasuhisa Shiozaki, the Minister of Health, Labour, and Welfare (at the time), Tokyo Governor Yuriko Koike, and Renho, the president (at the time) of the Democratic Party (DP). Speaking for the government, Minister Shiozaki said, “I am happy to be taking part in this May Day rally now that government, labor and management are all striving for “Work Style Reform.” The Action Plan for the Realization of Work Style Reform is a historic step in changing work styles. I have high hopes that Rengo will engage in efforts, as a labor organization well versed in the realities of the workplace.”

Tokyo Governor Koike made a strong call in support for the May Day Central Rally, saying, “The days are gone when people worked longer hours to produce greater profit, and when working long hours was a virtue. Rengo stands at the vanguard of Work Style Reform. The Tokyo Metropolitan Government

will firmly support your efforts in Rengo.” This was the first speech by a Tokyo governor at the Central Rally since Governor Naoki Inose addressed in the 84th rally.

Speaking on behalf of the organizers, Rengo President Rikio Kozu said that the 2017 *Shunto* had “created a trend for four successive wage hikes and led to a previously unknown tendency for wage rises of those working in small and medium enterprises; part-time work, fixed-term contracts and the like to be higher than those of leading corporations and regular employees.” On Work Style Reform, he insisted that, “we should not tolerate misinterpretation and system abuse whereby, if there were an upper limit, workers could be worked up to that point.” On the Anti-Conspiracy Bill, he urged all parties to conduct “a serious and in-depth Diet debate that will resolve all concerns,” while also asserting that “the bill should be withdrawn if those concerns were not cleared away.” The May Day Declaration adopted at the Central Rally called for efforts to ensure the steady progression of the Action Plan by the Council for the Realization of Work Style Reform, and the establishment of “decent work.” Rengo also adopted a special resolution for strengthening efforts to stop long working hours. In addition, it issued a call for efforts in both eliminating *karoshi* (death caused by overwork) and expanding the number of workplaces with a system of work intervals by increasing the number of unions concluding collective agreements.

Rengo Tokyo agrees policy with Tomin First toward local elections

Prior to the election, the Tokyo Local of Rengo (Rengo Tokyo, President: Kei Okada) held a press conference on April 7 to announce an agreement with the Tomin First, a local party formed by assembly members who support Tokyo Governor Koike. Under the agreement, Rengo Tokyo would provide support for Tomin First during the Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly elections on July 2. At that point, two candidates, backed by member organizations (industrial unions) of Rengo, had defected from the Democratic Party, and those member organizations asked Rengo Tokyo to maintain their support. As a result, the candidates in question were temporarily withdrawn, and on March 3, a policy agreement was concluded with the Tomin First. The agreement included steps to achieve policies for the reduction of long working hours and taking measures for non-regular employment, as well as “cooperating and making efforts to realize policies and systems for a better understanding of employment and labor policies.” In response to this policy agreement, Rengo Tokyo restored its backing of the candidates in question within the organization. In future, Rengo Tokyo aims to focus not only on supporting assembly members who have defected from the Democratic Party but also on support in electoral wards where there are no DP candidates. At the press conference, Rengo Tokyo President Okada lamented, “I wanted this election to be contested with the backing of the Democratic Party if possible, but sadly, that seems too hard to achieve.

1. “War Law”— Legislation for Peace and Security

The Legislation for Peace and Security was approved by the Diet on September 19, 2015 as an amalgamation of the Act for the Development of the Legislation for Peace and Security (a bundle of partial amendments to 10 existing laws, including the Amended Self-Defense Forces Act) and the newly enacted International Peace Support Act. Their stated aim is to ensure peace and security for Japan and the international community. Successive governments have interpreted the minimal use of force permitted in the Japanese Constitution as being restricted to the right to exercise individual self-defense in response to a direct attack on Japan. The Abe administration, however, has changed the conventional interpretation of the Constitution to pass this legislation. It will enable Japan to exercise collective self-defense, albeit use of force is limited to the minimum necessary. At the same time, the duties of self-defense forces dispatched to UN peacekeeping activities will expand, while “rush and rescue operations” to protect other countries’ forces and local civilians will also be possible. At the deliberation stage, Prime Minister Abe explained the necessity of this legislation, describing it as an urgent task to develop a seamless system for peace and security of Japan and the international community, due to the increased severity of changes in the security environment surrounding Japan. On the other side, there were concerns over the ambiguous definition of a state in which Japan’s survival is threatened and as a result Self-Defense Forces could exercise armed force; some constitutional scholars pointed out that the amendment was unconstitutional, and most opposition parties were against it. In particular, the Japanese Communist Party vehemently opposed the enactment and called it a “War Bill,” adopting the view that the bill would trample over the Constitution and make Japan capable of waging war. Even after the legislation was enacted, opposing voices continue to call it a “War Law.”

Though national and metropolitan administrations are not the same thing, I hoped it (the Democratic Party) would have taken the attitude of representing workers in a way people could understand a little more easily.”

After this, candidates supported within the organization and sub-organizations of Rengo Tokyo were announced on May 8. They included three Tomin First members, including the two who had defected from the Democratic Party. The number of candidates who defected from the Democratic Party and were backed by Rengo Tokyo, either as members of the Tomin First or as independents, continued to increase thereafter. Yet, Rengo is adopting a negative stance on the joint struggle by opposition parties including the Democratic Party and the Japanese Communist Party.

Zenroren and Zenrokyo exchange rallying calls, share the same slogan for the first time

The Central May Day Rally of Zenroren held on May 1 attracted an attendance of 30,000 (figure provided by the organizers). At the rally, President Yoshikazu Odagawa referred to the Action Plan for the Realization of Work Style Reform decided on March 28, and criticized the government’s proposed overtime regulation, saying that “specifying 720 hours per year or 100 hours per month in a law as an upper limit for overtime is an outdated way of thinking.” “The Abe administration is definitely not the almighty,” Odagawa stated. “In fact, I would say it’s morally collapsing. Let us expand the joint struggle between opposition parties and the citizens,

join forces with the citizens’ coalition, bring down the Abe administration and create a new politics,” he said in his speech.

Guest speeches were made by Kazuo Shii, Chairman of Japanese Communist Party and Motoaki Nakaoka, General Secretary of the Zenrokyo, who called on those present to “build our foundation on a struggle never to allow a bill on long working hours that would legalize *karoshi*.” On May Day last year, the leaders of Zenroren and Zenrokyo gave speeches at each other’s rallies for the first time. This year, in addition to that, they shared the same main slogan for the first time at the Hibiya May Day Rally – “Down with the War Bill!¹ No! to the Anti-Conspiracy Bill!² No Revision of the Pacifist Constitution!³”

The rally adopted a May Day Declaration including a statement of intent to “confront the Abe administration as it races wildly to build a nation that goes to war, a nation controlled by corporations; instead, aim for a society of peace and democracy, in which the Constitution is upheld and people can continue to work humanely.”

According to the organizers, the Zenrokyo Hibiya May Day was attended by 7,000 supporters. Besides Mizuho Fukushima, Deputy President of the Social Democratic Party, Yutaka Tateno, Secretary-General of the National Federation of Trade Unions of Agricultural Cooperative Associations in Japan (ZEN-NOH ROREN) in Japan also made a speech of solidarity as a member of the Zenroren May Day Executive Committee.

2. Anti-Conspiracy Bill

A bill to criminalize conspiracy has been presented to the Diet on three separate occasions, only to be defeated each time. The bill would have made it a punishable offense to plan or prepare to commit a crime, and was touted as necessary domestic legislation prior to signing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime. The government has now reduced the number of applicable crimes from more than 600 to 277, and has limited the applicable groups or organizations to terrorist groups, crime syndicates, drug cartels and other organized criminal groups whose purpose is to commit serious crimes. Having applied these and other more stringent conditions, the government established a new offense of “preparation of acts of terrorism and other organized crimes” and, based on this, submitted a bill to amend the Act on Punishment of Organized Crimes and Control of Crime Proceeds and other legislation to the Diet in April, 2017. Most of the opposition parties took their stance to reject this bill, while public opinion was also fiercely –almost equally– divided on the issue. The concerns of those who oppose it are, that it will restrict freedom of speech and expression, that Japan will turn into a police or surveillance state, that the prewar Maintenance of Public Order Act is being revived, that the definitions of applicable organizations and “preparation” are ambiguous, that it will lead to false charges being brought, and so on. The opposing factions are calling this an “anti-conspiracy bill,” the same name they used for the previously rejected bills. “The Bill to Amend the Act on Punishment of Organized Crimes and Control of Crime Proceeds, etc.” was approved by the House of Representatives on May 23, 2017 and was passed by the House of Councillors on June 15, 2017, thereby becoming law.

All organizations ramp up efforts to oppose the “Anti-Conspiracy Bill”

On April 27, Rengo reaffirmed its stance and policy on the proposed amendment to the Act on Punishment of Organized Crimes and Control of Crime Proceeds, which would create a crime of conspiracy for 277 different offenses. Rengo’s principles for response involve highlighting flaws in the proposed amendment and demanding that it be withdrawn. Problems found in the amendment are that domestic law has not yet been adjusted in line with the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, which the government cites as the reason for the amendment; that ordinary companies, groups, labor unions and others could become targets for investigation; and that human rights could be infringed by over-zealous investigation. Rengo is calling on local branches and member organizations to awaken public awareness by holding study meetings and engaging in street protests, to prevent this highly problematic amendment from being forced through. On May 12, meanwhile, Rengo held a rally inside the Diet to demand the withdrawal of a proposed amendment to the Act on Punishment of Organized Crimes and Control of Crime Proceeds that would create a new crime of “preparing for acts of terrorism,” including the gist of the so-called “crime of conspiracy.” On that occasion, Naoto Ohmi, Secretary-General of Rengo stated, “Concerns that labor unions and groups will be targeted for investigation and that human rights will be infringed by excessive

investigation cannot be resolved.”

On May 16, Zenroren also held a “No! to the Anti Conspiracy Bill!” rally at Hibiya Open-Air Concert Hall together with the Executive Committee for Saying No! to the Anti-Conspiracy Bill and the Executive Committee for Joint Action to Stop War and Preserve Article 9 of the Constitution.

On May 24, a “Solidarity Rally against the Degradation of Labor Law and the Creation of an Anti-Conspiracy Bill” hosted by the “One-Day Executive Committee for Solidarity on Labor Movements and Citizens’ Movements,” was also held at the Hibiya Open-Air Concert Hall. It called for solidarity between labor movements and citizens’ movements, but the Bill was approved by a parliamentary majority consisting of the LDP -Komeito ruling coalition on the morning of June 15.

AUTHOR

Noboru Ogino, Deputy Research Director General, The Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training (JILPT). Research interest: Industrial sociology. Profile: <http://www.jil.go.jp/english/profile/ogino.html>

3. Constitutional Amendment

Japan’s Constitution has remained unamended ever since it was promulgated in 1946. As a direct result of Japan’s defeat in World War II, the General Headquarters (GHQ) played a major part in its creation; some today regard the existing Constitution as having been “thrust upon” Japan. For this very reason, the ruling LDP has assumed the mission of independently amending the Constitution ever since the party was founded. Points of particular contention in the proposed amendment are the “renunciation of war” and the non-maintenance of armed forces in Article 9. Although Article 9 symbolizes the pacifist principles of Japan’s Constitution, the circumstances surrounding Japan’s security have changed significantly in recent years, including the problem of nuclear and missile development by North Korea. As such, moves to amend Article 9 are now gathering momentum, in that the pacifist principles espoused by Japan immediately after the war are no longer relevant to the current reality. Another factor lying behind these calls to amend the Constitution is the wish to rebuff criticism that the existence of the Self-Defense Forces, widely supported by the Japanese public, violates the constitutional pledge not to maintain armed forces. Prime Minister Abe has expressed a determination to amend the Constitution by 2020, and there are growing calls from the pro-amendment camp for a debate on constitutional amendment to go ahead. The anti-amendment camp, conversely, wants to keep the existing Constitution as it is. Left-leaning parties such as the Japanese Communist Party, representative of the anti-amendment camp, describe the planned constitutional amendment as “constitutional degradation,” and have embarked on a campaign of opposition.