INDUSTRIAL PEACE IN JAPAN

James Flynn
Yonsei University

Industrial relations in postwar Japan have persistently exhibited collaboration between labor and management, operating within a larger corporatist political-economic framework. This industrial peace is often cited as a major contributing factor to both Japan's rapid re-industrialization following the wartime destruction of its industrial core and its emergence as a major economic power in the later-half of the twentieth century. Laying aside the merit of such claims, this work instead traces the postwar development of Japanese industrial relations in the order of: 1) the heated labor-management confrontations in the period of American occupation, 2) the rise of conservative enterprise unions within the context of a gradually developing system of collaborative industrial relations during Japan's economic ascendancy, 3) the subordination of Japanese unions to state and national capital, the compromise of its institutional independence, and the decision to sacrifice a certain contingent of its membership's interests, facing the challenges of Japan's lost-decade(s) and liberalization. In doing so, this work challenges the notion that a lack of industrial conflict is the result of a transhistorical Japanese cultural trait rooted in ie, "family"and mura, "village" forms of traditional social organization. Instead, employing neo-classical economic theory, the paper argues that the behaviors of Japanese unions and union members shaped by individual and institutional incentives have sustained Japanese industrial peace.

Introduction

Industrial Peace in Japan

The conditions that led to the successful and rapid development of postwar Japan are many. Analysts have identified numerous unique characteristics of the Japanese political economy that expedited the reindustrialization. For some, that source was the active role Japanese bureaucratic institutions like the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI) have played in the economy.[1] For others, the integrated

---

1 Chalmers Johnson, MITI and the Japanese Miracle: The Growth of Industrial Policy, 1925-1975
  (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1982), 1-393.

networks among business, political, and bureaucratic organizations that have developed over the years was the one.[2] The active intervention of the bureaucracy in the economy and the importance of close-knit networks in Japanese society can help explain the emergence of corporatist behavior among the stakeholders in Japan's political economy, where instead of confrontation and class-conflict, differences are resolved among the major actors (i.e., business, labor, and the state) through negotiation, bargaining, and consensus. While it is not the goal of this work to determine whether Japan, either now or at certain points in the past, indeed did fit within the framework of a corporatist polity, it will seek to trace the development of important elements of corporatism, industrial peace, and the relative absence of confrontational and economically disruptive conflicts between labor and management.

Industrial peace can provide a crucial advantage to an economy like Japan's because Japan chose export-oriented industrialization as its preferred postwar development strategy. Industrial peace lowers transaction costs that might otherwise emerge in a system of more confrontational industrial relations. These transaction costs have two primary sources: the interruption of the production process during strike activity or lockouts, and expensive litigation and legal service fees expended in the course of mediating and resolving disputes between labor and management. If labor is willing to forego strike activity and management doesn't resort to lockouts, the production process continues with little disruption and export competitiveness can be maintained. It is no wonder then that both Japanese policymakers and businesses had an interest in encouraging and maintaining an environment of industrial peace.

But industrial peace is never a foregone conclusion, nor does the absence of industrial conflict indicate satisfaction with the status quo. Striking and the threat of strike are powerful and necessary strategic tools that can be used by labor to gain leverage against management, which possesses a far greater array of political and financial assets in the negotiating process. If a strike or credible threat of one is absent, management is given a far greater control over the production process, compensation levels, and overall working conditions. When the conditions for workers deteriorate beyond what they are willing to tolerate and management appears dismissive to the issues they raise, workers are

---

2 Shumpei Kumon, "Japan as a Network Society," in The Political Economy of Japan: Cultural and Social Dynamics, vol. 3, Shumpei Kumon and Henry Rosovsky, eds. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992), 109-141.

highly likely to strike given the proper incentives and organizational capabilities. However, if these incentives and organizational capabilities are found to be lacking, even a workforce with numerous grievances will find it difficult to pursue a strike to resolve its conflicts with management. What were the conditions in the Japanese political economy and its system of industrial relations that were able to sustain its industrial peace for such a long stretch? Why have Japanese unions and their members traditionally neglected to use the strike to leverage negotiations with management, and what can be inferred about the historical and current state of Japanese industrial relations from the absence of striking? It seems unlikely that workers and their unions would be satisfied with their current conditions, which leaves us with the question of what mitigating factors discourage the use of a strike as a means of resolving disputes with employers.

To gain a better understanding of the phenomenon of Japanese industrial peace, the questions of culture, institutional structures, and rational economic motivations of the relevant stakeholders in labor, business, and government will be examined and assessed on the basis of their relevance. Two culturally specific forms of organization unique to Japan affecting its various formal and informal institutions are *ie*, "family" and *mura*, "village."The ie form is described as a hierarchical grouping with a strong sense of identity and is driven by the primary goal of continuity and expansion as motivating factors.[3] If the idea that such cultural forms are deeply embedded in the Japanese society to the point that workers actively accept their assigned roles in the firm hierarchy holds true, then the idea of industrial peace seems like a foregone conclusion. While the ie model may indeed reflect the reality of intra-firm industrial relations to a certain degree, it is important to note important exceptions that complicate this understanding. Similarly, models focusing on institutional structures provide insight into the complex negotiations between relevant stakeholders. Japanese enterprise unions and their confederations maintained a degree of leverage in negotiations with the firms whose workers they represented throughout much of the postwar era. Such privileges provided labor market insiders, those with skills prized by employers and strongly represented by enterprise unions, both considerable leverage for pressing their demands and a forum in which they could feel their voices would be heard. However, diversity

---

3 Yasusuke Murakami, "The Japanese Model of Political Economy," in The Political Economy of Japan 1: The Domestic Transformation, eds. Kozo Yamamura and Yasukichi Yasuba(Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 35-36.

and internal conflict within these institutional structures must be taken into account, and conceptualizing them as concrete wholes should be avoided. To better grasp the diverse elements that make up the various organizations examined, this work utilizes neo-classical economic theory in reflecting on the rational self-interest of atomized individuals operating within their representative organizations. Though workers might nominally belong to the same class and share a number of mutual interests, only rarely do they display the solidarity necessary to achieve broader class interests. Workers in different industrial sectors and different positions within the production process will have different ideas about how to press their demands. All these topics will be explored in further detail below.

Undermined Foundations, but Persistent Peace

Whatever the foundations of industrial peace in Japan might have been, it is clear that they have been under great strain over the past three decades. Labor market liberalization has aggravated precarity for both labor market insiders and outsiders, broadly defined as nonregular workers generally lacking union representation, secure contracts, and the generous benefits that usually accompany union representation. In the past, though limited in their organizational capacity due to the constraints of the enterprise union structure, labor could rely on institutions like shuntō, the "Spring Bargaining Offensive" in which affiliated unions would coordinate with one another to press for better wages.[4] But the constraints of restructuring and international competition have rendered this once powerful strategy almost completely irrelevant. Indeed, it seems the privileges awarded to labor, which afforded it a considerable say in the process of labor market liberalization, have granted it a hand in the undermining of its own bargaining position. The result is a labor leadership that has become progressively coopted by business and government prerogatives and increasingly aloof from its hard-pressed membership. Given the weakened state of labor's bargaining power through these formal institutions and the increasing pressures on its members and the broader working class, why has industrial peace persisted throughout each stage of the liberalization process? To answer this question, rather than looking at cultural factors alone, the paper discusses how businesses, government, unions, their membership and the broader working class have acted in ways that maintain the status quo in industrial relations while considering economic disincentives and organizational barriers that prevent the strike

---

4 Marcus Rebick, The Japanese Employment System: Adapting to a New Economic Environment (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005),77.

from becoming a viable tool toward resolving industrial conflicts and resisting the further deterioration of working conditions. It is the goal of this research then to accomplish the following. First, it will explain a traditional model of industrial peace in Japan and provide a conceptual framework for understanding its function. It will then trace how this model has changed in neoliberal Japan, accounting for the effects of reform on Japanese workers and their representative institutions. Finally, it will conclude by critiquing the Japanese labor movement's inability to bring worker issues to the forefront while revealing several limitations to the enterprise union model that have resulted in an ossified industrial peace.

Research Framework

Critical Review

Several texts and articles from academic journals of labor and Japan studies have covered the topics of the Japanese labor market and industrial relations in Japan. A prominent comparative political scientist, Ikuo Kume provides an excellent overview of the historical progression of Japan's postwar labor movement in all its diversity in his work *Disparaged Success.* Far from resorting to cultural determinism, this book provides keen insights into instances of both collaboration and confrontation between labor, government, and businesses in political and economic context. However, its favorable treatment of the labor movement and the Japanese corporatist model gloss over the outsiders of Japanese corporatism such as nonregular and female laborers. Further, the overall optimistic tone of the book and forecast of enduring strength and independence of the labor movement have not withstood the repeated rounds of liberalization since its publication in 1998. A more critical perspective might have emphasized the prevailing contradictions in the system of Japanese industrial relations and reached more realistic conclusions. "The Japanese Employment System" by Marcus Rebick—an empirical labor economist specializing in Japanese economy—highlights the key features of the Japanese labor market and changes it underwent during the "Lost Decade". This text was useful in identifying general long-term characteristics in the Japanese labor market institutions, their interactions, and changes to them over the years. Rebick takes note of the prevalence of enterprise unions, longer tenure and tenure-based wage scales, worker participation in the decision-making process through Joint Labor-Management Committees (JLMCs), and the presence of internal training and labor markets (13-15), as contributing to an overall collaborative

rather than confrontational tendency in Japanese labor-management relations. However, Rebick's work is fundamentally an economic text, largely ignoring political elements. More nuance is required to understand the reasoning behind the actions taken by various stakeholders. The final text consulted in this research was Jiyeoun Song's comparative work on the process of labor market reform in Japan and Korea. Despite being a comparative work, it treats both nations as separate cases identifying similar and divergent patterns. In *Inequality in the Workplace*, Song outlines how labor market insiders in both nations were protected from more drastic reforms at the expense of outsiders, thus widening the gap between the two. In Japan, labor's official involvement in the tripartite (labor-management-government) policymaking process led it to forego the interests of its diverse and divided base preventing it from advocating on behalf of all workers. Instead, organized labor's participation in the reform process produced a strategy of retrenchment characterized by the sacrifice of labor market outsiders in exchange for temporary guarantees of protection for privileged insiders. While bringing to light how the process of labor market reform aggravated divisions within the working class and the labor movement, the work lacks insight into the links between union leadership and its members or whether members felt their interests were being fairly represented by union officials.

Conceptual Framework

Consideration of the following three concepts will assist in the formation of a standard model of Japanese labor relations, assess changes to it and provide insights as to why industrial peace has prevailed despite changes to that model.

   Corporatism. While there may exist some debate over whether the postwar Japanese state and society can fairly be described as corporatist, corporatist practices among Japanese business, labor, and government institutions have contributed to industrial peace over the long term and its ossification in the post-reform era. Corporatism can be conceptualized as nonideological and from the standpoint of praxis as, "a system of interest...representation, a particular modal or ideal-typical institutional arrangement for linking the associationally organized interests of civil society with the decisional structures of the state."[5] In Japan, it can be observed in the collaborative efforts among conservative enterprise unions, firms, and businesses throughout the postwar era, the JLMCs

---

5 Philipe C. Schmitter, "Still the Century of Corporatism?,"The Review of Politics 36, no. 1 (1974): 86-87.

in many of the nation's firms, and labor leadership involvement in the tripartite committees organized by the Ministry of Labor to discuss the crafting of labor market flexibility reform policy. The tendency towards collaboration gave labor a chance to promote its interests as a nominally equal player, but ultimately led to its capture by business and government interests as the reform process progressed.

Union Leadership—Membership Disconnect. There are a number of obstacles at the firm, industrial, and national levels of Japanese unions that filter out, dilute, and diffuse the interests of union membership as they pass through communication channels operated by union officials. Also problematic is the atomized nature of enterprise unions which produces fissures in the labor movement that develop along the fault lines of industry and firm, preventing solidarity among workers as a whole and weakening the resolve of union leaders with influence over the policymaking process, who must sacrifice some of their members' interests in favor of others. After decades of reform it seems unions have been sapped of the vitality that originates in the rank-and-file. Unions now seemingly operate as a matter of formality or in some cases an appendage of management. Such lassitude renders the thought of industrial action unthinkable for most.

The Lost Art of the Strike. Strike activity reached its peak in the mid-1970s arising from greater pressures on workers during the dual oil-shocks of that decade. Gradually tapering off in the 1980s, they nearly disappeared as market liberalization progressed. Rebick attributes this to the rise of conservative Dōmei unions after 1970,[6] and the disuse of the strike was compounded by the increasing number of potential strikebreakers made available through lifting regulations on the Worker Dispatch Law. In the neoliberal era, there are significant financial constraints placed on unions due to declining membership and the accompanying loss of union dues over the past decades.[7] Thus, resources necessary to conduct a strike are severely limited. Furthermore, the very fact that strikes have declined makes it unlikely that they can be revived as a legitimate means of resolving disputes since both union officials and management are inexperienced with the form.[8] Under such conditions, even if workers had motivation to strike, they would be unlikely to do so. It is in this way industrial peace has proceeded.

6 Marcus Rebick, The Japanese Employment System: Adapting to a New Economic Environment, 85
7 Hiroaki Richard Watanabe, "The Struggle for Revitalisation by Japanese Labour Unions: Worker
  Organising after Labour-Market Deregulation,"Journal of Contemporary Asia 45, no. 3 (2015):516.
8 Hiroyuki Fujimura, "Japan's Labor Unions: Past, Present, Future,"Japan Labor Review 9, no. 1
  (2012): 8.

Labor Relations Institutions and Their Incapacitation

From Conflict to Collaboration

Before the corporatist model of industrial relations took hold in Japan, a history of antagonism existed between the labor movement and business that 'democratization and wage improvements.[9] The general strike of January 1947 would represent the high-water mark of this period of industrial conflict in the immediate post-war era. The preceding months had seen the foundation of the radical trade union Sanbetsu formed by the Japanese Communist Party and representing some 1.5 million members in public enterprises and the civil service.[10] Public sector workers had been pressing the Yoshida government for wage increases to a level on par with that of workers in the private sector. But met with the prime minister's intransigence, these workers represented by Zentō (a national union council) as well as other major union confederations, including Sanbetsu and Sōdōmei, called for a general strike.[11] The period leading up to the strike was a turbulent one, with Sanbetsu's president severely wounded in an assassination attempt. The general strike was only prevented by the direct intervention of SCAP. This is hardly the image of industrial peace for which Japan would later become known.

   However, an important demand was made by workers in this period that would set the stage for a more collaborative approach in the future. A primary demand had been the elimination of status distinctions between blue-collar (*kōin)* and white collar (*shokuin*) workers[12] When these status distinctions were implemented, it helped lead to the development of a community-like atmosphere in the factory that maintained the appearance of egalitarianism. Firms were quick to grant these concessions as a means of partially diffusing the antagonistic attitude widespread throughout the labor movement at the time. Such antagonism was further dampened with help from SCAP's reversal in policy course regarding leftists in the Japanese labor movement and a reactionary counteroffensive led by the Japanese Federation of Employers' Associations (*Nikkeiren*). The more moderate enterprise unions were given a boost, and in lieu of general strikes across industrial sectors, wage negotiations were confined within

---

9 Ikuo Kume, Disparaged Success: Labor Politics in Postwar Japan (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 56.

10 Robert A. Scalapino, The Japanese Communist Movement, 1920–1966 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 68.

11 Kume, 56.

12 Ibid., 51.

the firm and labor's influence over management decisions was scaled back.[13]

One of the key strategies pursued by Japanese unions in their bargaining strategies with management was *shuntō*, the "Spring Bargaining Offensive." *Shuntō*, grew out of a need to overcome the obstacles inherent to enterprise-level union organizational structure, which was accomplished by synchronizing wage negotiations to occur simultaneously. Through this process industry-wide wage standards were set, which worked to prevent a fractious, drawn out, and disruptive bargaining process as this institution became routinized.[14] While *shuntō*, began as a labor pressure tactic to force management to provide wage increases that kept pace with productivity increases, through annual repetition it became a semi-formalized institution with a set of unwritten but mutually understood rules whose timing both labor and management could anticipate. This was the pattern followed by the moderates taking leadership positions in Japan's Metalworkers Federation, whose members were employed in the steel, auto, shipbuilding, and machine industries. Demands for wage increases were kept within limits that wouldn't provoke management opposition, but were also accepted by the union base because they kept pace with inflation and productivity improvements.[15] Incrementally, a solid foundation for labor—management cooperation was being built.

Patterns of Labor—Management Cooperation

Industrial peace cannot proceed without the willing support or acquiescence of labor, and so enterprise unions, because of their conservative ethos and tendency to use the strike only as a last resort, have had an important part in seeing that production goes undisturbed by frequent disruptions which might erupt from more confrontational strategies. Currently, the largest union confederation in Japan is Rengō (at 11 million members in the early 2000s), formed in 1989 from elements of the activist Sōhyō and the more conservative Dōmei, which was prevalent in Japan's export-oriented manufacturing industries. However, the emergence of this national union confederation obscured the fact that the real center of gravity for Japan's industrial relations has long been limited to the enterprise or local level. Rather than forming an industry or federation-wide consensus over bargaining strategies, local

---

13 Ibid., 47.
14 Rebick, 77.
15 Charles Weathers, "Shuntō and the Shackles of Competitiveness,"Labor History 49, no. 2 (May 2008): 178-79.

union chapters have in reality been more closely integrated with the firms in which their members are employed. Unions at this level participate in joint consultation groups with their employers, a corporatist practice that stymies grassroots initiatives among the rank-and-file. Whereas in the past, union—management committees might have served as a forum for discussion of improvements in pay, they have since become a conduit for the management of firms undergoing restructuring to pressure unions into accepting wage restraints and submit candidates for layoffs or early retirement.[16]

The situation hardly differs from firms without unions, where Joint Labor—Management Committees (JLMCs) serve to promote communication and share information between the two parties. Ideally, the JLMCs, or *keieikyōgikai*, should provide workers a chance to participate in managerial decisions over the production process and foster a sense of community in the firm. However, the influence workers have had in these committees is limited and they have mostly served as a way for management to deflect worker discontent away from the company by allowing a nominal say in factory management without granting labor any formal power in the management of the firm.[17] But even if JLMCs are nothing more than a management tool, they represented a desire on the part of the firm to engender a sense of shared community and identity.

Regardless of the role enterprise unions and the JLMCs had in fostering feelings of community within the firm, there are other reasons why individual workers might feel a strong affinity with their employers based on their rational self-interest and opportunity for promotion within the company and its affiliates. Many workers in Japan receive their training on the job, which requires their employers to make long-term commitments to their regular employees and protect them from job losses. Incorporating new employees into the company system would require training and transactional costs as the workers adjust to a new environment.[18] The Japanese training system and the intra-firm or intra-business group hiring practices have given rise to *shushin koyō* "permanent employment."[19] According to this hiring practice, as tenure increases, so does pay with compensation levels roughly tied to age.[20] This employment system can be described as exhibiting the characteristics

---

16 Rebick, 23-24.
17 Kume, 53.
18 Jiyeoun Song, *Inequality in the Workplace: Labor Market Reform in Japan and Korea* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014), 68-69.
19 Rebick, 17.
20 Ibid., 14.

of the *ie*, "family," organizational form in Japanese culture where one's relationship to the group is considered permanent. However true this claim might be, it encourages observers to overlook the actual incentives provided to employees by the firm, ignores larger macroeconomic factors, and erases labor market outsiders who experience a much higher rate of turnover and weaker ties to their employers. Therefore, it cannot be used to describe the behavior in the Japanese system of industrial relations as a whole.

As has been made clear, the conditions that brought about industrial peace in Japan were not determined at the outset. On the contrary, the historical and legal circumstances of the early postwar period gave rise to a labor movement that pursued a confrontational strategy, which did not hesitate using the strike when it felt necessary. The collaborative approach came about only after the reaction from Nikkeirenand SCAP against labor militancy, which in turn provided leverage that the conservative unions could exploit to enhance their leadership in the labor movement. Far from being an accident of culture, workers, unions, and firms all faced economic and structural incentives which made collaboration seem natural. But how would these actors, government, business, and labor negotiate changes to the employment system brought about by liberalization? And to what extent was labor complicit in the dismantling of its own institutional power?

Liberalization, Cooptation, and Capture

Minor steps taken in the 1980s toward liberalization and globalized market competition notwithstanding labor were able to maintain the modest leverage gained in the period of rapid postwar development. However, following the asset bubble burst and the ensuing decades of economic stagnation, labor proved unable to withstand the mounting pressures for reform. In a textbook case of corporatism, officials in the major labor union federation Rengō were invited by the government, specifically the Ministry of Labor, to partake in the process of crafting labor market flexibility reform bills alongside major business groups such as Nippon-Keidanren, albeit in a somewhat reduced role.[21] Noticeably excluded from this arrangement was Zenrōren (National Confederation of Trade Unions), Japan's second largest union confederation representing some 1.2 million workers. Zenrōren traces its origins to the communist-supported, Sanbetsu (mentioned above) and other leftist unions from that

---

21 Song, 91-92.

time period, and has maintained a commitment to a militant, class-based organizing strategy.[22] For this reason it was unwilling to participate in the labor market liberalization process and its presence was not welcome by the Ministry of Labor and Keidanren-dominated committee. Labor market outsiders, were also left without a voice as the unions and large businesses colluded to protect their own interests. Ultimately, organized labor's ideological and tactical disagreements and Rengō's desire to maintain its institutional privileges kept unions from representing a viable challenge to liberalization as it fell victim to retrenchment and capture in the reform policymaking process.

In the early-to-mid-1990s, labor deliberative councils (*rōdō shingikai*) were organized so that union and business interests could debate and construct reform bills with the Ministry of Labor (MOL) acting as neutral arbiter. At this time, Rengō held much sway in these tripartite committees, and if the parties were unable to reach consensus, the MOL was unwilling to press forward with legislative proposals. A more substantive development came in 1994 when the Deregulation Subcommittee was formed. It was chaired by IBM CEO Shiina Takeo (later replaced by Orix CEO, Myauchi Yoshihiko a year later), and composed of sixteen members among business and academia, with only one union representative.[23] The Deregulation Subcommittee might have been the catalyst which transformed labor's role in liberalization from reluctant collaborator to coopted conspirator.

Under worsening economic conditions in the late 1990s and under the more politically resolute and centralized Obuchi cabinet (1998-2000), business began pressuring the government and labor leaders to support adjustments to the "Worker Dispatch Law" that would allow the lifting of restrictions regarding the hiring and scheduling of dispatch workers. Rengō, lacking a unified base and seeing little interest in defending workers who represented only a small minority of its membership, relaxed their opposition as long as union insiders were promised employment protection in the event of restructuring.[24] Ultimately however, labor was dropped entirely from the tripartite committee under the Koizumi administration (2001-2006).[25] In sacrificing labor market outsiders, Rengō and the labor movement at large had unwittingly undermined their bargaining positions in the long-term by allowing the growth in the number of available non-

---

22 Keisuke Fuse, "Zenroren Labor Federation,"The International Encyclopedia of Revolution and Protest(Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2009).
23 Song, 101.
24 Ibid., 104.
25 Watanabe, 514.

regular workers in the labor market, thereby placing downward pressure on wages overall, and losing possible future dues-paying union members.

The center-left wing of the labor movement had willingly entered the tripartite arrangements at the behest of government and business and was complicit in the remaking of the Japanese economy that took place over the "Lost Decade." The leaders of the recently expanded Rengō could not have known that they were making a deal with the devil which would leave it robbed of its spirit, wearily wandering the neo-liberal wasteland of the new millennium in search of its lost soul. Not only had the corporatist institutions that had given it so much say in the postwar political economy been gradually eroded, but its membership was now depleted, aged, and resigned to an uncertain fate. Can such a situation be described as industrial peace?

Increased Pressures Vanishing Remedies

Even for regular workers represented by the major unions, working conditions and employee satisfaction in the post-reform era is a far cry from what it had been during Japan's boom years.Career pathways into secure long-term employment are increasingly harder to come by, and workers find little institutional support in resisting management pressures to work longer and more intensely than in the past. Workers are registering dissatisfaction with unions that seem to provide few benefits to their members while failing to forward their grievances to management. Union activity has reached a nadir and the movement no longer forms an important part of workplace culture. Confrontation with management is simply not viable. It's not so much that workers *won't* strike—indeed they have good cause too—but that they *can't* and *don't know* how to strike.

The marginalization of regular workers has proceeded in tandem with nonregular workers. Management's implementation of performance-based salaries has intensified the labor process and pushed workers into performing overtime duty without proper compensation.[26] A new phenomena *karoshi*, "being worked to death," has become so common that the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare (MHLW) established a standard procedure for awarding compensation to the family of victims in such cases.[27] These tragedies should act as a wake-up call to the labor movement, but it lacks the willpower and means to respond.

---

26 Ibid., 515.
27 Tony Royle and Edson Urano, "A New Form of Union Organizing in Japan? Community Unions and the Case of the McDonald's 'McUnion',"Work, Employment and Society 26, no. 4 (2012): 614.

Union members have expressed higher levels of dissatisfaction with their organizations because of their failure to prevent continued deteriorations in working conditions and job stability.[28] The movement leadership in organizations like Rengō has repeatedly failed to represent the working class as a whole by cooperating with business on reforms despite widespread and public opposition from the movement's base.[29] A survey conducted by the Institution for Industrial Relation and Labor Policy in the late-2000s suggested that workers who become union officials do not actively pursue the position and after being selected, view it more as a duty or chore than a chance to represent and advocate for fellow members. Results from this same survey suggest that even management perceives union officials as having failed to take charge in the workplace, with only 7.9 percent responding in the affirmative to the question, "workplace officials understand what is occurring in the workplace and have an accurate grasp of these problems."[30] This would suggest that union officials possessed little prior interest in becoming advocates for their members before taking their positions and instead perform their duties as a mere formality. It seems that unions have lost a sense of direction and purpose by having abandoned their function of airing worker grievances and leveraging management for improvements.

In a more confrontational setting, the strike could restore a sense of solidarity and reinvigorate the rank-and-file as they pursue their shared interests in opposition to management. But strikes have fallen so deeply into disuse that both union leaders and management would have no clue as to how to conduct or respond to one.[31] In addition, strikes require sufficient financial resources to compensate participating members for lost wages during their inactivity, and union finances have been stretched to the limit as the government places greater burdens on unions to provide pension, training, family, and mental healthcare services, which the state cannot or will not provide.[32] A final factor mitigating striking is the large number of strikebreakers made available through deregulation of the "Worker Dispatch Law." Dispatch workers are not represented by unions which might make them less likely to sympathize with striking workers, and more importantly their immediate need for income outweighs the

---

28 Ibid., 607.
29 Jeffrey P. Broadbent, "Social Capital and Labor Politics in Japan: Cooperation or Cooptation?,"Policy Sciences 33, no. 3 (2000): 186.
30 Fujimura, 15-17.The survey targeted enterprise union officials and managers in both clerical and technical divisions of Japanese industry.
31 Ibid., 8.
32 Tatsuru Akimoto & Yōichi Sonoda, "Labor Welfare in Japan: Social Change and Enterprise Unionism,"Journal of Workplace and Behavioral Health 24, no. 1 (2009): 250-55.

increasingly weakening deterrent of being labeled a strikebreaker. It is these practical and economic difficulties, more than underlying cultural tendencies, that make Japanese workers unwilling to strike.

Japanese in the post-reform era work under conditions that actors in different settings would find intolerable. But, through failures in communication, interest, and leadership among union officials, labor has been sapped of its livelihood. A strike might reawaken the movement, but the absence of previous strike experiences, financial resources, and the likelihood of replacement by dispatch workers make striking impractical. The labor movement has lost both its institutional power and sense of purpose, making industrial peace an unavoidable outcome rather than the result of collaboration between a competent union leadership and flexible management.

Conclusion

Japanese labor hardly resembles its postwar self. The momentous struggles that emerged in the chaos of Japan's industrial reconstruction are hard to imagine given the current silence among workers today. Such relics are also out of step with the popular understanding in academia of a Japanese society that prizes social harmony and in-group consensus. The received images that essentialize Japanese culture disguise a history of conflict and confrontation, ignore groups that do not fit the model, and reduce its social institutions to mere holograms of culture. Of course, this is not to say that culturally unique modes of social networking and ingroup identity do not have a special influence on the Japanese society, and should not be considered as useful frames of analysis, but they should always be considered in the proper historical and economic contexts.

If this work assumed cultural determinist explanations of industrial peace in Japan at the outset, it would miss a complex history of the labor movement, which took on radically different appearances according to various structural incentives, historical events, and changes to its relative power vis-a-vis government and business. Also, the loss would have been the negotiated compromises, sacrifices, and betrayals made by union organizations divided both among themselves and internally, throughout its ascension and decline. Considering labor's internal tensions and conflicts with government and business, it's a wonder that industrial peace was maintained at all. And yet, it was.

The institutions in the corporatist model succeeded to integrate and ameliorate a working class with a significant contingent hostile to the

interests of business and the dirigiste state, and directed its energies to what for a long time seemed like mutually agreed upon interests. Still not all workers were comfortable with collaborative industrial relations, such as those represented by Sanbetsu and Zenrōren, which perceived and claimed to advocate for their membership based on its class interests rather than from the standpoint of institutional survival. Rengō, the largest, and institutionally most powerful confederation, took the latter approach and found that it would have to sacrifice protections for some of its most vulnerable members in order to maintain a say in policymaking and protecting the interests of its core membership. For various reasons, not least among them the labor movement's internal divisions, corporatist collaboration devolved into cooptation as the shared goal shifted from industrial development to liberalization. In the post-reform era of a weakened and divided labor movement, the strike became a lost art, and unions, failing to find other alternatives became merely an appendage of management. The ossification of industrial peace proceeded apace.

To sum up, Japanese industrial peace was not a predetermined outcome based on transhistorical culturally specific forms of organization. Throughout the postwar era, Japanese unions and membership, regardless of ideological background or organizational model, acted in personal, class, and organizational self-interests and even expressed those interests through militant confrontation at times. Even the function of JLMCs can be better understood by considering the perceived practical benefits they offer workers and management rather than through the lens of *ie* and *mura*. These cultural models can serve as descriptive tools and be useful in conceptualizing patterns of behavior repeated over time. But they are dangerous when assumed to function as a constant throughout historical epochs. To properly grasp the industrial relations in Japan and account for cases that do not fit the standard model, the only alternative is to abandon the assumption of causal force in the model itself and substitute it with a historical analysis that accounts for the dynamic set of strategies used by these actors in pursing them.