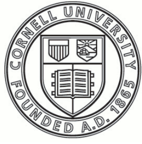

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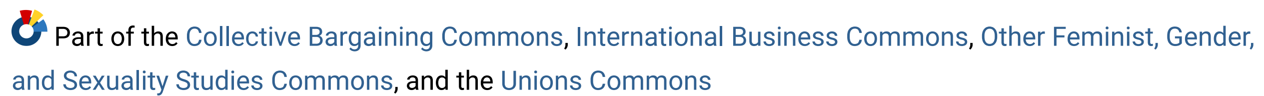
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Our Unions, Our Selves: The Rise of Feminist Labor Unions in Japan

Abstract

[Excerpt] In *Our Unions, Our Selves*, Anne Zacharias-Walsh provides an in-depth look at the rise of women-only unions in Japan, an organizational analysis of the challenges these new unions face in practice, and a firsthand account of the ambitious, occasionally contentious, and ultimately successful international solidarity project that helped to spark a new feminist labor movement.

In the early 1990s, as part of a larger wave of union reform efforts in Japan, women began creating their own women-only labor unions to confront long-standing gender inequality in the workplace and in traditional enterprise unions. These new unions soon discovered that the demand for individual assistance and help at the bargaining table dramatically exceeded the rate at which the unions could recruit and train members to meet that demand. Within just a few years, women-only unions were proving to be both the most effective option women had for addressing problems on the job and in serious danger of dying out because of their inability to grow their organizational capacity.

Zacharias-Walsh met up with Japanese women's unions at a critical moment in their struggle to survive. Recognizing the benefits of a cross-national dialogue, they teamed up to host a multiyear international exchange project that brought together U.S. and Japanese activists and scholars to investigate the links between organizational structure and the day-to-day problems nontraditional unions face, and to develop Japan-specific participatory labor education as a way to organize and empower new generations of members. They also gained valuable insights into the fine art of building and maintaining the kinds of collaborative, cross border relationships that are essential to today's social justice movements, from global efforts to save the environment to the Fight for $15 and Black Lives Matter.

Keywords

Japan, unions, feminism, gender inequality, discrimination

Disciplines

Collective Bargaining | International Business | Labor Relations | Other Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies | Unions

Comments

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OUR UNIONS, OUR SELVES

The Rise of Feminist Labor Unions in Japan

Anne Zacharias-Walsh

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Introduction

Our Unions, Our Selves is the story of the emergence of women-only unions in Japan and their extraordinary efforts to transform their workplaces, their lives, and the national labor movement as a whole. It is also the story of the three-year grassroots exchange project that brought together struggling Japanese activists and US activists and scholars who, like their Japanese counterparts, were searching for new ways to organize workers whose circumstances did not quite square with traditional models of organizing. That long-term collaboration led to important discoveries about the complex and often conflicting nature of women's unions' mission and organizational structures and practices. The project also produced crucial lessons about the difficulties of and necessity for cross-border (where borders are not limited to national boundaries) collaborative social justice efforts in the face of the increasingly dehumanizing demands of global capital.

In the late 1980s Japanese women began creating their own labor unions to confront long-standing gender inequality in the workplace as well as newer "American-style" lean and mean management practices that degrade employment conditions for all workers and hurt women workers most of all (Liddle and Nakajima 2000; Broadbent 2005a, 2005b, 2007; interviews with union members and leaders 2000).[1] The first women's union, Kansai Women's Union (KWU), was founded in Osaka in 1987 after corporate Japan's palpable shift to the right led a small group of activists to conclude that "establishing women workers' rights as basic human rights will require women to organize their own labor movement" (KWU 2004).[2] Soon after, women's unions opened in Sapporo,

Fukuoka, Tokyo, and Sendai. By 2003, twelve women-only unions were operating in Japan (Broadbent 2007).

Women's unions are autonomous grassroots workers' organizations that organize by gender rather than by company, industry, or occupation. Based on the community-union model, women's unions connect working women within a geographical area to collectively address workplace issues such as gender-based wage inequality, sexual harassment, lack of childcare, and forced retirement. They also provide representation to the growing number of women working on part-time and temporary contracts, who are ineligible for membership in traditional enterprise-based unions. Although they are similar in some ways to other alternative unions that emerged around the same time (e.g., community unions, part-time and temporary workers unions), women's unions are unique in that they play the dual role of advocating for women's human and workers' rights. As workers' organizations, women's unions seek to wield the collective power of women as workers whose issues have long been neglected by mainstream unions. As women's organizations, they seek to empower women to recognize and claim their status as independent selves, with the same rights to self-determination, self-actualization, and full participation in society as their male counterparts. In other words, women's unions are in the business of pursuing the often contradictory goals of helping members to develop collective consciousness as workers and individual consciousness of their rights to full and equal personhood. And it is within that conflict that both the promise and pitfalls of this new form of organization lie. As organizations that, by their very nature, combine labor concerns with at least one other marginalized constituency, women's unions could provide a bridge to the broader kind of social movement unionism that progressive activists and scholars in Japan are currently seeking (Suzuki 2010; Weathers 2010).

Gender Inequality in the Japanese Workplace

Despite the passage of equal employment legislation in the mid-1980s, Japan's workplaces remain mired in anachronistic gender relations and discriminatory practices. According to the Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training (JILPT), Japanese women are no less likely to be employed than women in other developed countries. Approximately twenty-four million women were employed in 2013, making up about 43 percent of the total workforce (JILPT 2014). And in 2012, the employment rate of Japanese women was at 60.7 percent, slightly exceeding the average rate across Organisation for Economic Co-operation and

Development (OECD) countries (OECD 2013). Yet, according to the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Report 2014, Japan ranked 102nd out of 142 nations for economic participation and opportunity (Kawaguchi 2015). Comparing female-to-male ratios of Japan with other countries, Japan ranked 112th in women as legislators, senior officials, and managers; 83rd for labor force participation; 78th for women in professional and technical positions; 74th for estimated earned income; and 53rd for equal pay for similar work.

Working women's advocates point to two institutional factors they say are primarily responsible for the continuing gap between men's and women's workplace experiences: the persistence of traditional gender roles in society (reinforced by lack of institutions that could enable women to work full-time, such as child and elder care), and discriminatory labor management practices that are designed to ensure that Japanese companies always have access to a pool of cheap, disposable labor (Brinton 1993; Gottfried and O'Reilly 2002; Broadbent 2003; Osawa 2007; Kawaguchi 2015).

Japan's postwar employment system was ostensibly based on the promise of well-paid, lifetime employment in exchange for total dedication to the firm (Kanai 1996; Osawa 2007; Gottfried 2008). But that promise was never extended to all segments of the workforce (Brinton 1993; Lam 1993; Kanai 1996). In order to guarantee lifetime employment, family wages, and regular raises to regular full-time workers, firms needed access to a pool of workers they could more easily hire and fire in response to fluctuations in the business cycle (Shinotsuka 1994; Kumazawa 1996; Gottfried 2008). Employers also needed people to fill low-skilled, support positions, but did not relish the idea of offering the same level of compensation or guarantees for merely supplemental work (Cook and Hayashi 1980; Ogasawara 1998). For much of the twentieth century, Japanese firms achieved these goals largely by making job assignments on the basis of gender (Kumazawa 1996). Male employees, assumed to be family breadwinners, were hired as full-time regular employees with all the rights and privileges (and responsibilities) pertaining thereto. Women, whose wage and job security needs were assumed to be lower than men's, were typically slotted into low-wage, short-term support jobs as a matter of course (Cook and Hayashi 1980; Liddle and Nakajima 2000; Gottfried 2008).

In the mid-1970s women's groups intensified their efforts to force Japanese companies to end discriminatory workplace practices. In 1985, after a decade of intense activism and international pressure, Japan adopted equal employment legislation that, at least on paper, outlawed some but by no means all management practices that discriminate on the basis of gender (Gelb 2003).[3] But, at the same time, Japanese firms and the state were under increasing pressure from global capital to modernize their employment practices (JILPT 2014). In

order to compete in the global economy, Japanese firms needed more not less access to workers who could be employed outside the corporate embrace of the lifetime employment system. Firms responded by shifting to new labor management practices, particularly the increased use of nonregular/nonpermanent employment patterns and the two career-track system, which allowed them to continue and even intensify practices that segment the labor force without explicitly invoking gender as the dividing line (Gottfried 2008, interviews with union leaders 2000–2009).[4] Far from being gender-neutral, both systems disproportionately disadvantage women, according to the labor ministry's analyses (JILPT 2014).

Regular Versus Nonregular Employment

Hiring workers under nonregular and/or nonpermanent employment contracts has become increasingly common in recent decades, largely as a result of increased pressure from global competition (JILPT 2007).[5] Nonregular, nonpermanent positions typically provide lower wages, fewer benefits, little or no opportunity for promotion, and less job security than full-time regular positions do—even when the work is identical. In addition, nonregular, nonpermanent employees are typically ineligible for membership in in-house unions, some social welfare benefits, and pension schemes (Osawa 2007; Gottfried 2008; Weathers 2010).[6] By virtually all measures, nonregular and nonpermanent employment patterns are inferior forms of employment from the employee's perspective and, not surprisingly, women are overrepresented in all forms of precarious employment (Liddle and Nakajima 2000; Gottfried 2008; JILPT 2014). Also, while it is true that nonregular employment has been increasing across the board in Japan, from 20 percent in 1995 to 35 percent in 2014, only about 20 percent of men are categorized as nonregular employees, compared to 50 percent of women (JILPT 2014). The severity and long-term consequences of the gender gap are even more apparent when we look at the figures by age group. According to the JILPT (2014), the gap between men and women is smaller at the extremities: very young (15 to 24 years old) and post-retirement age men and women have relatively high rates of nonregular employment. The rate for young men was 43.9 percent compared to 50.6 percent for young women. And for over 65, the rate for men was 66.9 percent to women's 71.4. But looking at the rates for employees during their prime earning years, ages 25 to 55, we can see that the gap widens dramatically. Nearly 41 percent of women ages 25 to 34 are classified as nonregular, while only 15.5 percent of men in that age group are nonregular. In the 35 to 44 age group, 8.2 percent of men are nonregular compared to women's 53.8. And in the 45 to 54 age group, the rates are 8.6 percent for men and 58.4 percent for women.

Between ages 55 and 64 the gap narrows somewhat to 31.4 percent for men and 65.4 percent for women, but that still means women are twice as likely to be working in nonregular positions than their male counterparts. Considering that nonregular workers' wages are about half that of regular employees (Weathers 2010), the effect of being concentrated in nonregular employment for the bulk of their careers on women's total lifetime earnings and pensions is catastrophic, and its effect on Japanese society at large is scarcely less so: "The non-regular work pattern has come to be regarded as a factor obstructing measures to combat the declining birth rate and aging population [problem]—identified by the Japanese government as its most important policy target" (JILPT 2014, chap. 2, sec. 2, 3).

Two Career-Track System

The two career-track system is another labor management practice that disadvantages women in the workforce. Feminists and other labor scholars argue that the two career-track system was developed specifically to enable employers to sidestep equal opportunity legislation (Gelb 2003; Weathers 2012).[7] The two-track system creates two distinct career paths: the management track (*sōgō shoku*) and the general clerical track (*ippan shoku*). The overwhelmingly male management track provides high wages, including regular bonuses, premier benefits, access to training and exams necessary for promotion, and increased responsibility and decision making over time. The overwhelmingly female clerical track, on the other hand, offers lower pay, fewer benefits, and little, if any, opportunity for advancement. Clerical track employees are assigned to routine tasks with few or no decision-making opportunities, and are typically denied access to company training programs and the chance to sit for the exams required for promotion.

Although the management track is overwhelmingly male and the clerical track overwhelmingly female, employees are not assigned to these categories explicitly on the basis of gender; that would be illegal. Instead, they are assigned on the basis of their willingness to accept the transfers, relocations, and extreme work hours Japanese companies require. But, in a society where women are responsible for virtually all outside-the-workplace obligations, that "willingness" in practice constitutes a reliable proxy for gender (Gottfried 2008; Kawaguchi 2015).[8]

As with the nonregular employment system, the two-track system is extremely damaging to women's economic position. Even holding the differences in wages, benefits, and job security aside, the JILPT describes the lack of access to training, which is a central feature of both the nonregular and the two-track

systems, as having "such negative consequences as to be life-defining" (JILPT 2014). That is especially alarming considering that nearly half of all major Japanese firms use a two-track system (Kawaguchi 2015).

Nevertheless, Japanese courts have upheld the legality of the two-track system, saying that the law allows for comparison only within categories, not across. Employers must provide the same opportunities (including access to training) for everyone in the management track, and the same opportunities for everyone in the clerical track, but it has no obligation to offer people in the clerical track (women) the same opportunities it offers people in the management track (men).[9]

Enterprise Unions

Japan's mainstream labor institutions have been slow to respond to the decades-long decline in wages and employment conditions. The Japanese labor movement is dominated by enterprise unions, which differ significantly from industrial unions in several ways. Enterprise unions organize the employees within a given company rather than by occupation or industry. As in-house organizations with no independent existence outside of the firm, most enterprise unions operate on a cooperationist model (Kume 1998; Weathers 2010). Their philosophy is that the best way to protect their members is to work in cooperation with management to ensure the success and profitability of the company (Kumazawa 1996; Gordon 1998; Broadbent 2007; Suzuki 2010; interviews with labor leaders in Japan 1999–2009). Most enterprise unions limit their membership to full-time regular employees, the majority of whom are male (JILPT 2014).

Historically, enterprise unions have done little to address women's work issues (Cook and Hayashi 1980; Simpson 1985; Kumazawa 1996; Broadbent 2003, 2007, 2008; Mackie 2003).[10] As company-specific organizations whose fortunes depend on the company's survival, enterprise unions accept the premise that management must have access to cheap, disposable labor as a buffer against the vicissitudes of the business cycle (Kumazawa 1996; interviews 1999, 2000, 2009). As representatives of full-time regular employees, enterprise unions tend to agree with employers that those jobs should be higher paying, more secure, and offer greater possibilities for promotion than nonregular positions do (Simpson 1985; Broadbent 2007). And, as majority male organizations, enterprise unions tend to be more responsive to male issues, have more expertise in addressing issues that are common to male employees, and be willing to accept compromises that preserve members' (i.e., men's) jobs and working conditions at nonmembers' (i.e., women's) expense (Brinton 1993; Kotani 1999; Broadbent 2003,

2007, 2008; Gelb 2003; Mackie 2003; interviews with union leaders and members 1999–2004). That is not to say that enterprise unions are monolithically indifferent to women's issues, but even when more progressive enterprise unions seek to address issues that primarily affect women, such as sexual harassment, their efforts are often hampered by their lack of experience and expertise (Broadbent 2003, 2008; interviews with union leaders 2000).

Community Unions

The women-only unions of today grew out of the broader community union movement that began in the 1980s. At the same time that Japanese women activists were reaching the apex of their frustration with conventional labor institutions, left-wing labor leaders were introducing new kinds of unions whose purpose was to organize workers who were outside the enterprise union bubble. Leftist labor federation *Sohyo* (now defunct) began organizing regional unions for employees of small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) as well as public sector employees who lost their full-time, union-eligible jobs in that decade's frenzy of privatization (Suzuki 2010). Typically called community unions or attribution-based unions, these network-based unions organize individual workers by nontraditional criteria such as geographical area and terms of employment instead of occupation, industry, or enterprise.[11] Most also operate on the individual affiliation model, meaning workers can join as individuals rather than as part of a larger bargaining unit.[12] By the 1990s, as pressure from global competition and labor market deregulation steadily eroded working conditions and job security for workers across the board, a broader swath of the Japanese workforce found themselves unemployed or underemployed and ineligible for membership in traditional unions. As a result, community unions grew in number and kind throughout the nineties, when newly disenfranchised workers joined the search for union representation (Weathers 2010).[13] By the mid-1990s, Japanese workers had founded an impressive array of attribution-based unions, including unions for part-time and nonregular workers, foreign workers, temp agency employees, displaced and unemployed workers, low-level managers, and unions for women only.

Women's Unions, in Theory and Practice

Japanese women's unions (JWUs) are similar to other community unions in that they are network-based organizations that connect members across enterprises

and industries. But they differ in that they focus on women's work issues, and they are structured and attempt to operate along feminist principles and practices. Like other attribution-based unions, women's unions seek to close the gap between highly paid "lifetime employees" and those hired as lower paid, expendable "extras" to whom the company makes no long-term commitment. But JWUs go further by explicitly rejecting the idea that it is natural and just for women, by virtue of being women, to be automatically funneled into inferior jobs or employed under inferior conditions. Women's unions also differ from other alternative unions in their willingness and ability to address workplace issues that primarily affect women, such as sexual harassment, hostile work environment, work-life balance, and gender discrimination. Although some alternative unions and even some mainstream enterprise unions are genuinely concerned about violations of women's work rights, JWU members say that even the best intentioned mixed-gender unions tend to be male-centered and to lack the experience and membership support to pursue women's grievances (Broadbent 2008; interviews with workers and union members 1999, 2000, 2004, 2007).

Women's unions constitute a significant development in Japanese women's and workers' activism. With their innovative outlook and practices, women's unions have the potential to play an important role in reshaping existing labor laws, institutions, and practices; political and legal discourse around women's and workers' issues; and the inter- and intraworkings of advocacy organizations and social movements writ large. Although JWUs organize women only, many of the founders hope that ultimately women's unions will serve as a model for creating social justice organizations whose internal operations more fully embody the principles they advocate (Broadbent 2005a, 2005b, 2007, and 2008; interviews with union leaders and members 2000, 2002, 2004, 2007).[14]

Yet, for all their potential, JWUs have not evolved in the way their founders had envisioned. The founders believed that union membership would "snowball" organically as more and more women became empowered by the experience of collective bargaining. By standing up for themselves and each other, women would automatically develop feminist and union consciousness, which would in turn motivate them to remain active in the union long after their own issues were resolved. That didn't happen. Instead of snowballing, JWU membership patterns look more like a revolving door. Women join the union when they have an active grievance at work and need immediate help, but once their grievance is resolved, most women become inactive members or they quit the union entirely. This has led to critical shortages in human and other resources among JWUs. Continuing deterioration of working conditions coupled with JWUs' high rate of success in resolving women's grievances (relative to enterprise unions and government labor agencies) meant that the number of women seeking union

services increased over time. But revolving door membership left JWUs unable to develop new cohorts of trained, active members to keep pace with that demand.

The US-Japan Working Women's Networks Project

From my first meeting with members of the Women's Union Tokyo (WUT) in November 2000, it was clear that Japanese women activists were grappling with many of the same questions labor feminists in the United States were asking: How do we build effective workers' organizations that operate on feminist principles? What does a feminist labor union look like? How can we reach, organize, and empower workers who are employed in small or dispersed work settings, or who are not represented or underrepresented by existing labor unions? Our circumstances were, in some ways, very different. The conditions Japanese women worked under sounded a lot closer to the problems of my mother's or even my grandmother's generation, but their questions about how to move forward had a decidedly familiar ring. It didn't take us long to realize that both sides would benefit from intense, crossborder dialogue. Japanese women's organizations clearly stood to benefit from opportunities to engage in dialogue with each other and with feminist individuals and organizations from other countries, including the United States. And reform-minded US activists like me had a lot to learn from Japanese women who were turning their nation's profoundly male-centered labor movement on its head.

That was the start of the US-Japan Working Women's Networks Project. With a grant from the Japan Foundation Center for Global Partnership, we developed a multi-year grassroots exchange program that brought American and Japanese women activists together to educate each other about their organizations, brainstorm solutions to critical ongoing problems, and create new Japan-specific resources to foster feminist consciousness and union solidarity within JWUs. The project was unique because we met several times over the course of three years, and because we designed the project in a way that would allow it to organically grow and change over time in response to the insights and innovations that emerged in the course of sharing new ideas.

The project had several interlocking goals. We sought to help JWUs to develop Japan-specific training materials to encourage solidarity and long-term participation among members, and to enable each generation of activists to pass their knowledge and skills on to the next. We also hoped that working together on educational materials would organically stimulate deep organizational

discussions, and that this cross-pollination of ideas and perspectives would enhance organization- and movement-building efforts in both countries. Finally, we sought to establish solidarity ties between and among US and Japanese women's groups as a step toward building a larger international network of working women's organizations.

At first I worried that our goals had a whiff of hubris about them, but from the moment the project started, the Japanese women pushed our aims and efforts to a level beyond what Heidi and I imagined possible. In addition to the three international meetings the project called for, the Japanese groups convened a variety of additional gatherings—national, regional, and local meetings to process and build on what they were learning and creating through the US-Japan Project; conferences, workshops, lectures, and retreats to refine and disseminate the new practices and materials they were creating. They brought new activists and women's groups into the project. They reached out to women in other Asian countries to extend the knowledge exchange beyond the original scope of the project.

In the end, the Japanese women used what they learned through the US-Japan Project to revolutionize the way Japanese feminists do business. The project changed the way Japanese women's groups operate, individually and as a movement. It changed the way they interact with women's groups in other countries and with other types of unions and social justice organizations. And it changed the way JWUs approach developing new generations of activists. The project also led to the creation of a new national organization that seeks to link Japanese women's groups, facilitate resource and information sharing, and coordinate national campaigns.

On the American side, the US-Japan Project was an eye-opening experience for scholars and activists alike. We learned about Japanese workers' increasing dissatisfaction with traditional company unions and their ongoing efforts to create new kinds of unions outside the company structure. We learned of the existence of an array of emerging alternative unions, including women's unions, part-time workers' unions, community unions, and other kinds of network-based workers' organizations. We became particularly well acquainted with the internal operations of JWUs and the kinds of organizational problems they face. We gained significant knowledge about the range of on-the-job problems Japanese women encounter, as well as the many ways Japanese women have tried to combat those problems. We also came away with a far more nuanced understanding of the similarities and differences between Japanese and American employment systems and labor-related laws and institutions, and how these factors shaped (and continue to shape) women's activities in each country.

Our Unions, Our Selves

Our Unions, Our Selves tells the story of the development of these innovative, dual-advocacy organizations and their evolving efforts to radically reshape the Japanese labor movement and society at large. Focusing on the case of Women's Union Tokyo, Part I looks at the evolution of JWUs; their origins, goals, philosophies, and daily practices; and the internal and external obstacles they face in practice. Chapter 1 centers on my first meeting with Keiko Tani and Midori Ito, the founders of the WUT, in which they described in detail the inner workings of their union and offered their take (echoed by other feminist labor activists and scholars) on how various phases and practices of the postwar employment system contributed to the eventual creation of unions for women only. Chapter 2 traces Midori's and Tani's personal histories as workers and as activists. Their stories reveal common workplace experiences for women of their generation and provide insights into how and why JWUs developed the way they did. Chapter 3 covers the six-month period from December 2000 to May 2001 when I was a participant-observer with the WUT. The chapter includes my observations and analysis of significant internal pressures the union was experiencing at that time as well as an account of the running dialogue among WUT leaders, members, and me, which led to the US-Japan Working Women's Networks Project.

Part II focuses on the insights and innovations that grew out of our unique grassroots exchange project. Chapters 4 and 5 detail the lessons and insights from the first phase of the project, in which participants from both sides laid the intellectual groundwork necessary for engaging in meaningful problem solving. Chapter 4 focuses on our first face-to-face meeting in Detroit, when each of the participating women's groups introduced themselves at a fairly broad level: who they are, how their organizations came about, what they hope to accomplish and by what means; and an array of scholars provided overviews of the social, economic, and legal contexts in which these organizations operate. Following these wide-lens reports, chapter 5 discusses the highly telescoped "self-analysis" the WUT presented at this first meeting, in which the union laid out in detail all of its organizational warts and challenges, as well as the problem-solving discussions that followed. The chapter summarizes activists' and educators' presentations on how participatory labor education has been used to foster greater union democracy and membership participation in the United States.

Chapter 6 looks at our second meeting, when US educators came to Tokyo to model participatory education techniques as a first step toward enabling Japanese women's groups to create their own educational programs. While ultimately productive, that phase of the project generated significant conflict among

some of the participants. Although they made us terribly uncomfortable in the moment, the controversies yielded important lessons about differences in how US and Japanese labor-feminists think about organizing, empowerment, and individualism. In trying to work through the tensions, we gained valuable knowledge about what it takes to create and maintain successful crossborder collaboration.

In chapter 7 we see the first concrete fruits of the project as the Japanese participants pilot their own newly created educational programs. In addition to showcasing some of the most innovative ideas the Japanese women came up with, chapter 7 documents various processes of creation the women established to enable the groups to work together across time and space to develop their new educational programs. Beyond facilitating that immediate goal, those processes also constituted the beginnings of an infrastructure for a national network of Japanese women's organizations.

The final two chapters offer my conclusions on the two intertwined narratives that make up this volume. Chapter 8 reflects on the lasting impacts of the US-Japan Project some ten years after its completion, particularly on its effect on the women's movement as a whole, and on its role in promoting democracy within unions—but also across a variety of social movements and organizations—through participatory membership education programs. The chapter also includes my reflections on JWUs as far as: their viability over time; their ability to fulfill the essential role of a labor union, which is to confront capital; and what role they might ultimately play in reshaping the Japanese labor movement even if they are unable to develop to the level the founders initially envisioned.

The final chapter explores the lessons we learned—sometimes the hard way—about the necessity, but also the difficulties, of crossborder collaborations. In designing the US-Japan Project, we made a number of fortuitous decisions about how to construct the project to increase our ability to work effectively together despite significant differences in language, culture, and industrial relations laws and institutions. On the other hand, there are a staggering number of ways well-meaning American and Japanese colleagues can, culturally speaking, knock heads, step on toes, offend, confuse, and generally piss each other off, and I think we managed to find each and every one of them in the course of the project. In this volume I catalogue both, in part for your enjoyment but also in the hope that our gaffes as well as our insights will prove instructive to future crossborder projects, which are urgently needed today. The issues facing US progressives today—the disappearance of middle-class jobs and wages, the intensification of poverty in the face of rising profits and productivity, the resurgence of hate crimes and police violence, and the persistence of economic activities that are causing catastrophic damage to our environment—by their very nature cut

across a variety of constituencies that don't necessarily have a lot of experience engaging with each other, particularly as equal players in a collective effort. "Fight for $15" rallies, for example, routinely bring together such strange bedfellows as fast-food workers, adjunct professors, home care workers, and Black Lives Matter activists. At some very basic level, these groups are united by their fight against poverty. But there are also significant borders that separate these constituent groups, and their success as a movement rests in part on their ability to recognize, plan for, and "translate" across organizational, historical, and experiential divides. By providing an account of the obvious and not so obvious borders the US-Japan Project encountered, and our successes and failures in negotiating those crossings, *Our Unions, Our Selves* will, I hope, serve as both invitation and guide to future crossborder projects that seek to unite workers and other marginalized people in the face of ever encroaching global capital.

Part 1

JAPANESE WOMEN'S UNIONS

1

A UNION OF ONE'S OWN

My first introduction to Japanese Women's Unions (JWUs) came in 2000 when a fellow activist arranged for me to interview the founders of Women's Union Tokyo (WUT), Midori Ito and Keiko Tani.[1] We agreed to meet at the WUT office in a part of town called Yoyogi.[2] Finding a random address in Tokyo is tricky business. Many streets have no names. Addresses have no discernible sequence or pattern. Even among native Tokyoites it is common for a host to provide a hand-drawn map or to meet guests at the nearest train station and escort them to the venue in question. In my case I had written instructions to the union office but was not feeling particularly confident about finding it in the maze that I knew awaited me outside the train station. Nothing can prepare you for the visual cacophony that is most of Tokyo, and Yoyogi is no exception. Outside the station I made my way past the usual chaotic bricolage of fast-food restaurants, pachinko parlors, noodle shops, western-style cafes, trade schools, hair salons, office buildings, massage spots, designer boutiques, convenience stores, and the cram schools for which this neighborhood is particularly known.

Following my directions, I cut through the parking lot behind the music school, walked down what I thought was an alley but turned out to be the street I was looking for, and stopped when I came to a nondescript two-story building that I thought stood some chance of being the union office for the sole reason that it wasn't definitively anything else. Not that it looked like an office building. It did not. And it certainly didn't feel like a place that was interested in welcoming newcomers. Walking up what felt like a fire escape, I was afraid I had gotten the directions wrong and was about to burst into someone's private apartment.

On the other hand, I had lived in Japan long enough to know that I was still too culturally ignorant to read the architectural markers. In the absence of the most glaring commercial identifiers—neon golden arches, for example—I routinely had trouble distinguishing between a private home and an expensive restaurant, or a community bath house and a government agency, based on outward appearances alone. I held my breath, knocked on the sliding door, and entered.

Once inside, there was no mistaking the scene in front of me: I was in the office of yet another underfunded, overburdened, grassroots organization trying to scratch out a few victories for those on the lower rungs. The entire operation consisted of one small room with a tiny sink off to one side. Every inch of horizontal space was pressed into service. Utilitarian bookshelves hugging the walls sagged from the weight of books, binders, government reports, and court judgments. Soulless metal work desks were piled high with current case notes, newsletters, meeting notes, and materials of all kinds, as was the large, rectangular common table in the center of the room. I would later learn that meetings and celebrations took place at that table despite the fact that it was habitually spilling over with the documents of their trade.

Several women were on hand answering phones, working the computers, and bustling about in preparation for upcoming negotiations. With the exception of the two I had come to interview, the women greeted me briefly then got right back to their tasks. Despite the flurry of activity, a cloud of exhaustion hung over the scene. When we sat down at the table for the interview, I couldn't pull my chair in because the area under the table was chock-full of file boxes. As my eyes trailed around the room, I tried to imagine keeping my spirits up working in this grim environment without a splash of color anywhere, except for the dollar-store slippers one dons at the front door.

Midori and Tani were easy to spot, each looking the part of long-time activist. A year or two on either side of fifty, they are sturdy, practical-looking women. No mincing or giggling into their hands as Japanese women are often taught to do. No cloyingly cute apparel or talking in high-pitched falsetto voices. They are serious women with serious work to do. Yet, for all they have in common, they are as different in personality as they are alike in purpose. Tani is all warmth, a motherly figure whose manner inspires women to find the strength to push on even when the fight has worn them down. Midori, on the other hand, has the flinty aspect of someone who cut her teeth on hardship. She exudes strength in a way that is by turns inspiring and intimidating. While not without her critics, Midori commands tremendous respect among labor activists, in part because of the sacrifices she has made for the movement, and in part because the sheer force of her personality belies the myth of women being inherently weak and subservi-

ent. Where Tani is a warm, fortifying bowl of noodles, Midori is a bracing shot of whiskey.

I sat at the center table as Tani and Midori cleared a small space to serve hot green tea and Japanese crackers. Just making tea in that cramped space seemed tricky enough, but a few weeks later I saw members cook a full dinner on a hot plate perched on one of the work desks. We ate the dinner at the center table amidst piles of papers so high I could barely see the people on the other side when I was sitting down. I quickly learned this was standard practice. No matter how busy the members were, the sharing of tea and at least a small snack was never dispensed with. Most of the time it struck me as a delightful ritual that made the grim and crowded office feel cozier. On my grumpier days, it struck me as an impediment to getting down to business when we had so much work to do—an attitude that would get me in trouble many times in the coming years. But at that moment, it put me very much at ease as the two local legends walked me through the specifics of their union.[3]

Characteristics of Japanese Women's Unions

Mission

At the broadest level, the WUT's mission includes such ambitious goals as: eliminating sexual harassment, power harassment, and other violations of women's human rights; closing the wage gap and establishing the principle of equal pay for equal work; achieving work-life balance "with a greater degree of humanity" by eliminating the gendered division of labor; and creating an environment in which women can exercise their rights as a matter of course in the workplace and in society at large. On a more day-to-day basis, the union provides individual-level assistance for women who contact the union either in person or through its "job counseling" hotline. By "job counseling" they mean anything from providing strategic support to women who are having on-the-job problems but are not yet ready to join a union, to helping women prepare for court or arbitration cases, to helping women who do join the union to enter into negotiations with their employer. Japanese women's unions use the English term "collective bargaining" to refer to the type of negotiations that in the United States we call grievance resolution.[4]

The WUT also engages in legislative and political advocacy, often in cooperation with other national and international women's organizations, such as the Committee for Asian Women (CAW), Equality Action 21, the Society for the

Study of Working Women (SSWW), and the League of Lawyers for Working Women. Together, these organizations work to promote working women-friendly legislation at national and local levels and encourage the Japanese government to adopt and enforce international labor and anti-discrimination standards. The League of Lawyers for Working Women also provides legal support in cases that go to trial. Like other women's organizations, the WUT also provides support services such as English language lessons, computer skills training, and a "safe space" for survivors of sexual harassment.

Daily Operations

Tani likes to describe the WUT as a union "of women, by women, and for women" because it relies on active participation of the members to carry out its daily operations. With the exception of two paid staff (Midori and Tani held those posts at the time of the interview), the union is run by member-volunteers, who do everything from answering phones and handling clerical tasks to providing job consultations, signing up and training new members, serving on bargaining committees, lobbying, and assisting fellow members whose cases have gone to mediation or court. To maintain its independence from the government and other organizations, the WUT primarily relies on membership dues for funding.

Although many of the most active members would prefer to spend more time on movement-building activities, the volume of calls to the job hotline means their day-to-day efforts focus instead on immediate conflict resolution. According to union records, the WUT received 3,391 requests for job counseling from 1995 to 2004, of which 506 resulted in direct negotiations with the company (WUT 2004b). Between 1995 and 2000, the union engaged in direct negotiations in 265 cases, and reached a settlement in 90 percent of those cases (interview with union leaders 2000).

Membership

A survey conducted just prior to my first meeting with the WUT found that the women who joined the union came from a variety of companies and occupations (Kotani 1999). Clerical workers make up the biggest category at 48.1 percent. Twenty-two percent are specialists or engineers, 7.4 percent are in sales, and 3.7 percent are service workers. Approximately 35 percent of WUT members have children under the age of six. Most WUT members (63 percent) are regular permanent employees (*sei-shain*).[5] The remaining 37 percent are non-permanent employees (*hisei-shain*), including part-time, temporary, and contract employees.

The same survey found that the most common reasons women gave for joining the WUT were:

- Because there is no union in my company (64.2%);
- Because the WUT is run by women (49.4%);
- To solve issues in the workplace (43.2%);
- Because the WUT lent a sympathetic ear (42.0%);
- Because of anxiety over the future (39.5%);
- Because it was impossible to solve issues with help from public institutions (30.9%).[6]

Most women find the union by searching the Internet. Others learn of it through government agencies that deal with labor issues, newspaper articles, word of mouth, or by searching phone listings for women's groups.

Joining the WUT

The path to membership usually begins when a potential new member calls the union's hotline about a work-related problem she has been unable to resolve through more traditional means. The hotline is staffed with member-volunteers who are trained to talk with the callers about their grievances and advise them on their rights and options. In some cases, all the caller wants is an outlet for her frustration or a little support and encouragement before she goes back to her company to tackle the problem on her own. In other cases, the caller might decide she wants to join the WUT to pursue a solution with the union's help. In that case, union members will meet with her in person and provide information to help the woman choose a course of action. Most women in this category are seeking to return to work on better conditions, or, if that proves impossible, to negotiate a financial settlement.

The WUT offers women who are already represented by their company's union two options for membership.[7] One is to work with the WUT—as Midori put it, "clandestinely"—while keeping her current enterprise-union affiliation. In this case, the woman consults with the WUT to develop strategies that she can use on her own in dealing either with her employer or the enterprise union. A woman might choose this pattern for several reasons, for example, if she fears retaliation from the enterprise union for going "outside." Ironically, a woman might also choose this path if she has a relatively good relationship with the enterprise union in general and doesn't want to jeopardize it. Even if the enterprise union is unwilling or unable to help her in her current situation, the woman might want to remain a member in good standing for future considerations, not

the least of which is that serving as an officer in the company union is often a pathway to landing a promotion to management.

The second course is for the woman to formally resign from the enterprise union and join the WUT as a full member. In this case, the woman would pursue her grievance with the WUT as her sole bargaining representative. This is a more radical course of action because it takes the issue outside the enterprise unit, and that raises company as well as company-union hackles.

The next step for new members is to decide how they want to pursue their grievances. That could mean anything from requesting a meeting with the company to discuss the case, to taking their complaint to government mediation or the courts.[8] Once new members decide on a course, the union helps them assemble a committee of more experienced members to provide advice and support through all the stages of their case. Whichever course a new member chooses—negotiations, mediation, or filing a lawsuit—she is expected to play a leading role in pursuing her case, with her union sisters providing guidance and assistance based on the lessons they learned from their own experiences.

Issues

Many of the complaints that bring women to the WUT will be familiar to US workers: sexual harassment, wrongful discharges, forced early retirement, unreasonable changes in working conditions, and violations of laws governing part-time, temporary, and contract work. But, while many of the underlying issues are similar, local laws and customs significantly affect the ways they play out.

Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment is an epidemic in Japanese workplaces, which is hardly surprising considering how institutionally disempowered and vulnerable working women are. Most women who experience sexual harassment on the job have no realistic options for resolving the problem. Except in the rare case of a responsive supervisor, complaining to management usually amounts to throwing gasoline on the fire. As we have already seen, traditional in-house unions are typically ill-equipped for handling sexual harassment issues, and, more to the point, often don't consider it a matter for the union. Moreover, many women are not eligible to join their company unions because they are not full-time employees. Some women take their complaints to the various government agencies that are supposed to help resolve sexual harassment and gender discrimination cases. But many of the remedial avenues created by the govern-

ment have proven largely ineffective because they rely on voluntary compliance, lack investigative and enforcement authority, and/or allow for mediation only if both sides agree to the process (Gelb 2003). All too often, women who muster the courage to stand up to sexual harassment end up losing their jobs, losing their health from stress and humiliation, and losing the support and friendship of coworkers who are afraid to associate with the office pariah. According to Midori and Tani, it is not uncommon for women who have left a job due to sexual harassment to become virtual shut-ins. Shame and loss of confidence make it hard for them to venture into society, and finding new employment is especially difficult because no one wants to hire someone who was a troublemaker in her last job.

Gender Harassment

Closely related to sexual harassment, gender harassment refers to comments and actions that are aimed at preserving traditional gender roles and keeping women in what some still feel is their proper place. Women are routinely subjected to comments that make it abundantly clear that the workplace is by rights a male domain and that women are interlopers who are better suited for doing other things, such as having children and keeping house. When I talked with women about their daily working experiences, I was always astounded by the kinds of Fred Flintstone-like comments they reported hearing on a regular basis. "Isn't it time you got married and had children?" "Don't become too strong or no man will want to marry you." "You are just here until you find a husband." These kinds of remarks are as common as air; an ordinary part of Japanese women's daily lives. They are often said without a second thought, largely because there is little fear of reprimand.

Making job assignments on the basis of gender role stereotypes is another form of gender harassment, but the problem is not perpetuated by management alone. The culture at large plays a role in shaping the gendered division of labor inside the company. One bank employee told me that all the front line employees were men while the data entry people behind them were all women. "There is a feeling that clients want to be greeted by a female voice when they call, but they do not want to talk to a woman when it comes to actually doing business," she explained. Another young woman who worked for a trading company said her boss promoted her from her clerical position to a position with more responsibility and direct involvement with the clients. But she was soon demoted because customers refused to entrust their business to a mere woman. It was fine for her to answer the phones, so long as she passed the call to a male employee immediately after chirping a cheery "Hello."

Japanese women also have to combat discriminatory practices that are rooted in long-standing customs that much of society still defends as being part of Japan's "unique" culture. One example is the custom of after-hours drinking parties, which often mingle sexual and gender harassment. A common part of modern corporate life in Japan, drinking parties are neither voluntary nor for the purpose of simple pleasure (Mehri 2005). They are company-mandated bonding exercises that play an important role in socializing employees in proper corporate behavior and ideology. Such parties typically involve heavy drinking and various types of "male bonding" behaviors, including sexual jokes and innuendo. For women, drinking parties are a no-win situation. If they do not attend, they lose bonding and networking opportunities, anger their bosses, and alienate their coworkers. If they do attend, they often become the target of embarrassing sexual banter. Moreover, they will be expected to play along with traditional gender roles, such as pouring drinks and artfully serving food to the male employees. Serving their male colleagues in this way is especially demeaning because it recalls highly sexualized images of the geisha or other types of hostesses whose job it was to pamper and titillate male customers by engaging them in witty repartee and pouring their drinks. While the women forced to enact this role for their bosses, male coworkers, and clients often feel angry and humiliated, many Japanese people regard it as a distinct and beautiful feature of Japanese culture that should be preserved.

Japanese companies also frequently require women office workers to pour tea for male employees, even if they outrank them. Many women bitterly resent this custom and say that it is a clear violation of gender equality laws. But such cases are hard to win because, as one WUT member said, "The firm and the [company] union said, 'It's not discrimination. It is just a social custom.'" Activists have made some progress in freeing relatively high-ranking women from tea duty, but getting people to consider the gender implications of traditional practices more generally is tough when even the government agencies that are tasked with overseeing implementation of the Equal Employment Opportunity Law (EEOL) are unwilling to take a firm stand against customary forms of discrimination. A 2007 report from the Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training invoked the long-standing tradition of gender discrimination to justify its kid-glove approach to dealing with the problem, for example, offering "corporate awards" to companies for merely *complying* with existing law (JILPT 2007).

Gender and sexual harassment cases such as these make it clear that not all problems can be solved at the bargaining table. To make serious inroads into the kinds of harassment women face at work, women's unions and other organizations also need to raise awareness and change cultural perceptions about the place of women in society, their abilities, and their rights to self-fulfillment. Nei-

her enterprise unions nor even the most progressive alternative unions face the challenge of remaking society at such a fundamental level. But women have no choice. They have to fight discriminatory employers while at the same time building a movement to overturn long-standing beliefs that help to perpetuate gender and sexual harassment.

Nonpermanent Employment

As mentioned earlier, the very existence of the nonpermanent employment system is itself an issue that women's unions are taking on. But the WUT also sees complaints from employees who are even being denied the already dismal working conditions nonpermanent employment offers. Such cases include companies illegally terminating employees before their contracts have expired; falsely categorizing employees as subcontractors to avoid paying social insurance premiums; keeping employees on temporary contracts for many years; and signing employees to increasingly short-term contracts, or illegally forcing them to accept unwanted changes from full-time to part-time or temporary status. Some of these actions directly violate Japanese labor law. Others are technically legal but arguably constitute a breach of socially accepted business practices. Employees on temporary contracts, for example, might request negotiations as their termination dates approach. The union would not argue such cases on legal grounds. Rather, it would seek to persuade management that it is in the company's best interest to retain trained and loyal employees or that the company is being a bad corporate citizen by violating accepted norms of the paternalistic relationship between employers and employees. Although breaking that bond is the whole point of nonpermanent employment, Japanese companies are still vulnerable to criticism and public censure if they are considered to be too brazenly embracing "American-style practices" (interviews with union leaders 2000, 2004).

Forced Retirement and Wrongful Discharge

Although early retirement as official company policy was largely eliminated by anti-discrimination legislation, the practice is still alive and well when companies want to cut payroll or eliminate a "problem" employee. When I first started interviewing WUT members about the experiences that brought them to the union, the most common reply was, "My company tried to fire me but I refused." The first few times I heard that I was totally confused. Refuse to be fired? You can do that here? Or does it mean you just keep showing up for work? You sit on the doorstep with a picket sign? Eventually, one of the members explained that firing someone is legally and socially frowned upon in Japan, so when a company