

**JAPANESE IRREGULAR WORKERS IN PROTEST:  
FREETERS, PRECARIETY AND THE RE-ARTICULATION OF  
CLASS**

by

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## ABSTRACT

The subject of my dissertation is Japanese *freeters*, youth who work part-time or move from job to job. Within Japan's protracted economic downturn, *freeters* have become a complex symbol that at times are blamed, other times pitied and sometimes even celebrated for structuring their lives around jobs that are unstable, but also less demanding and potentially freeing. Ideally, working as a *freeter* is a temporary period to be replaced by full-time employment. However, many *freeters* are finding this "temporary" state difficult to move beyond. Within the last decade, some *freeters* have begun to protest against jobs that many see as exploitative and as demanding as full-time positions without the added benefits and security.

This dissertation approaches some of these sites of *freeter* protest ethnographically. Drawing upon twenty months of participant observation research with four union movements attempting to organize *freeters* and other young irregularly employed youth, I look at how these groups attempt to politically mobilize *freeters*. This dissertation explores some of the strategies the union movements use in attempting to cultivate class-consciousness amongst *freeters* and other young irregular workers that feel disaffected by the limiting circumstances of the employment system and seek to confront and change their working condition. Through the descriptions presented in my ethnographic chapters on these union groups, I argue that the loss of place for young irregular workers is contributing to the re-articulation of class politics and protest in post-industrial Japan. However, I also show that instilling class-consciousness in *freeters* is itself a complex process full of resistances, negotiations, contradictions and even rejections.

I situate this study within a variety of critiques surrounding the fields of the anthropology of Japan, the anthropology of labour and the anthropology of social movements. This study seeks to contribute to the critique that although the anthropology of Japan has taken the experiences of difference and diversity seriously, the field has paid less attention to the role of social class. Moreover, studying union movements ethnographically supports the argument that anthropology can provide greater appreciation of the cultural dimensions and lived experiences of activists involved in organized labour and social movements.

## **PREFACE**

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## GLOSSARY

*ANPO*: U.S.—Japan Security Treaty that caused mass protests in 1960 and 1970.

*Arubaito* (アルバイト): temporary workers

*Ainu* (アイヌ): Indigenous peoples of Japan

*Akarui Seikatsu* (明るい生活): Bright new life of the emerging middle-class

*Amae* (甘え): theory of psychological dependence

*Burakumin* (部落民): descendants of the *Eta-Hinin* outcaste groups

*Ba* (場): social location or place

*Chiba Doro* (千葉動労): The National Railway Motive Power Union of Chiba

*Chīki Yunion* (地域ユニオン): regionally based labour unions

*Danketsu* (団結): Unity

*Densangata Chingin* (電産型賃金体系): wage system which tied wages to the lifecycle needs of each employee

*Dōmei* (同盟): *The Japan Confederation of Labour*. A National labour center founded after World War II. It merged with RENGO in 1989. The full name of the organization was *Zennihon Rōdō Sōdōmei* (全日本労働総同盟).

*Enjo Kōsai* (援助交際): “compensated dating” or teen prostitution

*Freeter* (フリーター): young people who work at one or more part-time jobs or at one short-term job after another

*Furītā Zenpan Rōdō Kumiai* (フリーター全般労働組合): *General Union for Freeters* (*Tokyo Freeter Union*)

*Furītā Yunion Fukuoka*: *Freeter Union Fukuoka*: (フリーターユニオン福岡): *Freeter Union Fukuoka*

*Futsū Gakkō* (普通学校): Academic or regular high school.

*Fuan no jidai* (不安の時代): the era of anxiety

*Gakkyū Hōkai* (学級崩壊): classroom collapse

*Gasorin Sutando Yunion* (ガソリンスタンドユニオン): *Gasoline Stand Union*

*Haken* (派遣労働者): dispatch workers

*Heisei* (平成): the Heisei era started on January 8<sup>th</sup>, 1989, the day after the death of Emperor Hirohito.

*Hikikomori* (引きこもり): social withdrawal

*Hiseiki Koyō* (非正規雇用): irregular employment

*Hiyatoi* (日雇い労働者): day labourers

*Hoshu* (保守): the politically “conservative”

*Ie* (家): Japanese family household and lineage system

*Ichikigyou Ichikumiai* (一企業一組合): “one firm, one union”

*Ijime* (いじめ): bullying

*Iincho* (委員長): committee chairperson

*Jigyosho* (事業所): place of business

*Jikosekinin* (自己責任): self responsibility

*Jiyū* (自由): freedom

*Juku* (塾): “cram” school offering supplementary lessons to students after public school hours.

*Kachō* (課長): workplace section head

*Karōshi* (過労死): death from overwork

*Kaiin Dōmei* (海員同盟): *Seamen’s Union*

*Kaisha* (会社): company or enterprise

*Kaishain* (会社員): company person

*Kakusa Shakai* (格差社会): disparity society

*Kakushin* (革新): the politically “progressive”

*Kigyō* (企業): enterprise

*Komyunitī Yunion* (コミュニティーユニオン): community union

*Kōgyō Gakkō* (工業学校): industrial high school

*Kumiai* (組合): labour union

*Kun* (-君): is a gendered and respectful term of endearment that is used by attaching it to the name of someone close to you that is male.

*Labor Net Japan* (レイバーネット日本): *Labor Net Japan* is a website forum for labour union activists.

*Meishi* (名刺): business cards

NEET (ニート): an acronym for youth “Not in Education, Employment or Training”

*Nenkō Joretsu* (年功序列): seniority plus merit wages and promotion

*Nihonjinron* (日本人論): pseudo-scientific body of literature arguing for the “uniqueness” of the Japanese people

*Nihonteki Keiei* (日本的経営): Japanese-style management

*Nikkeijin* (日系人): people of Japanese descent

*Nikkyoso* (日教組): *Japanese Teacher’s Federation*

*Nōgyō Gakkō* (農業学校): agricultural high school

*Otaku* (お宅): your house

*Otaku* (オタク): a person with an obsessive and unhealthy preoccupation with any form of popular culture

*Oyabun/Kobun* (親分／子分): parent/child relationship

*Parasite Shinguru* (パラサイトシングル): “parasite singles” are so called young people who shun adult responsibility while receiving financial support from their parents

*Pāto* (パート): part-time workers

*Purekariāto* (プレカリアート): “*precariat*” is a combination of “precarious” and “proletariat” used to describe the condition of irregular workers demanding social justice

*RENGO* (連合): *Japan Union Confederation*. Founded in 1989, it is the largest national trade union centre in Japan. The full name of the organization is the *Nihon Rōdō Kumiai Sō Rengō Kai* (日本労働組合総連合会)

*Rentai* (連帯): solidarity

*Rentai Yunion* (連帯ユニオン): *Solidarity Union of Construction and Transport Workers of Japan*

*Rōdō to Seizon No Kumiai* (労働と生存の組合): ‘labour and survival’ union

*Sanjyokai* (賛助会): annual union membership fee

*Saundo Demo* (サウンドデモ): a “sound demonstration” is a style of street protest using music and art to appeal to youth

*Sararīman* (サラリーマン): the Japanese “salary man”

*Seisan Kanri Undo* (生産管理運動): production control movement

*Sekinin* (責任): responsibility

*Seishain* (正社員): a regular full-time employee

*Senmon Gakkō* (専門学校): vocational schools

*Senpai/Kōhai* (先輩／後輩): senior/junior relationship

*Sensō Sekinin* (戦争責任): “war responsibility”

*Shakaijin* (社会人): those considered to have reached full membership in adult society by entering the workforce after finishing school

*Shingata Rōdō Kumiai* (新型労働組合): new types of unions for those typically excluded from the enterprise union system

*Shinkōiin* (進行委員): committee member

*Shōgyō Gakkō* (商業学校): commercial high school

*Shuntō* (春闘): annual spring offensive

*Shūshin Koyōsei* (終身雇用制): lifetime employment

*Sōhyo* (総評): *The General Council of Trade Unions of Japan*. One of the national labour centers established after World War II. It merged with RENGO in 1990. The full name of the organization is *Nihon Rōdō Kumiai Sōhyo Gikai* (日本労働組合総評議会).

*Tatakau* (戦う): to fight

*Tochō* (都庁): Tokyo Metropolitan Government Offices

*Uchi* (家): my house

*Uchi/Soto* (内／外): inside/outside

*Ura/Omote* (裏／表): back/front

*Zainichi Kankokujin* (在日韓国人): resident Koreans

*Zengakuren* (全学連): *The All-Japan Federation of Student Self-Government Associations* (全日本学生自治会総連合)

*Zenrōkyō* (全労協): *National Trade Union Council* (全日本労働組合連絡協議会)

*Zenrōren* (全労連): *National Confederation of Trade Unions* (全国労働組合総連合)

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## DEDICATION

*To my parents Rory and Valarie, wife Sawako and son Kai*



# Chapter 1: Death of the *Salaryman* and Birth of the *Freeter*

## 1.1 Thesis Introduction

In Japan, when people learn that the topic of my dissertation is *freeters* (フリーター), youth who drift from part-time job to part-time job, I am generally met with an instant recognition that this is a serious and valuable topic to study. This is because the recent trend of young people, particularly young men, failing to acquire full-time employment is implicitly understood as problematic. It is a problem since it upsets an established pattern of youth leaving school and transitioning into full-time employment that their parent's generation had come to take for granted as normative.

Yet, my research is not simply about *freeters*. There have been a number of studies that have sought to explain the increase of *freeters* in terms of generational differences and young people's lack of work ethic (Yamada 1999); the institutional failings of the school-to-work system and changing transition periods (Brinton 2011; Kosugi 2003, 2004, 2008; Miyamoto 2005); the influence of economic restructuring in the post-recessionary period (Genda 2001, 2005a, 2005b; Honda 2005; Inui 2005); by questioning the limits of Japan's middle-class (Smith 2006); exploring workplace difficulties (Osawa 2001) and by putting the working experiences of young Japanese in international comparison with the working conditions of their peers in European countries (Hommerich 2007). Nor has everyone accepted the general reaction that the trend is alarming. There have been some optimistic depictions of *freeters* arguing that they are demonstrating a youthful creativity and exuberance stifled often by an overly

rigid employment system. Yet growing numbers of researchers are increasingly highlighting the concern that whatever the reasons *freeters* are finding themselves in irregular employment, there are potentially serious consequences. These include long working hours, low pay, no benefits, no pension, little opportunity for advancement, limited skill acquisition, instability, little job protection, alienation, isolation and barriers to transitioning from irregular employment to full-time employment.

Although the *freeter* phenomenon first emerged in Japan in the late 1980s, by 2003 rumblings of discontent among some young people began to emerge through street protests and public demonstrations (Mōri 2005; Hayashi and McKnight 2005). I began my research with a general interest in discovering how the recent street protests and demonstrations surrounding issues of inequality associated with non-regular work were complicating *freeter* identity. Through my fieldwork at public demonstrations and in activist spaces I began to take a closer look at several union movements composed of *freeters* and other young irregular workers (*hiseiki koyō*) (非正規雇用) that played pivotal roles in organizing and leading these protests. My dissertation follows some of the different ways that these social movements find political potential in their marginal employment status and ultimately are, I argue, re-articulating a form of class politics in post-industrial Japan.

## **1.2 Locating *Freeters* in the Anthropology of Japan**

With this dissertation, I first seek to contribute to the anthropology of Japan by situating the union movements within the broader interpretive framework within the field. Prior to the 1990s, William W. Kelly (1991) broadly divided the English language

anthropological studies of Japan into the areas that included the society and self; personhood; the family; work and workplaces; education and schools; gender and patriarchy; urban life; regional Japan (in terms of farming, fishing and factories); festivals, heritage and cultural tourism; law and crime; minorities and marginals; religion; and health.

Within the literature, Ruth Benedict's *Chrysanthemum and Sword* (1946) and Nakane Chie's<sup>1</sup> *Vertical Society* (1970) showcased the best-known models of Japanese society. Benedict's anthropological project was to identify "patterns" which she argued represented Japanese culture itself. What she argued was that an emphasis on shame, hierarchy, duty, obligation and loyalty characterizes the patterns of Japanese life. In contrast to American behaviour that she argued is more heavily guided by a moral ethic of guilt because of its roots in the Judaeo-Christian ethic of sin, Japanese ethics of behaviour tend to be more heavily influenced by shame in relationship towards the expectations of duty and obligation of individuals towards groups. Near the end of World War II, the U.S. Office of War Information commissioned Benedict to write a report on what American occupying forces might encounter in Japan. Her report provided ground rules for governance by comparing and contrasting Japanese frameworks of meaning with American ones. Benedict sought to de-mystify Japanese behaviour by turning the anthropological lens back on Americans to show that so-called "natural" behaviour is learned. In doing so, she made the Japanese appear less alien to the American public (Creighton 1990, Geertz 1988).

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this dissertation I have rendered Japanese names in the Japanese order of listing surnames first.

In contrast to Benedict's work, Nakane Chie's (1970) book came at a decidedly different point in Japan's history when researchers were largely focusing on how Japan was changing into a "modern" society by identifying what "traditional" aspects remained. The assumption was that once Japan was fully "rationalized" and "modern" its "traditional" qualities would fall away making it the same as Western societies. Nakane challenged that assumption by showing that modern Japan's progress was founded upon persistent social patterns that have existed for centuries. Rather than being pulled apart by the supposed opposition of its "traditional" and "modern" aspects, Japan functions quite smoothly as an integrated whole. Japan is both capitalist and industrialized, but functions along very different lines than Western societies. Nakane's research offers a structural image of Japan by synthesizing the key distinguishing features found in Japanese society. Her main theme is the *vertical principle*, which she argues is the most distinguishing characteristic of Japanese social organization that separates it from caste and class societies. Japanese society is characterized by vertical stratification by institutions or group of institutions.

As the field of Japan anthropology developed throughout the postwar period, significant interest was directed towards the institutions of family, school and work. Within this body of research much of the emphasis was on how each of these institutions contributed to the formation of a middle-class or what was also referred to as a "middle-mass" society. Yet, through Japan's postwar industrialization and rapid economic rise, mounting criticism emerged around treating Japan as an undifferentiated whole. A movement amongst scholars from the mid-1980s onward sought to bring a sharper corrective perspective towards the depiction of Japan as overly homogenous.

Significant research targeted how gender and ethnicity in particular shaped a diversity of experiences in contemporary Japan. Studies of women's experiences within the family and workplace explored issues of inequalities, power struggles (Bernstein 1983; Brinton 2001; Broadbent 2003; Ogasawara 2001), and compromises and resistances (Creighton 1995a; Kelsky 2001; Kondo 1990; Roberts 1994). Other studies explored how race marginalized minority groups such as the indigenous Ainu (アイヌ) (Creighton 1995b, 2003; Siddle 1997), resident Koreans *Zainichi Kankokujin* (在日韓国人) (Ryang 2005; Weiner 1997), Chinese residents (Vaisisth 1997) the return migration of people of Japanese descent (*nikkeijin*) (日系人) (Hotaka-Roth 2001; Sellek 1997), Okinawans (Taira 1997) and other foreigners in Japan (Creighton 1991, 1997). There has also been work on how deviations from behaviours and practices associated with middle-class values have been constructed as forms of youth delinquency (Sato 1991; Yoder 2004).

In addition to studies of the full-time white-collar *salaryman* (サラリーマン) worker (Rohlen 1974, Vogel 1971) and the blue-collar worker in large factories (Abegglen 1958, Cole 1971, Dore 1973) that were dominant in the post-World War II period, there were also explorations into the varieties of workplace experiences. Such studies looked at workers in small manufacturing firms (Roberson 1998), day labourers (*hiyatoi*) (日雇い労働者) (Gill 2001), female factory workers (Roberts 1994), women working in the entertainment industry (Allison 1994; Robertson 1998) and in artisanal craftwork (Kondo 1990).

In addition to the growing sensitivity to differences in Japan, the bursting of the economic bubble in the early 1990s and the prolonged economic recession have also

significantly altered the direction of the anthropology of Japan. Yet, despite the appreciation of diversity within anthropology of Japan new criticisms have arisen about how the field has come to depict contemporary Japan. One of these criticisms suggests that, since the 1990s, the sheer volume of research, taken collectively, into the experiences of minority groups may falsely give the impression that Japan has much larger populations of these groups than it does (Steinhoff 2008b). Also, the push to include the perspectives of Japanese women has been in some ways so successful that the experiences of Japanese men have become less visible in much of the recent English language literature (Steinhoff 2008b:10).

There is no denying that investigations into diversity and difference along gendered, ethnic and racial lines have provided valuable perspectives on those living on the margins of Japanese society. Yet, recognition of this diversity has also led to questions about the kinds of differences that exist within “mainstream” Japanese society and how far these differences can be traced historically (Ishida and Slater 2010). Ishida and Slater (2010) suggest that recent scholarship in Japan on issues of identity, gender and ethnicity have often neglected the role of social class in re-evaluating the post-war institutions of family, school and work.

These criticisms are essential for situating my current study. The subject of this dissertation, labour union movements aiming to organize young irregular workers, approaches the experiences of mostly young men<sup>2</sup> in an attempt to explain some rather dramatic changes facing youth transitioning into the workplace in post-economic bubble

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<sup>2</sup> Although it was mostly young men involved in the union movements that I engaged in fieldwork with, there were also young women involved in the organizations. Moreover, women often played key leadership roles. Therefore the unions that I did fieldwork with do not easily bifurcate along gendered lines although there were more young men in these organizations.

Japan. Moreover, since these union movements are developing political resistances to emerging economic inequalities they necessitate asking questions about the role of social classes.

In addition to locating this dissertation within the debates in the anthropology of Japan with attention to social class, I also aim to contribute to some of the broader discourses occurring in the anthropology of labour. In particular I aim to align this study with the critique that there is a disciplinary resistance within anthropology to studying labour movements as legitimate sites of ethnographic inquiry. I draw attention to this argument since the protests happening in Japan around employment inequality not only reflect an ongoing labour politics, but also speak to a negotiation of the deeper cultural values around the role of work, identity and place of the individual within Japanese society.

### **1.3 *Freeter Unions and the Anthropology of Labour***

Sharryn Kasmir (2009) suggests that despite important work by many anthropologists, the study of organized labour and its struggles remains on the periphery of the discipline. In an effort to explain why an anthropology of labour is underdeveloped, she traces the resistance to such a project through the development of the discipline. In its early development, anthropology's primary purpose was to map out distinct cultures. As a result less attention was paid to the connection between people within the larger contexts of global capitalism and imperial expansion.

Kasmir draws a link between the Boasian legacy of producing texts and images that depicted native peoples as untouched by capitalism and colonialism with the

reluctance within anthropology to examine and adopt a broader perspective for understanding how different peoples around the world are effected differently by the uneven distribution of the movements of capitalism (Carbonella and Kasmir 2008). By literally and metaphorically “dressing indigenous people up”, Kasmir asks if Boas’ vision of using an overly tight ethnographic frame effectively depoliticized the complex struggles for social justice in which the peoples under ethnographic gaze were intertwined.

In contrast to what Kasmir (2009) sees as the apolitical legacy of Boasian anthropology, the anthropological approach of Eric Wolf (1982) advocates emphasizing interconnected processes instead of dividing relations into bounded and unconnected “nations”, “societies” and “cultures.” Drawing on world systems theory (Wallerstein 1974), Wolf advocates using historical and political economic approaches to locate peoples studied by anthropology within the larger fields of force generated by systems of power exercised over their social labour. At the same time, Roseberry (1988) warns that in engaging in such a project, the anthropologist must be cautious to avoid making economic processes overly deterministic, and resist the impulse to overly romanticize the cultural independence of the anthropological subject. Since the anthropological subject is located at the intersections of local and global history there is a constant theoretical tension based upon oppositional idioms that include global/local, determination/freedom and structure/agency. The anthropologist can avoid slipping into easy binaries through a political economy approach that offers a fundamental challenge to those who discuss culture, history and agency without sufficiently considering class, capitalism and power.



Another significant obstacle to the development of the anthropology of labour, identified by Kasmir (2009:12), is a pervasive attitude in the study of organized labour in North America that depicts unionized workers as the heirs of imperialism who occupy the position of the “labour aristocracy.” According to this view, union struggles can be dismissed as little more than attempts to protect positions of privilege in the working class. The academic scepticism toward organized labour has contributed to a turning away of the study of unions in favour of studying groups of people considered more dispossessed.

Although there are a host of valid critiques levelled at labour unions, anthropologist Karen Brodtkin (2007) draws attention to the fact that in today’s climate labour unions have resources that no other group can offer. Because of their experience, money and staff, labour unions are in a unique position to support not only workers, but also activists. Through her ethnography of young people in the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) in Los Angeles, Brodtkin demonstrated how the additional resources offered by the union contributed to supporting a wider movement by the young activists. The implication is that the interconnection between labour unions and social movements make each sphere more vital. Brodtkin suggests this connection between labour unions and social movements is ripe for additional anthropological inquiry.

Although labour unions often participate in social movements they are not always seen as part of the vanguard since unions often have their own legacies, agendas and reasons for participation. Brodtkin suggests that despite these criticisms organized labour’s ability to support activists should not be discounted as a potent dimension of emergent social movements. Brodtkin’s observation is also largely valid in the

contemporary Japanese context. Japanese organized labour played an active role amongst the movements on which this dissertation is based. Since the *freeter* unions overlap spaces occupied by both organized labour and social justice movements it is also necessary to interpret these organizations through the lens of social movement theory.

#### **1.4 Situating *Freeter* Unions in the Study of Social Movements**

As I will demonstrate, the union movements with whom I did ethnographic fieldwork connect their labour struggles with demands for social justice. As such, they straddle the spaces of organized labour and a broader social movement in Japan confronting growing economic inequality. As with Kasimir's (2009) critique that the anthropology of labour is underdeveloped, the anthropology of social movements has also been criticized for failing to play a prominent role in shaping the theoretical and conceptual debates within the field (Gibb 2001).

Research into social movements has developed significantly since the 1960s. Within this body of research four 'schools' or 'traditions' have been identified. The four main approaches include; the collective behaviour perspective, new social movement theory (NSM), resource mobilization theory (RMT), and the "political process model."

The collective behaviour perspective, popular in the 1960s, draws on symbolic interactionism to interpret social movements as loosely structured informal proponents or opponents of change. Conceptualized as expressing a society's value system, researchers adopting this approach were primarily interested in how movements use collective action to produce and establish new social norms.

The new social movements (NSMs) perspective emphasizes the processes of identity formation and the creation of solidarity among movement members. New social movement theory stresses how collective action is the result of complex interactional processes that articulate novel identities and conflict over cultural orientations. One of the most influential theorists of NSMs is Alain Touraine (1988). His approach to studying social movements is influenced by both Marxist and Weberian thought. Touraine sees social movements as being influenced by a central conflict in society. For Marx, this central conflict is between labour and capital in industrial society. However, Touraine argues, with the transition into post-industrial society, the conflict between labour and capital becomes less central as other social conflicts around identities, lifestyles, behaviours and needs move to the forefront of social justice struggles. Touraine draws on Weber in arguing that the “actor” is a main protagonist of “social action.” Advocates of the NSMs theory distinguished themselves from the “old” labour or working-class movement. In contrast to the “old” labour movement’s emphasis on class as the primary issue of social conflict, mode of analysis, organizational principle and political matter, the NSMs perspective focused on the struggles over symbolic, informational and cultural resources.

The resource mobilization theory (RMT) focuses on a different aspect of social movements by emphasizing the organizational structure of the movement and the logic driving collective action. While NSM theory dominated the discourse around social movements during the 1970s in Europe, researchers in the United States developed an alternative theory around the concept of “resource mobilization.” While NSM theory emphasized grievances as the driving force behind social movements, proponents of

resource mobilization suggested that discontent and conflict alone were insufficient for collective action to take place.

The proponents of resource mobilization theory (McCarthy and Zald 1977, Zald 1992, McAdam et al 1996b) suggested that it is necessary to examine the material, human, cognitive, technical and organizational resources of movements. Moreover, it is necessary to examine how these resources are deployed to expand the movement, reward participants and influence the political system. The resource mobilization perspective explained social movements as reflecting the politics of particular interest groups through social connections. From this perspective, movements are not representative of the most disaffected but rather those capable of mobilizing resources and directing dissatisfaction into organizational forms. While the RM perspective focused more on the resources and the internal dynamics of the movements, NSM theory emphasized the underlying structural bases of social conflict. Since the RM perspective defined social movements as interest group politics, “success” was largely defined by the movement’s ability to achieve a policy objective rather than influence broader cultural transformations.

The “political process” approach to social movements is currently the dominant paradigm. It has grown out of a critique of the other approaches that have “neglected the politics” of social movements by failing to sufficiently examine the relationship between social movements and the state. This approach is concerned with the outcomes of the movements in terms of political change, adoptions of new policies and the role of the state in shaping the form of collective action.

These four different approaches to the study of social movements developed separately until the late 1980s. It was only in the 1990s that scholars from the different

theoretical schools began to seriously engage and debate one another. What emerged was an attempt at creating an “integrated theory” of social movements by blending together different elements from the collective behaviour, resource mobilization, new social movements and the political process theories. Most scholars working out of the four different schools came to a general agreement about a working definition of social movements as: “(1) informal networks, based (2) on shared beliefs and solidarity, which mobilize around (3) conflictual issues, through (4) the frequent use of various forms of protest” (Della Porta and Diani 1996:16).

This definition also implies a series of additional distinguishing qualities with respect to social movements. The first important quality is that social movements are not single organizations like political parties or interest groups. Social movements are networks made up of a diverse set of individuals, groups and organizations. A single organization in and of itself is not a social movement, although it may be part of a larger social movement. The second important point is that those participating in a social movement share a sense of identity. In the course of interaction, participants in a social movement develop a sense of collective identity based upon a shared set of beliefs and values. This collective identity connects individuals and groups in a way that extends beyond specific organizations or group identities. The third important dimension of social movements is that they are usually engaged in political or cultural conflict over a variety of issues. The conflict is usually manifest in different forms of public protest that may include demonstrations, occupations or strikes.

## 1.5 The Invisibility of Social Movements in Anthropology

Anthropologist Arturo Escobar (1992) lamented that despite the development of a dynamic field of study by sociologists, political scientists, historians and women's studies scholars, anthropologists have played a less central role in shaping the field of inquiry into social movements. Gibb (2001), writing nearly a decade later, suggested that little had changed in how anthropologists engaged the study of social movements. Escobar (1992) and Gibb (2001) trace the resistance to developing a robust anthropological perspective into social movements to five key factors.

The first factor was a literary turn in anthropology in the 1980s and early 1990s. *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986) was a significantly influential work that argued for increased attention in the field towards textuality and representation. Although the volume addressed the issue of "the poetics and politics of anthropology," it was literary questions that became paramount. The approach to "politics" within anthropology was examined through questions of how power and domination are constructed through the textual authority of the ethnographer. While not discounting the importance of this development, Escobar does suggest that it has limited the definition of what is considered "political" and consequently shifted focus away from collective political practice and contemporary social movements.

The second factor contributing to anthropology's lack of involvement in social movements is how anthropologists conceptualize the notion of practice. Escobar recognizes Sherry Ortner's (1984) argument that the concept of practice has become increasingly important in the development of anthropology since the 1960s, thus providing a greater awareness of the role of everyday practices in the construction and

reproduction of social and cultural formations. Edelman (2001:286), echoing Escobar's point argues that by the mid-1980s, American trained anthropologists became increasingly enamoured with the "everyday" and, inspired by Foucault, tended to analyze power operating at the micro-level. This period saw ethnographers avoiding the study of organized resistance since social movements did not easily lend themselves to "grand theoretical" models. A tight ethnographic frame into collective action often looked messy with different groups, factions and coalitions forming, dividing and reassembling with the individuals involved displaying varying levels of commitment. One of the consequences of paying such attention to everyday life, Escobar suggests, is that anthropology has developed few theoretical or conceptual tools for understanding how collective political action shapes the everyday worlds in which people live. He suggests a move towards a more inclusive definition of practice that recognizes the role of collective action.

The third factor that has prevented social movements from occupying a position of prominence within anthropological inquiry concerns the division of labour within the academy. The suggestion that social movements are primarily driven by socio-economic factors has perhaps led anthropologists to defer such research to their colleagues in sociology and political science. Moreover, the sharp division of labour between anthropology as the study of "culture" and sociology as the study of "society" may have also influenced anthropologists to avoid studying social movements. However, Escobar pointed out that, even if such a strict division of labour is adhered to, social movements remain relevant to anthropology since they often involve conflicts over cultural meanings in addition to social and economic ones.

The fourth factor is what Escobar describes as academic anthropology's detachment from the concerns of wider society. Escobar suggests that anthropology operates within an epistemology shaped by Western modernity that seeks knowledge that is often abstract, and removed from popular social concerns, and accountable primarily to the academy. One of the consequences of separating academic and social practices, Escobar contends, is that the discipline has made certain types of research unlikely. An example of this is the reluctance of many anthropologists to engage in action research. Gerrit Huizer (1979) argued that within the social sciences the attempt by researchers to maintain objectivity has often led to the avoidance of engaging in action research in addition to a general disinclination to study social conflict in general. The pressure to make a personal commitment while doing action research has likely worried many social scientists that it would undermine their objectivity. The implication is that this concern has inhibited anthropologists from engaging social movements as legitimate areas of study.

The fifth and final factor that Escobar identified as contributing to a reluctance towards studying social movements was what he saw as the decline of collective action in the United States during the 1980s, notwithstanding the fact that there is debate about whether cases of collective action were low during this period (Tarrow 1994). Nevertheless, Gibb (2001) still questions why anthropologists avoided studying social movements despite the prevalence of social movements in Latin American, Western Europe *and* North America.

However, since the 1990s there has been a growing interest among some anthropologists in social movements influenced by environmentalism, feminism and



opposition to the excesses of free trade. Many of these movements are transnational in scope. The term “globalization-from-below” was coined to describe the processes of civil society seeking to connect transnational social forces that share concerns for a host of justice issues including the environment, human rights, opposition to patriarchy, oppression, poverty, violence and a celebration of cultural diversity (Falk 1993:39). Individuals and groups within these movements position themselves in opposition to what they see as “globalization-from-above” led by global elites in charge of supranational governance institutions and multinational corporations.

June Nash (2005a) locates ethnographic interest in social movements in the post-millennium period in an increasingly connected and transnational world. Nash suggests that the assumption that globalization would produce a faceless, borderless and homogenized world only interested in consuming an endless supply of products is not supported by ethnographic case studies. Rather, careful studies of social movements often reveal acts of transformation or subversion of globalization processes to align them with values more in accord with human rights, environmental conservation, autonomy and social justice (Nash 2005b:12).

Ethnography provides a means to perceive and compare how globalization processes affect different populations and how they re-envision their own positions in culturally distinct ways. Nash recognizes that although there once was a trend among anthropologists to ignore the intrusion of national and international forces into their field sites, many anthropologists have now become the principle observers of social movements as disaffected or marginalized groups seek new and more inclusive relationships with the state.

## **1.6 Utility of an Ethnographic Perspective on Social Movements**

Edelman (2001) suggests that there remains ample potential for cross-fertilization between social movement researchers from different disciplinary perspectives. Political process and NSM theorists' emphasis on meta-level analytical categories could benefit from additional attention to the historical and cultural dimensions of how movements are constructed. Ethnography is particularly well positioned to provide insights into the lived experience of movement participants. Ethnographers work with documentary and oral sources and may have privileged access to the lived experience of those involved in movements "as well as a window onto the 'submerged' organizing, informal networks, protest activities, ideological differences, public claim-making, fear and repression, and internal tensions, which are almost everywhere features of social movements" (Edelman 2001: 309-310).

Edelman goes on to say that ethnographic analyses of social movements have been most persuasive when they have been able to transcend the single-organization or single-issue of the movement by locating it within the broader social and political fields within which mobilizations operate. The strength of an ethnographic approach to the study of social movements has been the production of many carefully crafted accounts of the daily activities of collective action. However, Edelman suggests that ethnographers have often neglected paying sufficient attention to the larger political contexts within which the movements operate, the connections of the movements to pre-existing militant organizations and the roots of their organizing processes. The danger for anthropologists in overly emphasizing the cultural content of movements is the advancement of ahistorical explanations for movements with significant historical dimensions.

## **1.7 Re-Articulation of Class in Post-industrial Japan**

One of the most significant shifts in the study of social movements is the perception that identity based movements are replacing movements organized around material issues. Slater and Ishida (2010) question this broader argument by suggesting that this view fails to capture the political complexity of Japan. This perspective contends that the basis on which social struggles are currently waged have shifted from production to consumption. This shift is most readily apparent in post-industrial societies where changes to employment patterns disrupt peoples' identification with their work as a means class identification. Whereas the basis of production once provided stability onto which status and identity were attached, the loss of this stability undermines the building of a class-based identity. In the place of a class-based identity, consumption and other leisure activities become the primary aspects of expressing social position. Gender, ethnicity and other forms of affiliation become the primary aspects around which identity is formed. Within such an environment, identity politics replaces labour politics. According to this argument, class analysis loses its utility in explaining a splintered society organized around complex social identities.

Despite the utility of this argument for explaining many social movements organized around identity politics, class struggle has not been abandoned as an arena of conflict and mobilization for change. June Nash (2005:8, 23) argues that some postmodernist critics have gone too far in their rejection of the privileged position of class conflict. Such critics, in their attempts to dislodge what many of them saw as the hegemony of class analysis, rejected and downplayed the importance of class in favour of other markers of identity, friction and exclusion. However, Ishida and Slater (2010:7)

argue that it is still essential to appreciate the role of social class within contemporary political debates about economic inequality in Japan. As evidence they further explain that the destabilizing effects of labour commonly associated with neoliberal economies is influencing a popular rhetoric in Japan around issues of social structure and identity that resembles a re-articulation of social class.

## **1.8 Fieldwork Background**

This dissertation is based on twenty months of fieldwork research that I undertook between 2007 and 2009. However, my relationship with Japan extends back for over a decade. In many ways, my previous experiences in Japan led me, in a roundabout way, to select a research topic that looks beyond many mainstream institutions.

My first on-the-ground exposure to Japan came in the summer of 1999 when, fresh out of my undergraduate program, I embarked as a participant on the Japanese Exchange and Teaching Program (J.E.T.). While I initially signed up for the program in order to travel and save money for graduate school, I enjoyed the experience so much that I put graduate school on hold. I stayed for the program's maximum, then three years. I lived in Saga, a rural agricultural prefecture in Japan's southern island of Kyushu. Over that three-year period, I taught in two junior high schools and five high schools around the prefecture. I made many lasting relationships with students, teachers, school administrators, locals and other foreign teachers from around the world.

Working in Japanese schools during the late 1990s and early 2000s was not only an immersion experience into Japan and its education system, but it also provided me with a particular vantage point to witness many of the anxieties of recessionary Japan.

Because I was in a school environment, issues surrounding the recession and its impact on youth were front and centre. There were a host of perceived social ills afflicting young Japanese that people were deeply concerned about, which included *freeter* (youth failing to secure permanent employment and drifting from part-time job to part-time job), NEET (youth not in education, employment or training), *hikikomori* (引きこもり) (youth that refused to leave their homes), *otaku* (オタク) (obsessive and unhealthy preoccupation with any form of popular culture such as video games, comic books, animation, etc.), *enjo kōsai*<sup>3</sup> (援助交際) (“compensated dating” that can include teen prostitution), *ijime* (いじめ) (school bullying) and *gakkyu hōkai* (学級崩壊) (“classroom collapse” where teachers are unable to maintain control of the classroom). All of these problems were and continue to be very real, yet they also struck me as issues that people could seize upon to symbolically represent the social disruption brought on by the economic “crisis.” These issues were present in the schools I worked in to greater or lesser degrees depending on the school. Although it was only ever a minority of students caught up in these troubling behaviours, the fact that they existed contributed to the sense that something had gone terribly wrong with the Japanese system. These issues were discussed by teachers in the staffroom, as well as in the media and in the community in general. Imamura (2003) has suggested that these types of discourses are part of a larger national anxiety about Japan’s uncertain future, which also includes fears about a rapidly aging population, low birth rate and a stagnant economy.

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<sup>3</sup> I use Macrons in this dissertation to distinguish long vowels from short vowels when romanizing Japanese words.

I taught at a high school called *Saga Higashi Kōtōgakkō* (Saga East High School). I was there for nearly two years and became familiar with the cycle of the school system as it prepared to transition students through their examinations for entrance to universities or into gainful employment. Saga Higashi was an “academic” (*futsū*) school and therefore in the top category of the hierarchical ranking of schools. Students must write entrance exams to get into high school in Japan, and all high schools are ranked. In general, the best schools are academic (*futsū gakkō*) (普通学校), followed by commercial (*shōgyō*) (商業学校), technical (工業学校) and agricultural (*nōgyō gakkō*) (農業学校) high schools.

However, Saga Higashi was a low ranked academic school. This meant that although the students scored high enough on their entrance exams to gain admission into an academic school, they were still at the bottom of the academic hierarchy. While many students from the top academic schools in our region went on to some of the top universities in the country, only the few top students at Saga Higashi went on to lower ranked universities. The other graduates usually moved on to junior colleges (two year vocational schools), *senmon gakkō* (専門学校) (vocational schools), or to employment in factories, small businesses, service industries (one of my students got a full-time job at the fish counter at my local grocery store) or became *freeter*.

Becoming a *freeter* was generally seen as a failure by the school, and unfortunately, the school produced many *freeters*. The ironic aspect was that our academic school seemed to be producing more *freeters* than the commercial, technical and agricultural schools. Part of the reason for this was that despite the general sense that commercial, technical and agricultural schools were lower ranked, their curriculum

taught practical skills that could be directly applied to jobs. Our students at Saga Higashi were in effect caught in a hierarchical system undergoing change. Many of our students were proud of their status as academic students since many of them felt it placed them above non-academic students despite the growing reality that there was a good chance that they would become *freeter* after graduation.

From observing the experiences of my students at Saga Higashi, I became interested in how rank, hierarchy and status influenced work and economic opportunity in Japan. Therefore, these major themes run through this dissertation. It was my earlier experiences on the J.E.T. program that eventually led me to selecting *freeters* as an issue to explore anthropologically. However, I felt that since there had been an abundance of anthropological research on schools and workplaces it would be better to do my fieldwork on something else. I had heard that there were groups of *freeter* beginning to organize and protest their working conditions, and I decided to explore this phenomenon.

## **1.9 Language**

It is difficult to do fieldwork in Japan without the ability to communicate in Japanese. All the demonstrations, meetings, public gatherings and interviews I participated in were predominantly in Japanese. On a few occasions, people that I encountered wanted to communicate with me in English, but these exchanges were rare. I worked methodically at ensuring accuracy in my translations.

When I entered the field I had functional Japanese that I acquired in a variety of ways. While a participant on the Japanese Exchange and Teaching Programme (1999-2002), I completed the beginner and intermediate level correspondence the Ministry of

Education offered to program participants. I also hired a tutor, and joined my neighbourhood cram school (*juku*) (塾) and completed its Japanese language program for foreigners. This study was supplemented by being immersed in Japan. By the end of my three years in Japan I was feeling fairly comfortable using daily conversational Japanese. After leaving Japan and entering graduate school I continued my language studies. During my M.A. program at McMaster University I completed advanced level Japanese classes.

On my return to Japan to do fieldwork I continued formal Japanese studies. From January to April 2008 I completed an intensive Japanese language course at Temple University's Japan campus. From April 2008 to January 2009 I studied for two terms in Sophia University's intensive language program. From April to July 2009, I studied in Waseda University's Intensive Language Program.

### **1.10 Fieldwork Methods**

The findings in this dissertation are based on fieldwork I completed in Japan between 2007 and 2009. Conducted over a total of twenty months, my fieldwork drew on a variety of ethnographic methods. However, the fieldwork I did in Japan did not follow the pattern of anthropologists finding a fixed site in which they immerse themselves into a community to make observations and interview informants. One of the consequences of studying social movements is that not all of the groups had regular places of business. Therefore, I had to observe their activities intermittently in scattered locations, follow their trails and slowly build up my rapport with some of the members of the different groups.



In her essay “New Notes from the Underground: Doing Fieldwork without a Site” Steinhoff (2003) outlines the methods she developed for studying radical social movements in conflict with the state in Japan. She has four main strategies for tapping into the social networks of the people she wants to study, namely by entering through network portals, monitoring communication networks and publications, observing gatherings and following individual cases. I used all of these strategies in following the social movements I study in this dissertation.

Before I entered the field I began to tap into the networks of labour activists in Japan through different network portals. My supervisor, Dr. Millie Creighton approached Dr. David Slater at Sophia University to act as my supervisor in Japan as part of my Japan Foundation Fellowship. About five months before my fieldwork fellowship began, I made a trip to Japan to do some preliminary fieldwork. This was July 2007 and David Slater was involved in organizing a conference on youth and work in Asia. I was able to present part of my tentative research at the conference and listen to what other researchers were engaged in. Dr. Slater introduced me to different Japanese scholars with overlapping interests. I was also able to speak to some journalists who attended the conference. These conversations helped orient me when I began my fieldwork.

During the same trip, Dr. Julian Dierkes put me in contact with some people he knew in Japan that he felt could be helpful. One person in particular, Yumoto Masanori, a *juku* (cram-school) owner and politically active filmmaker, turned out to be very helpful. After making contact with Mr. Yumoto, he made arrangements to introduce me to people he knew who were involved with *Labor Net Japan* and the *Union Yes!* Campaign, which encouraged young people to get involved in the labour movement (this is the subject of

chapter seven). Through these introductions I met more activists, exchanged business cards, picked up handouts and literature produced by the group and was placed on the internet list-serve for *Labor Net Japan*.

*Labor Net Japan* served as an invaluable resource for monitoring many of the different political activities being held in Tokyo. As a clearinghouse of information for various grassroots political organizations in Japan, *Labor Net* was not only valuable for following the activities of the *Union Yes!* Campaign, but it also kept me informed of the activities of a variety of other political movements in Japan. By monitoring the event schedule and paying attention to the discussions happening on the website, I was able to keep abreast of what was happening and join different events that related to *freeter* labour. I attended a wide variety of demonstrations, public talks, film festivals and group meetings through *Labor Net Japan*. At each event I followed a similar pattern of listening to the speeches and discussions, collecting the material produced by the group and speaking with people attending the events.

I used these techniques very broadly in the beginning of my fieldwork by attending a wide variety of events, but then narrowed my focus as I began to hone in on the specific groups that I wanted to study more closely. Through *Labor Net Japan* and my conversations with various activists I was led to the *Furītā Zenpan Rōdō Kumiai* (FZRK) or the “*Freeter* General Labour Union” which was getting a reputation for organizing popular and elaborate street protests. After attending events held by the FZRK and becoming familiar with the group, I was connected with the *Freeter Union Fukuoka*. I chose to explore the activities of these two unions because they were specifically focused on *freeter*.

I encountered *Worker's Action* somewhat differently. While I came into contact with *Union Yes!*, the *FZRK* and the *Freeter Union Fukuoka* by working through activist networks, my introduction to *Worker's Action* was more serendipitous. One afternoon during the first few months of my fieldwork, I was walking out of Tokyo's Shibuya station when I had a flyer thrust into my hand. The flyer was calling for a demonstration to protest against labour inequality and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. I attended the demonstration in Tokyo's Yoyogi Park, which to my surprise was larger than I expected with over a thousand participants. What surprised me was that as the demonstration moved through the streets of Shibuya the students clashed with riot police. This suggested to me that the State took these demonstrations and participants seriously.

I chose to focus on the four different union movements because of their emphasis on *freeter* and youth labour. The factors that shaped the direction of my fieldwork included time, my ability to gain meaningful access to groups and maintaining a research focus on *freeters* and labour organizations.

During my fieldwork, I interviewed seventy-five different people connected in different ways to *freeter* employment and labour organization. These people included non-regular workers (including those who considered themselves *freeters* and those who did not), activists, union members, students, salaried workers, retirees, journalists, non-governmental workers, teachers and academics. I connected with these people at a variety of locations including public protests, labour festivals, union offices, private residences, coffee shops, restaurants, bars, talk spaces, in front of train stations, on the street and at group meetings.

I gathered data in various ways depending upon the situation. I kept detailed field notes in which I recorded my observations and kept track of conversations and interactions. All of the groups produced significant amounts of written material, which I collected and analyzed. Each group also had a presence on the Internet. The digital material that I gathered consisted of the groups' web sites often with links to members' blogs or to other affiliated groups. I also took photographs, made video recordings and used a digital voice recorder with some of my longer semi-structured interviews.

As ethnographic fieldworkers we walk a fine ethical line in the choices we make in presenting our research for public consumption. On the one hand we must protect our research participants from any harm that may come from our research. On the other hand, anthropologists have often been vulnerable to the critique that they take much more from the people they research than they give back. Therefore, in an attempt to strike a balance between these two concerns, I decided to use pseudonyms for some of my research participants to protect their identities while using the actual names of the groups involved. I have used the real names of some of my research participants who are easily identifiable by the prominent positions they hold in their organizations.

### **1.11 Position as a Researcher**

Edelman (2001) warns ethnographers of social movements that there are dangers in overly identifying with the cause, accepting the activists' claims at face value and succumbing to the pressure to represent movements as more cohesive than they actually are. Moreover, the ethical-political principle of how "committed" the ethnographer is to the movement is not always sufficiently questioned. An anthropologist's sympathies,

sensibilities and identification with the challenges of those in the movements are often what permits access and builds a sense of trust between the researcher and participants. However, being unreflective about their own position and commitment to the movement can potentially lead to an avoidance of exploring important, but unflattering dynamics within the movement.

I am certainly sympathetic to the experiences of Japanese *freeters* and I did not hide my feelings when asked by my research participants why I was interested in studying their experiences. However, it was clear that I was not a Japanese *freeter*, nor could I become one. This of course separated me from those I encountered in the field, but it also was likely helped by my efforts at trying to remain as objective as possible. Being clearly marked as an outsider sometimes worked to my advantage because people were curious about who I was and what I was doing. Yet, at other times people deliberately avoided me and looked on me with suspicion. I had little control over this beyond doing my best to communicate my motives for being there.

Although I was sympathetic to the struggles of the people I encountered in my fieldwork, I also attempted to document the contradictions, disputes and tensions within the union movements in addition to the coherent ideologies, strategies and struggles that they were articulating. Within my ethnographic chapters I try to convey some of the multiple layers of negotiation happening within the union movements as best as I was able to read the situations.

## 1.12 Overview of Chapters

In “Chapter Two: ‘Loss of Place’” I suggest that the *freeter* union movements can be understood in relation to Mary Brinton’s (2011) argument that the Heisei recession in the early 1990s and subsequent employment restructuring has disproportionately affected young people’s ability to successfully transition from school to the workplace. What Brinton highlights as a significant problem in the inability of youth to obtain full-time employment is the loss of belonging to a “social location” or “*ba*.” Having a secure social location was paramount in much of the postwar period for developing a sense of psychological, social and economic well-being for youth as they transitioned from the stable social location of school into the stable social location of work. Moreover, I connect Brinton’s argument of the loss of place experienced by young irregular workers to emerging forms of political activism around the issue of irregular work.

In Chapter Three; “Conflict and Class” I highlight the importance of taking the roles of conflict and class seriously for understanding the emerging political discourses around *freeter* labour. Although many cultural theories in the postwar period emphasized the role of harmony and cooperation in Japanese culture, I take a more critical look at the roles of how conflict and class-consciousness have shaped working experiences. I suggest that both conflict and class are necessary vehicles through which recent labour protests must be understood.

In Chapter Four; “Locating *Freeter* Unions in the Japanese Labour Movement,” I extend the argument that the roles of conflict and social class in postwar Japan are necessary for understanding union movements for irregular workers by locating the movements within the broader development of the Japanese labour movement. Unions

representing *freeters* and other irregular worker are a new form of labour organization that have emerged recently in an attempt to provide protection for groups of marginal workers that have been typically excluded from the dominant enterprise (or company) union system. One of the qualities of these new unions is that they often overlap their labour interests with social justice issues thereby straddling the spaces occupied by labour and civil society activists.

In Chapter Five; “Dancing in the Streets: Domesticating *Precarity* in the *Tokyo Freeter Union*,” I present my research on the *Furītā Zenpan Rōdō Kumiai* (FZRK), or the “*Tokyo Freeter Union*.” The aim of the chapter is to draw attention to the social and cultural processes involved in how the *freeter* union is attempting to frame the discourse around *freeters* and other irregular workers as political. Specifically I examine the union’s adoption of the politics of precarity (the “precarious proletariat” animating European labour struggles) with the experiences of economic and social marginalization experienced by *freeters* in post-economic bubble Japan. I suggest that the process of instilling class-consciousness in *freeters* is a complex process of negotiation.

In Chapter Six; “Creating an Alternative Place in the *Freeter Union Fukuoka*,” I look at how the union attempts to frame *freeters* and other irregular workers politically. I pay further attention to how they attempt to create a space that is both nurturing and supportive for the members who express symptoms of being emotionally and psychologically damaged by the new realities of the labour market. In this chapter I provide an overview of the union’s origins, philosophical orientation and how the group distinguishes issues facing youth as separate from the politics that have dominated Japan’s “left” in much of the postwar period.

In Chapter Seven; “Union is Hope: The Role of Youth, Networks and Digital Media in Organizing Japan’s Irregular Workers,” I provide an account of another group of labour activists’ strategies as they attempt to encourage young *freeters* and other irregular workers to join labour unions. Through a description of *Labor Net Japan’s* “*Union Yes! Campaign*” I explore how the group aims to circumvent what they see as the mainstream media’s problematic depiction of *freeters* and labour unions. Moreover, I also describe how the members of the campaign negotiate competing visions with respect to re-framing the labour movement to appeal to young irregular workers.

In Chapter Eight; “The Performance of Violence: Radical Students, Militant Unions and the Legacy of the 1960s’ Protest Cycle,” I explore the activism of a group calling itself “Worker’s Action” that attempts to frame the experiences of *freeters* and other irregular workers within pre-existing militant left-wing politics. Although composed of a variety of unions, student groups and activists I focus primarily on two of the dominant groups in *Worker’s Action*, *Chiba Doro* (The National Railway Motive Power Union of Chiba) and the *Zengakuren* (The All-Japan Federation of Student Self-Government Associations). In particular I focus on the historical legacies of these groups in attempting to shape current activism around economic inequality. I look specifically at how the group advocates channelling anger outward against systemic inequalities instead of inward against the self.

In Chapter Nine; “Conclusion: *Freeters* and the Re-Articulation of Class in Post-Industrial Japan,” I summarize the dissertation with an emphasis on my argument that, taken together, the four different union movements represent different attempts to frame the *freeteer* as a form of political identity. I suggest that in doing so these union



movements are re-articulating a form of class politics and protest in post-industrial Japan.

I further suggest that this is significant since the roles of conflict and class provide vehicles through which to gain additional perspective on the complex pressures faced by young Japanese coming of age after the Heisei recession in the early 1990s.

Theoretically this study challenges the argument that the role of class is no longer relevant to the politics of post-industrial societies where other markers of identity have become the primary vehicles through which politics are expressed. In post-industrial Japan these union movements suggest that as late-capitalism continues to transform, so do the forms of resistance by those who perceive that they are on the losing end of the vicissitudes of global capital.

## Chapter 2: Loss of Place

### 2.1 Introduction

In order to locate the ethnographic chapters on the union movements that follow, the aim of this chapter is to provide part of the background context explaining why being an irregular worker in contemporary Japan is contributing to the emergence of new forms of labour protest. This chapter draws on key elements of Mary Brinton's (2011) argument that the bursting of Japan's financial and real estate bubble in the early 1990s, economic recession and employment restructuring have created an environment where a disproportionate share of Japan's nonelite young men has been lost in transition from school into the workplace. What I adopt most centrally from Brinton (2011) is her argument that what is most significant is the loss of "social location" ("*ba*") (場) for a growing number of young people because of their inability to obtain stable full-time employment. This chapter concentrates on outlining some of the ways Brinton (2011) explains why having a stable social location (*ba*) was important for psychological and economic security in Japan's post World War II period, and why the loss of an abundance of full-time jobs has been experienced as so disruptive. After outlining some of the key elements of Brinton's (2011) thesis, I then suggest that her argument about the significance of the loss of place for young irregular workers is also an important factor contributing to young Japanese who are beginning to protest the limiting conditions of working unstable and irregular jobs. I then point to some of the emerging responses in political activism to be developed in subsequent chapters.

## **2.2 The Importance of Social Location (*Ba*)**

In order to appreciate why the increase of young Japanese working irregular jobs is a cause for anxiety it is necessary to understand the role that full-time employment played in the post World War II period. Brinton (2011) suggests that there is a significant contrast in experience from those who came of age in the relatively stable thirty-year span of Japan's economic growth period from the 1960s to the 1980s with the experiences of those coming of age after the economic recession of the early 1990s. One of the ways that Brinton (2011) demonstrates the contrast in experiences between generations is by explaining how institutional processes designed to facilitate the transition of young people out of school and into the workplace have changed.

Japanese high school students who do not continue on to university typically receive assistance from guidance counsellors to find work. The priority of the guidance counsellor is not to find a job that the student is necessarily interested in doing, but to find a good company in which to place the graduating senior (Brinton 2011:2). This orientation is based on the recognition that the most important thing is to find a good organization in which to place each student.

The underlying importance of finding a strong social location for students to move into after leaving school is also supported by other researchers who study how institutions interact with the Japanese life course. As students transition out of high school, finding a good full-time job is considered paramount for the student to make a successful transition into the next phase of life (Okano 1993:9-10). This is in part because learning does not only happen in school in Japan but is also further developed in various social contexts including the workplace (Singleton 1998:6). Therefore

transitioning from school to work is considered a critical time since it not only indicates a change from being a student to becoming a worker it also signifies a broader and more symbolic shift from childhood to the adult world of career development (Okano 1993:10; Plath 1983:4). As Brinton (2011:2-5) suggests, the transition towards becoming an adult member of society (*shakaijin*) (社会人) is intimately connected to becoming a company person (*kaishain*) (会社員).

The school to work system was, until the 1990s when the system began to weaken, a well-managed process that transitioned young people from schools to companies (Brinton 2011:3). Japanese high schools and employers had developed a system helping those students who were leaving formal education find appropriate work. Brinton (2011:3) also explains that the system was indicative of one of the distinct ways that postwar Japanese society was organized. What was paramount within this system was for people to be attached to a strong *ba* (social location). Having a secure *ba* was necessary for economic success, individual identity and sense of belonging (Brinton 2011).

The concept of *ba* can be translated into terms such as “organization”, “institution” or “place.” The concept was central to Nakane Chie’s (1970) structural analysis of Japanese society. It is Nakane Chie’s (1970) concept of *ba* that Brinton (2011:3) adopts in her discussion about the cultural and social significance of having a strong social location in Japan. Nakane translated *ba* as “frame” and used the concept as one of the fundamental criteria for delineating the contours of Japanese social structure.

Nakane used “frame” to explain an individual’s situational position in contrast to an individual’s common “attribute.” In all societies individuals are classified into social

groups on the bases of attributes and frames. For example, an attribute could mean belonging to a particular profession, whereas, being a member of a particular village expresses the commonality of frame. In modern societies “plumber” or “accountant” refer to attribute, while “members of X company” refers to frame. Attributes and frames identify individuals in certain groups, which can then be classified within society. Nakane suggests that Japanese tend to emphasize their situational position in a particular frame over their attribute when they encounter others from outside their social group.

The importance of the institution a person belongs to in Japan is evident in the way members conceive of their relationship to that organization. For instance, the concept of “*Kaisha*”, generally translated as “company” or “enterprise”, has a set of distinct social implications that are typically not associated with the English terms (Nakane 1970:3). Members of *Kaisha* do not consider themselves as individuals bound contractually to their employer. Ideally, *Kaisha* are conceptualized as a “community” to which a person belongs and should occupy the center of a person’s social existence. This idea can be seen in the use of the term “*uchi*” (家) (my house) to refer to the organization the person belongs to while referring to “*otaku*” (your house) (お宅) to mean an outside person’s company or institution (Creighton 1995a:50; Rohlen 1974:14).

As influential as Nakane’s theory has been for explaining Japanese society, her theory has not been without criticism. One challenge has been that her depiction of Japanese society draws too heavily from the organization of elite institutions and implicitly suggests that these models are representative of the entire society. Moreover, her structural-functionalist approach has been widely criticised as perpetuating the myth of cultural homogeneity. Despite these and other criticisms, Brinton argues that

Nakane's emphasis on the importance of *ba* for individual identity and security remains largely valid. As Brinton (2011:4) explains, Nakane was highlighting the importance of *ba* as an organizing principle of Japanese society in contrast to societies such as the United States in which people frequently move between social locations bringing their individual skill sets with them. The role of having a stable *ba* continues to be important for economic security and sense of identity. The implication is that in a society where identity has been strongly tied to a workplace organization, the rise of irregular employment can be profoundly destabilizing.

### **2.3 Post World War II Stability and the *Salaryman***

For the generation that came of age during the few decades before the Heisei recession, the transition into adulthood was relatively orderly. Brinton (2011:13) explains that the economic-growth period of the late 1950s to mid-1970s in Japan helped stabilize the “permanent employment” system. This allowed large numbers of people to move through their lives in fairly similar patterns. Drawing on the work of Ochiai Emiko (1996), Brinton (2011:13) explains that this was a time period of unusual stability. During this time the “postwar family system” emerged with a strong male income earner ideology at the head of a nuclear family. Brinton explains that women born in the late 1940s to early 1950s became the first generation of Japanese women in which full-time housewives became the majority. These changes were in part possible because increasing numbers of men were able to support a middle-class lifestyle for their families because of secure employment (Brinton 2011:13-14).

Ezra Vogel's (1963) ethnography of a Tokyo suburb in the late 1950s captures the beginning of this time period with the emergence of Japan's "new middle-class." White-collar employees of large business corporations and government bureaucracies were replacing the "old middle-class" of independent business people and landowners. Because the income of the new middle-class citizen was guaranteed in the form of a husband's regular salary, this type of employee became known as the "*salaryman*" (サラリーマン). Vogel's ethnography explored how the family institution mediated industrialization and modern occupations. The new middle-class model was a nuclear family with a sharp division of labour between husband and wife. Husbands were expected to be devoted to the goals of the corporation, and wives were expected to be devoted to the home, neighbourhood and children. Achieving the middle-class ideal occurred through a highly competitive education system that would lead the top achievers to high-ranking universities and then on to work in large corporations. The *salaryman* was also a symbol of the "bright new life" (*akarui seikatsu*) (明るい生活). This was a lifestyle with leisure time, travel and recreation, and few binding obligations and formalities. The middle-class lifestyle was celebrated for its optimistic outlook as evidenced by its improved quality of life with the ability of those families to purchase nicer homes and modern conveniences such as electric appliances and consumer goods. This new affluence stood in stark contrast to the poverty experienced in the immediate postwar period. Vogel argued that Japan made a smooth transition to modernization because many pre-existing cultural qualities were complementary to the demands of modern industrial organization. These qualities included a high degree of common national culture, political unity and stability, high valuation placed upon hard work and

productivity, the planning and organization of political leaders, the kinship system of inheritance and collective organization.

The Japanese *salaryman* became a powerful symbol of consensus about aspirations and standards of achievements from the early 1960s onwards (Smith 2006:15). The *salaryman* also has been described as a “folk model” among Japanese since ninety percent of the nation came to identify itself as middle-class (Miller 1995). Therefore there was considerable social pressure during the post World War II period on Japanese youth to achieve a middle-class lifestyle.

If Japanese youth wanted to enter the middle class their best chances were to work through the social institutions of the school, workplace and marriage. Brinton (2011:14) explains “for young Japanese coming of age in the early 1960s to the 1980s, the path into adulthood was defined as the smooth movement from a stable attachment in one social location or *ba* (school) to stable attachment to other *ba*, notably the workplace and marriage.” Although the Japanese life course patterns of this period were fairly rigid in that individuals needed to make the “right” transitions at the “right” times, the route leading to the middle-class was widely understood (Brinton 2011:18). There were obvious ways for people to navigate through school, into work and into marriage. The trajectories were highly gendered, but individuals could significantly improve their chances of embarking on a middle-class lifestyle by studying hard and mastering appropriate behaviours (Brinton 2011:18).

What is important to recognize is that these were some of the social expectations in operation when Japan entered the 1990s (Brinton 2011:19). The bursting of the financial bubble in the early 1990s suddenly made it far more difficult for young



Japanese to follow the same path into the middle-class as the generations before them. Brinton (2011:19) suggests that “[i]f Japan in the 1960s—1980s was unusual in the extent to which people followed orderly lifecourses compared to many other countries, it was unusual as well in the speed and severity with which the foundation for these patterns – the availability of full-time employment for young men – disintegrated in the 1990s.”

#### **2.4 Economic Downturn, Re-Structuring and the Rise of “Flexible” Labour**

Despite Japan’s economic rise in the post World War II period, its growth proved unsustainable and the “bubble” economy of the late 1980s burst in the early 1990s, ushering in recession and then economic stagnation creating the so-called “lost decade” beginning in the early 1990s.<sup>4</sup> In response to this economic downturn some companies reorganized their labour force as part of their competitiveness strategies (Mouer & Kawanishi 2005). Such companies shifted away from hiring new graduates into permanent career tracks in favour of using more atypical workers including part-timers, dispatched workers and contract workers with lower personnel cost and higher employment flexibility (Honda 2005:7).

Rather than mass lay offs of its full-time employees, many Japanese companies instead either stopped hiring new full-time employees altogether or greatly reduced the numbers of new recruits (Abegglen 2006; Genda 2001, 2005). For the generation of young people entering the workforce during this period their opportunity to obtain a

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<sup>4</sup> However, full realization that the economic downturn was more than a simple recession did not become widespread until 1995-96 (Abegglen 2006: 24).

secure full-time job was greatly reduced. However, the *salaryman* model was not completely abandoned, but gaining such employment became increasingly difficult (Abegglen 2006: 73-90; Mouer & Kawanishi 2005: 253-263).

With fewer opportunities for full-time employment available, new patterns of employment emerged that contrasted significantly with the working experiences of those who came of age before the economic recession of the early 1990s. During the post World War II period, Japan had significantly low rates of unemployment for young men. From 1992 to 2002 the unemployment rate more than doubled from less than five percent to over ten percent for young men aged fifteen to twenty-four (Brinton 2011:20).

One of the reasons that unemployment rates rose so steeply for young Japanese men was the employment protection in place for “core” male workers already hired into full-time career tracks. Brinton (2011:24) explains that not only are long-term employment contracts between “regular” (*seishain*) (正社員) workers and employers implicitly understood, it is also difficult for Japanese companies to lay off these workers because there are significant legal protections for full-time employees under Japanese labour law. Instead of mass lay-offs, the Japanese response was the labour market liberalization policies of the late 1990s in which many restrictions on the use of temporary and fixed-term contract workers were removed or relaxed (Song 2008 cited in Brinton 2011:25; Song 2010:1013).

There are of course consequences for young workers because of the changes to the employment system. One effect has been that young workers face job insecurity with working conditions that often require as many hours as demanded by full-time employment without the added security or benefits (Hori 2007:141). Different kinds of

irregular work (*hiseiki koyō*) (非正規雇用) have also marginalized many young people in the workforce because there is no commitment by the employer to keep the employee over a long period (Brinton 211:27-28). These jobs are usually associated with *freeters*.

## 2.5 The Emergence of *Freeters*

The abrupt shift toward using temporary, contract and part-time workers as Japan moved deeper into the economic recession of the 1990s drove speculation as to why so many young people were failing to successfully obtain stable full-time employment. As people struggled to understand why Japan's economy had deteriorated so quickly, youth came under increased scrutiny. One example of such concern about Japanese youth was Yamada Masahiro's (1999) concept of "*parasite singles*" (パラサイトシングル). Smith (2006:57) explains that Yamada had actually first introduced the concept in the *Nikkei newspaper* in 1997, but it was his book that made the concept commonly known.

Yamada suggested that young Japanese had lost the work ethic responsible for Japan's post World War II economic success. In his opinion young people no longer needed to take work seriously since they could rely on their parent's financial support. At fault were parental tendencies to spoil their children, and self-indulgent youth. Yamada located the problem within individuals' behaviours and choices.

Yamada's argument gained considerable popular currency. The neologism "*parasite single*" entered the Japanese lexicon as a pejorative for describing the increasing numbers of Japanese young people who appeared unwilling to take responsibility and "grow-up." The concept of "*parasite single*" has been critiqued as little more than a patronizing rebuke. Nonetheless, as Brinton (2011:5) explains, the

concept built its popular success off the stereotypes swirling around changing youth lifestyles during the “bubble economy” of the late 1980s and the subsequent economic collapse in the early 1990s.

During the “bubble economy” of the 1980s jobs were plentiful (Brinton 2011:5). The term “*freeter*” (フリーター) emerged to describe a young person who moved in and out of jobs in order to pursue a fulfilling lifestyle. The concept of a “*freeter*” was originally part of a 1987 marketing campaign invented by an executive working for the magazine “*From A*” (Smith 2006). *From A* is a free employment magazine found in public places like convenience stores and train and subway stations. The initial idea of a “*freeter*” was to encourage young people to take on part-time work as an attractive and hip form of employment that would complement their urban lifestyle of earning some money without the heavy personal commitment required of full-time company employees (Smith 2006:93). Etymologically “*freeter*” is derived from the English word “free” or “freelance” and the German word “*arbeit*” used as a loan word in Japan to mean “part-time worker” (アルバイト) (Brinton 2011:5; Genda 2005b:52; Smith 2006). The Japanese government now uses the concept to classify youth aged 15-34 who work at one or more part-time jobs or at one short-term job after another (Brinton 2011:5; Hommerich 2007:301-302; *KōseiRōdōShō* 1992).

At the height of the bubble economy, Brinton (2011:6) points out that Japanese media recounted stories of the excesses of the *freeter* lifestyle. Tales of *freeters* working for several months, quitting their jobs to travel, and only returning once they ran out of money to start the cycle over again became associated with a carefree lifestyle. Brinton (2011:6) suggests that within these stories “lay a mixed discourse describing the freedom,

boldness and irresponsibility of the young” altogether foreign to an older generation where such lifestyle choices would have been largely inconceivable. Moreover, Brinton (2011:6) suggests that also embedded in the discourses surrounding *freeters* was a rejection of the values associated with Japan’s postwar *salaryman*. The *freeteer* in effect was the antithesis of the full-time company employee who was at once the symbol of Japan’s post World War II growth and also the symbol of conformity. While some saw *freeters* as emblematic of a spoiled generation, others saw in them a sign of refreshing creativity as youth experimented with new lifestyles (Brinton 2011:6; Smith 2006).

Whatever the allures of being a *freeteer* that existed when the economy was strong and jobs were plentiful in the 1980s, they quickly evaporated when the recession began in the early 1990s. *Freeters* became associated with those working in unstable and undesirable jobs. As the recession deepened, speculation on what exactly went wrong began to emerge. Arguments like Yamada’s *parasite singles* pointed the finger squarely at young people as being instrumental in the nation’s economic downturn.

However, a group of Japanese researchers began to argue that the root cause of rising numbers of *freeters* had less to do with youth’s attitudes and more to do with a decade of economic recession and employment restructuring in the 1990s. Based on an analysis of statistical data and survey research, Genda (2001; 2005) countered the discourse that there had been a significant deterioration in the work ethic of young people. Rather, his research suggested that there had been significant structural changes resulting in a decline in employment opportunities available to those people entering the job market. He rejected explanations that emphasized “choice” as the driving force as to why

young people became *freeters*. He suggested that most young people likely become *freeters* without any clear intention of doing so.

Other research also supported Genda's main thesis. Kosugi Reiko (2003, 2004, 2008) examined how the decline in full-time employment for young people was creating a difficult environment for establishing satisfying lives. One important element to emerge in Kosugi's research surrounded the meaning attached to irregular work in Japan in comparison to other countries. Kosugi (2008) looked at the working patterns of young people in Japan in comparison with eleven European countries. She discovered that although the practice of young people moving from job to job in Europe was in fact much higher than in Japan, the issue was perceived as being far more negative in Japan. She suggested that this was because there is a cultural importance attached to the meaning of being a full-time employee and being "something else" in Japan. Since a person's occupation is closely related to identity, a low status non-permanent job can bring with it social and cultural stigma. Another problem she identified was that as *freeters* drift from temporary job to temporary job, there is little opportunity for skill acquisition or upward mobility.

Brinton (2011:7) explains that the research by Genda, Kosugi and others was influential in communicating the message that young people who came of age in the 1990s encountered significant barriers in their pursuit of full-time employment. In light of their research, being a *freeter* looked less like a personal choice in lifestyle and more like the only available option for many young people. The result has been that increasing numbers of youth have had to accept less than full-time employment to support themselves because of decreased opportunities.

## 2.6 Gender and Irregular Employment

Brinton discovered a surprising gendered dimension to the rise in irregular employment in post-bubble Japan. She explains that “[t]he big story is not just that the young have borne a greater economic cost than the middle-aged or the old, but that the negative impact has spread to men in a way unheard-of in prior generations” (Brinton 2011:30). She explains that in the latter half of the twentieth century, Japanese women’s work trajectories have actually broadened as women have developed strategies for combining family and work while men’s work options have remained relatively narrow. For most men the ideal path of adulthood begins by entering a full-time job after graduation, and then remaining employed in the same firm for the duration of their career.

In contrast to the working lives of men, part-time work for married Japanese women became a common practice in the postwar era (Brinton 2011:30). It was a way in which women were able to financially contribute to the household. Although it is important to note that full-time work as company employees (*seishain*) usually done by men, and part-time work (*pāto*) (パート) usually done by women were never valued as equal forms of labour.

Kaye Broadbent (2003) argues that part-time work in post World War II Japan was highly gendered. Broadbent explains that part-time work was a compromise between government and employers to use women’s labour without overly disrupting the ideal gender norms with women as subordinate to the household. Despite providing a critical mass of labour in Japan, female part-time workers, irrespective of the number of hours worked, job content, qualifications or skills, were marginalized in terms of status, pay, career advancement, training and benefits in comparison with their usually male full-

time coworkers. Broadbent argues that part-time employment was a gendered employment strategy created by employers, and legitimized and institutionalized by the State and by enterprise unions.

However, Brinton explains that large numbers of young men working part-time positions was not part of the pattern that was seen in the post World War II period. This is an important shift since it indicates what Brinton (2011:30) has described as the “de-gendering of irregular employment in post-industrial Japan.” What is important to recognize here is that this is not an argument that suggests men’s employment is inherently more important than women’s employment. What it indicates is that the de-gendering of irregular employment in Japan is an important change in a society with a strong male income earner ideology (Brinton 2011:31). It also helps explain why the rising numbers of men unable to enter full-time employment has been a cause for moral panic as it disrupts established normative gender roles related to “appropriate” kinds of work for men and women.

From an economic perspective Brinton (2011:31) argues the changes in Japan’s employment system suggests that the nation is itself transitioning to a mature post-industrial economy with a labour market characterized by insecure employment that contrasts with what workers faced during the 1960s to the 1980s. Japan’s new labour market represents the trend, as seen in other post-industrial economies, towards the split between “core” and “noncore” jobs (Brinton 2011:30; Harvey 2005). This trend is profoundly disruptive in a country where achieving a “normal” life became associated with men working full-time jobs and women assuming the roles of full-time housewives and mothers. Brinton (2011:31) further argues that these fundamental changes in the



economy and employment system indicate that Japanese society is in a state of “disequilibrium” changing from a society where individuals were connected to a small set of *ba* in each stage of their lives to a society where this remains true for fewer individuals.

## **2.7 Finding Place (“*Ba*”) Elsewhere**

Presumably the tremendous changes in the Japanese labour market have altered how these youth identify themselves with the workplace. If the workplace is no longer operating as the principle *ba* for youth transitioning from school to the labour market, are young irregular workers looking elsewhere to develop their sense of identity and belonging? If so, where are some of those alternative spaces that youth are seeking?

Having a sense of belonging to a community is an important part of how human identity is constructed. Millie Creighton (1997b:211) has explained that the process of industrialization, urbanization and Westernization in Japan contributed to a feeling that basic human connection, once a central dimension of rural community life, eroded in the nation’s pursuit of economic prosperity. Creighton (1997b) explains that during Japan’s rapid industrialization period there was a mass migration of people from rural areas to the cities in the pursuit of work. As people moved away from rural areas and concentrated in urban centres, many people felt that Japan might have lost something vital from its national identity (Creighton 1997b). This feeling produced nostalgia for traditions that were perceived as “vanishing” (Ivy 1995).

Over the last thirty years Japan has seen a “retro boom” that celebrates things seen as part of the past. These often romanticized conceptualizations of Japan’s rural heritage have been central features of Japan’s domestic travel and tourism industries targeting

urban Japanese to rediscover a “lost” Japan in the countryside (Creighton 1997b). Many rural areas have responded by recasting themselves as sites of nostalgic authenticity to meet this need. Creighton suggests that at the heart of these impulses to find authenticity in nature, rural areas and in traditional activities is the contemporary quest for community and collective identity, consistent with Japanese cultural values that encourage the cultivation of relationships and embeddedness over individualism and self-reliance. Creighton (1997:242) writes that, for contemporary Japanese, “[i]mages of a symbolically mediated past agrarian existence have come to represent not just the ideal community but also the good life, wholesomeness, and the moral values of Japan.”

Other studies have also explored how Japanese youth are identifying and finding meaning in other forms of popular cultural activities such as video games, comic books, animation and music. Through an ethnographic study of the Japanese Hip Hop music scene, for instance, Ian Condry (2006) demonstrates how the art form of Hip Hop is adopted and remade in Japan. Condry explores how the clubs and community of music enthusiasts provide an alternative place, or the “real place” or “*Genba*”, for youth where the scene is created. Many of the youth that belong to this “scene” are *freeters*.

Some of the Hip Hop music also takes a critical and political perspective on contemporary Japanese society. Japanese rappers take on controversial issues related to the education system, sex industry, bullying and the war on terror. However, it is not only popular music that adopts a critical gaze on Japanese society. Recently, the issue of irregular employment has become a fractious issue. As a result, labour unions and protest groups, the subject of this ethnography, have emerged in an attempt to represent the interests of youth. Many of them are not only demanding better treatment in the

workplace, but are also questioning the very logic of the economic system based solely on economic productivity at the expense of those who must work alienating jobs.

I find Mary Brinton's (2011) argument that many Japanese youth are being lost in transition due to the changes to the economic and employment systems as insightful for appreciating the social and cultural context around contemporary youth work in Japan. However, at least at the time she was writing her book, Brinton did not see the institutional and structural changes occurring in Japan as having a significant impact on the political activities of Japanese youth. She wrote:

As far as social protest is concerned, young people in France marched on the streets in the spring of 2005 when a revision of the labor law made their employment less secure. But there has been little evidence until very recently of young jobless Japanese taking to the streets to march in protest over the fact that so many of the jobs available to them are short-term, low-wage, and lacking in the job security that their fathers were promised when they entered the labor market a quarter of a century ago. (Brinton 2011:182)

Instead of street protests or criminal activity, two activities that have often increased in other post-industrial societies with rising inequality facing young men, Brinton suggests that Japan is developing a somewhat different pattern of negative consequences. She sees a common response by Japanese youth to turn inward and blame themselves, questioning their own abilities and losing self-confidence when faced with joblessness and lack of hope (Brinton 2011:183). Drawing on Emile Durkheim's [1984(1893)] concept of *anomie*, Brinton sees young people responding through expressions of social isolation. She signals the phenomena of *hikikomori*, young people who shut themselves in their own homes unable to meaningfully participate in the social world beyond their door, and the extreme case of suicide as some of the more common responses (Brinton 2011:183).

Although Brinton highlights some of the broader consequences of Japan's changing economy for young men in general, I will attempt to show how those involved in the union movements are also negotiating the same experiences of *anomie* and hopelessness, but instead of retreating inwards are trying to channel that energy outwards into protest and organizational activities. I recognize that the political dimensions of irregularly employed youth were not the focus of Brinton's study, nevertheless I aim to show through this ethnography, which I believe is, overall, complementary to Brinton's argument, that there are also a variety of political responses towards the loss of place for young Japanese in reaction to barriers they are encountering in the employment system.

I suggest that Mary Brinton's (2011) argument that young nonelite men have been lost in transition as Japan itself changes into a mature postindustrial economy also provides insight into understanding some of the feelings motivating those joining the social movements that I explore in my fieldwork. Within these social movements it was my impression that young nonelite men were the dominant group.<sup>5</sup> It is important to indicate that the movements that I studied were not exclusive. Most of the members self identified as *freeters* and most of the members were young men. However, there was diversity in gender, age, level of education and type of employment within the membership of these groups. Despite the diversity, there seemed to be an overriding sentiment that whatever their differences, everyone shared the sense that irregular employment was contributing to their own sense of personal alienation.

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<sup>5</sup> I did not systematically record the ages, genders or levels of education of the members of the social movements I was studying since I was predominantly using qualitative research methods. However, my overall impression was that if any group was dominant in the social movements I studied it would be young nonelite men working irregular jobs.

## 2.8 Conclusion

Japan's Heisei recession was a watershed for youth who came of age after the early 1990s. The bursting of Japan's financial and real estate bubble, the ensuing economic recession and the subsequent process of employment restructuring has significantly altered the smooth transition from school into the workplace for a disproportionate number of nonelite young men. What is significant is the loss of social location for those unable to find full-time employment. The experience of being unable to move into a stable workplace contrasts significantly with the experiences of those who entered the workforce between the 1960s and 1980s. For the previous generation, having a secure *ba* was paramount for economic security, individual identity and sense of belonging. It was also a period of time when the "postwar family system," based upon a strong male income earner ideology became widespread through secure employment that enabled the support of a middle-class family. Although life course patterns were rigid during this time, there were obvious ways leading to the middle-class.

As Japan slipped deeper into economic recession in the 1990s, the use of temporary, contract and part-time workers sharply increased. These changes made it progressively difficult for young people to follow the orderly life course of the previous generation. While people struggled to understand what had gone wrong with Japan's economic development, young irregular workers fell under growing scrutiny. Some saw in the changing youth work patterns and lifestyles of "*freeters*" the evidence of failing to live up to the standards of their parents' generation, while others saw in them signs of creativity and experimentation. Despite the mixed discourses surrounding youth, it has also become evident that for those coming of age after the economic recession of the

early 1990s, it has become much more difficult to obtain full-time employment than for the previous generation. Labour market restructuring in Japan has disproportionately affected the working lives of youth, especially nonelite young men, by channelling them towards different forms of irregular work. This is a significant change in that it appears to signal the de-gendering of irregular employment in post-industrial Japan.

Japan appears to be transitioning to a mature post-industrial economy with a labour market that splits employment into “core” and “non core” jobs. Yet, as evidenced by the anxieties surrounding irregular employment, these changes are profoundly disruptive in a nation where achieving a “successful” life was based on the ability of men to work stable full-time jobs. Japanese society appears to be in a state of “disequilibrium” where individuals were once connected to small and stable sets of social locations (“*ba*”) in each stage of the life course to a society where this remains out of reach for many in the new economy. One result has been different forms of disenfranchisement among youth unable to successfully transition into full-time work.

In the next chapter I examine how the loss of place in Japanese society for youth who fail to successfully transition into stable employment is connected to the recent rise of protest around the issue of economic inequality in post-recessionary Japan. Specifically the chapter will explore the roles of how conflict and class have shaped working conditions in post-war Japan. The aim of the next chapter is to provide additional context for understanding the significance of the different union movements that I focus on in chapters five to eight of the dissertation.

## Chapter 3: Conflict and Class

### 3.1 Introduction

In an effort to underscore the significance of why young people working non-regular positions have become a cause for social concern, in the previous chapter I discussed the significance of place or “*ba*.” Specifically I discussed how the inability to “successfully” transition from school to full-time employment is robbing young people, particularly non-elite young men, of finding a meaningful social location. Building on this argument, in this chapter my aim is to draw attention to two more significant factors influencing the union movements that make up the core of my ethnographic study; namely conflict and class.

I approach these topics with some trepidation since the roles of conflict and class are controversial subjects in the post World War II social scientific literature on Japan. Many postwar studies of Japanese work culture accentuated the absence of conflict as a key feature of Japan’s economic success. Cultural theories in general tended to minimize the role of conflict and focused instead on the harmonious dimensions of Japanese culture. Moreover, social class has been largely dismissed as a useful explanatory tool by instead emphasizing the vertical nature of hierarchies as the key to understanding Japanese social relations. However, I take a far more critical look at both conflict and class. In this chapter I use the roles of conflict and class as vehicles for understanding the rise of protest among young irregular workers in the union movements that are the subjects of the following chapters.

### **3.2 Studying Conflict in Postwar Japan**

Two of the central subjects of this dissertation are the roles of conflict and class in understanding recent union movements for young irregular workers. The union movements that I explore ethnographically are oppositional, conflictual and publically vocal about their sense that the direction of Japanese society is becoming increasingly unequal and separated by “winners” and “losers.” Those in the movements see this inequality, which many of them are beginning to articulate in class terms, as being driven in large part by the shift toward using more irregular workers who receive lower wages, fewer benefits and less job security than their parents’ generation experienced. However, as a subject for ethnographic inquiry, union movements are potentially problematic because they deal with the issues of conflict and class, two areas that run against the grain of post World War II scholarship on Japan.

Part of the reason conflict was not readily explored in Japan in much of the postwar period is attributed in part to the broader development of the social sciences (Steinhoff 2008b). During the 1950s and 1960s in the United States, but also in Japan and many other countries, functionalism was the dominant paradigm of social science inquiry. The functionalist approach explained culture as an organic whole with different institutions and customs all contributing to its support. Research under the functionalist paradigm tended to explore how parts of the social system integrated with one another and how core values were reproduced within a system that worked together to stabilize society. Conflict was thus seen as an aberration. Any strains or conflict occurring in a society were seen as temporary dysfunctions that would be straightened out by the system’s integrative mechanisms.



Functionalism emphasized how parts of societies functioned in the present. There was less attention paid to how societies changed over time. In anthropology, studies of small-scale societies were assumed to represent unchanging stages of development. Sociologists used functionalism to produce modernization theory in an attempt to explain social changes created by industrialization. Modernization theory holds that as societies move from “traditional” to “modern” there will be some temporary friction, but the new society will once again find a way to integrate and balance itself anew.

During the postwar period in the United States, functionalism was a safe paradigm. According to Steinhoff (2008b:4), during the Cold War period, functionalism was a good fit because it was anti-Marxist and modernization theory legitimized American activities abroad, including in Japan. Moreover, functionalism also complemented the language and area studies model of Japan Studies in the United States. This approach encouraged students to learn about Japan through a variety of different disciplines at the Master’s level as a prerequisite for increased disciplinary specialization during doctoral studies. As a result, functionalism and modernization theory became the dominant paradigms through which most Western trained social scientists studied postwar Japan in the 1950s and 1960s. Although not everyone agreed with the functionalist approach, Steinhoff (2008b) suggests that it was an attractive model for many social scientists in addition to ordinary Japanese citizens who served as informants eager to put the war behind them and embrace a new model of modern Japan. In this context, the harmony model of a homogeneous society that emphasized cooperation over conflict was very attractive.

In the 1950s and 1960s functionalism and modernization theory were the dominant paradigms under which most Western social scientists were trained. Although many social scientists in Japan did not accept the functionalist approach, Nakane Chie's description of vertical society (Nakane 1970) and Doi Takeo's (1973) explanation of the psychology of dependence (*amae*) (甘え) provided influential indigenous theoretical validation and new perspectives for understanding harmony (Steinhoff 2008b:4). Moreover, during this period there were few social science studies of Japan available. What was available was a small body of English language social science literature influenced by the harmony model which was itself part of a larger body of functionalist theoretical work. In the 1960s a new generation of Japan specialists were trained through this body of social science literature.

The second generation of Japan specialists went to Japan in the 1960s and 1970s with research questions that came out of the functionalist paradigm and modernization theory with attention to the harmony model (Steinhoff 2008b). However, the 1960s was a time of significant social unrest in Japan (as well as in other parts of the world). Although conflict was evident in massive street battles and challenges to the state, most social scientists remained focused on exploring social institutions that were assumed to integrate society based on the cultural values of cooperation and harmony. These researchers were in fact able to find a wide variety of areas where the functionalist model was quite applicable. Yet, by the early 1970s many Japan specialists of this generation recognized that they had been witnessing significant conflict within Japanese society for which functionalism and the harmony model failed to provide adequate explanation.

The edited volume *Conflict in Japan* (Kraus, Rohlen and Steinhoff 1984) grew out of the desire of many of the scholars of that generation to rethink their research in terms of conflict. By using existing social science conflict theories, the contributors to the volume explored examples of conflict in a variety of areas including interpersonal relations, movements, organizations, education and in politics. By the time the volume was published in 1984, functionalism began to be in decline and modernization theory was no longer as relevant to explain Japan's development (Steinhoff 2008b:8).

The social sciences were transforming, and so was Japanese society. New forms of social science thinking came to be applied to Japan. Steinhoff (2008b) suggests that it is possible to delineate three successive paradigms that have defined Japan Studies: the functionalist paradigm in the 1970s and early 1980s, the competition paradigm in the 1980s and 1990s, and the cultural studies paradigm since the 1990s. These are broad categories that subsume most, but not all of the research. The functionalist paradigm was not replaced by another dominant paradigm, but rather broken down to allow for a wide variety of other social science theories to develop. In the 1980s, Japan's new status as a major post-industrial country opened up a line of comparative inquiry with other Western democracies around questions of self-interest and competition in the marketplace. Researchers were interested in answering questions as to why Japanese institutions and practices were succeeding when Western theories of capitalism assumed they would fail.

Business practices and structural organizations were studied carefully, resulting in the recognition that the harmony model could not explain examples of inequalities. Therefore theories of conflict and competition became increasingly useful for understanding examples of social discord. Also beginning in the 1970s and continuing

through the 1980s and 1990s were many significant social transformations happening in the United States and European societies that came to influence social science theories (Steinhoff 2008b). What might be termed “postmodernism” or a series of theories that significantly challenged the hegemony of functionalism and other “grand theories” in the social sciences also influenced the kinds of research done on Japan. Younger scholars in the 1970s and 1980s were influenced by a variety of identity movements around marginalized groups. These scholars were concerned with questions of identity, difference, social problems, inequality and the rising aspirations of the oppressed. What these scholars shared was a general recognition of structural conflict within societies. Western-trained scholars used this growing body of scholarship to design research projects about Japanese women, minorities and other marginalized groups, and to explore similar social problems seen in other societies. These research projects eschewed functionalism and challenged the harmony model of Japan. In the late 1980s and early 1990s a new paradigm emerged from Cultural Studies that emphasized the study of subcultures within their larger social context. Drawing on a variety of theoretical perspectives, this field examines cultural forms through questions of power, identity and justice. From the Cultural Studies perspective cultural forms can be vehicles through which conflict is expressed. However, despite the increased attention to conflict within the field of Japan Studies since the 1980s, the question of class has received less attention.

### **3.3 Class**

Over the last decade, the social scientific literature on Japan has taken a significant turn in part because the Heisei recession in the early 1990s has influenced

significant social changes (Ishida and Slater 2010). In the post World War II period most social analysis presented Japanese society as unified and homogenous by concentrating research on institutions and mechanisms that united the population. However, in part because of the post-modern sensibilities of researchers, questions about the role of diversity and difference have increasingly come to the fore. The discrepancies of experiences along gendered, ethnic and racial lines challenged the dominant narratives of mainstream society through attention to those on the margins. This diversity amongst marginal groups has raised questions about the kinds of differences that exist within the very core of the society and how deep these divisions can be traced historically (Ishida and Slater 2010). There is growing attention to the emergent and increasingly significant areas of friction within Japanese society. In the process of reorienting scholarly focus towards the diversity of experiences in contemporary Japan, the study of Japan is being resituated within a “broader global and comparative context where questions of change, hybridity and innovation have replaced national and institutional frames of reference” (Ishida and Slater 2010:1).

Ishida and Slater (2010) also suggest that in the rush to “diversify” Japan, social class has been largely neglected. They suggest this is paradoxical since class is one of the important dimensions of difference and diversity. While the research on Japan’s middle class society was instructive for providing a window into Japan’s experience of modernity that was organized along non-Western lines, the same approach now potentially obscures more than it reveals. Ishida and Slater (2010) suggest that the analysis of class formation is necessary for re-examining the social institutions of the family, school and workplace in Japan’s postwar society, in addition to the more recent

scholarship on identity, gender and ethnicity. They argue that current social science research must pay attention to how class dynamics crosscut the other principles of social organization. Failure to address the role class at best renders contemporary research on Japan incomplete, and at worst makes it misleading. In addition to contributing to the understanding of the local context, attention to shared patterns of class dynamics in a society with a different history and culture than the West provides an opportunity for gaining further insight into the manifestations of class formation.

Ishida and Slater (2010) also suggest that ethnography may not have been the best method to capture class dynamics in Japan. Ethnographers tend to focus on uncovering whole-culture patterns through attention to the subjective experiences of informants. In Japan, class dynamics usually operate outside or only on the peripheries of reflective experiences. They contrast this with the UK where the idiom of social class is a conscious element of identity construction.

In the postwar period standards of living rose sharply along with political pressure to reinforce social unity and sacrifice despite emerging social differences. Within this historical context, it is understandable why popular uses of social class were marginal, and why most ethnographers failed to capture class dynamics. However, the veil covering social differences and the reluctance to use the rhetoric of social class to explain inequality appears to be weakening due to the prolonged economic downturn. As Japan's recession becomes increasingly understood as representing part of the characteristic of neoliberal capitalism, the re-emergence of social class rhetoric in the popular press and as a means for framing academic research is gaining attention.

Yoshio Sugimoto (2010) observes that a dramatic paradigm shift appears to be happening in contemporary Japan with public discourse taking a sharp turn towards paying careful attention to the internal divisions and differences within the society. The common characterization of Japan as a monocultural society with little internal cultural difference and class stratification that dominated in the post World War II period is losing its monopoly as the depiction of Japanese society. Now, at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the emerging discourse is organized around the idea that Japan is a *kakusa shakai* (格差社会), a “disparity society” or “unequal society”, characterized by social divisions and inequalities.

Sugimoto sees the discourse as building through the prolonged recession in the 1990s and into the 2000s with the global financial crisis in 2008 only pushing the discourse further. He argues that the new discourse is less the result of intellectual criticisms than of the public experiences and perceptions of the changing patterns of the labour market.

At the same time, Sugimoto warns that we must be sceptical of the *kakusa shakai* thesis. The assumption that Japanese society has suddenly become unequal is suspect. Japan has never been a fully “middle-class society.” What appears to be happening is that there is an abrupt shift in public awareness and sensitivity to class differences. The post World War II high-growth economic period saw major transformations of occupations as workers shifted from agriculture to manufacturing, from blue-collar to white-collar work, from manual to non-manual work and from low-level to high-level education. However, Sugimoto suggests that these occupational transformations left a false impression that the entire population was experiencing upward mobility. When the

economy slowed in the 1990s, this perception became harder to sustain and the reality of class competition started to become more apparent.

One common argument that dismisses the relevance of class in societies with post-industrial economies is that as work becomes increasingly irregularly organized it disperses value-creation and as a result society becomes less structured according to class segmentation (Ishida and Slater 2010). Whereas the once-stable basis of production provided stability onto which status and identity was attached, with the loss of this stability the ability for building a class-based identity is also lost. In the place of class-based identities, consumption and other leisure activities become the primary aspects of expressing social position and gender, ethnicity and other collectivities of affiliation become the primary aspects around which identity is formed. Moreover, identity politics replaces labour politics. According to this argument, class analysis loses its utility in explaining a fractured social order organized around complex social identities. Despite the utility of this argument for explaining postmodern identity politics, it does not unambiguously represent the complexity of Japan (Ishida and Slater 2010:7). The destabilizing effects on labour commonly associated with neoliberal economies are also apparent in Japan, yet the popular response has led to a re-articulation of a rhetoric of social structure and identity that resembles social class (Ishida and Slater 2010:7). Therefore, if class is being resurrected as a potent political vehicle amongst irregularly employed youth in Japan, it is necessary to examine how questions surrounding social class have been addressed in the literature.



### 3.4 Conflict and Class in the Literature on Workplace Culture in Japan

Although questions of class in Japan have been marginal amongst Western trained social scientists, there has been some important ethnographic work into the subject. A significant ethnography, *Japanese Workers in Protest* by Christina Turner (1995), is a case in point. Her ethnography captures the daily lives, consciousness, and collective actions of approximately two hundred blue-collar workers in two separate union struggles in the 1980s. She approaches the role of protest and conflict as vehicles for understanding how Japanese workers conceptualize their own positions as unionized factory workers within a democratic industrial society. She pays careful attention to social processes to illustrate how the workers themselves understand their own acts of acquiescence, accommodation, resistance and protest within Japan's industrial system.

Turner's (1995:8) ethnography of Japanese union workers in conflict with their employers aimed to address "a deep silence in the literature on Japan" on the intellectual and practical lives of industrial workers. On one hand, historians have devoted significant attention to the intellectual and political battles waged over shaping modern Japanese industry with particular attention to the divisive turmoil that erupted immediately after World War II. On the other hand, social scientists have studied the institutional structures of contemporary companies beginning from the middle of the 1950s. Images of Japanese workers as passive labourers cooperating in efficiently run industrial enterprises remained entrenched as Turner was writing her ethnography. Her study aimed to critically challenge the image of Japanese industry as producing high-tech postmodern products designed and manufactured by traditional workers trapped in social relations and cultural practices from a feudal past.

These images of Japanese workers are both reinforced and challenged by competing perspectives. At the turn of the twentieth century Japanese labour relations were characterized by often lengthy and sometimes violent battles between workers and management (Gordon 1993). The institutional practices of harmony and cooperation within industry were also heavily influenced by state intervention (Kinsley 1991). Japan's modern industrial organization, democratic institutions and labour relations were heavily influenced by intense debates about social order and moral values in which workers and their organizations were heavily involved (Turner 1995:9).

Turner notes that most social science research on workplaces began in the middle of the postwar period. Of primary concern to those researchers was the stability and economic success of Japan's largest firms. This period was characterized by overarching economic prosperity for the nation, high growth rates and conservative political rule. The working environment, from the mid-fifties contrasted significantly with the more turbulent period immediately after World War II that saw radical political action and a rapid rise in the rates of unionization. These forces of opposition were suppressed by a coalition of American and Japanese powers with vested interests in containing and controlling emerging threats from communism in Asia and creating an economically stable and compliant form of capitalism. The success of these conservative forces created a period of stability and growth that lasted until the early 1970s (Gordon 1993).

A great deal of social science interest during this period focused on institutions and structures to understand and explain Japan's rapid recovery. Of particular interest were hierarchical structures, participatory practices and cooperative labour-management relations. The picture that emerged of Japanese firms, researchers argued, was a

workplace of loyal workers cooperating harmoniously for the prosperity of the company (Abegglen 1958; Nakane 1970, Ouchi 1982). This explanation provided an attractive model of efficiency and productivity that was of particular interest to businesses in other advanced industrialized countries eager to learn from Japan's successes (Turner 1995:10).

However, this particular characterization of Japanese firms provided only a partial glimpse into the complexity of how companies were organized and has, perhaps unwittingly, contributed to an essentializing image of Japanese workplaces as docile, compliant and free from conflict. The prevalence of hierarchies, status, and authority within Japanese organizations often leads to uncritical assumptions about the passivity of the workforce (Turner 1995).

One of the significant problems was that the largest and most successful firms on which these studies were based should not have been assumed to be representative of the experiences of all Japanese workers since no more than 20% of the workforce were employed by these types of firms during this period (Creighton 1995a:6; Whittaker 1980:339). These studies did not significantly address the cultural processes of conceptualization or social processes of accommodation or resistance of individual workers in the capitalist and democratic structures of Japanese society (Turner 1995:10). Some analyses of workplaces did seriously engage aspects of daily life and critical thought within Japanese firms (Cole 1971; Dore 1973; Rohlen 1974). The ethnographic work of Kondo (1990) and Hamabata (1990) also provide accounts of contested gender, family, and work identities. Yet, despite these studies that have taken a more critical approach to how Japanese workers negotiate their own experiences, an entrenched image of a passive and docile Japanese workforce remains.

Dorinne Kondo's (1990) ethnography of a family run confectionary factory, for example, explored how identity is constructed in the arenas of company and family in Japan. Kondo wrote against the essentializing conceptions of "the Japanese" that tend to suppress differences, tensions and contradictions. Instead, she approached her fieldwork with an attempt to understand how people "craft" themselves and their lives in shifting fields of power and meaning in particular situations within particular historical and cultural contexts. Kondo critically examined how race, gender and age influenced identity construction. She paid particular attention to how much self-identity can really be separated from others in a context like Japan where individuals are bound up within webs of social relationships. Kondo described how the company strategically deployed the idiom of company-as-family to discipline workers and demonstrated how employees also contested, negotiated and subverted the same idiom.

Kondo contends that the identities of the factory workers she encountered were constructed within relations of power and that their everyday lives were fraught with complicated ironies, contradictions and ambiguities that betrayed simplistic reductions. For instance, neither the hegemonic ideology of company-as-family, nor resistance to it was unproblematic since both were changing categories with multiple meanings and unintended consequences. Gender was also contested as it was used as a category of exclusion for women, keeping them marginal to the centers of power as part-time workers, but also vital to the labour necessary for the company. Work too was an axis of identity construction as workers constructed disciplined selves and used work as a pathway to maturity and self-realization. Yet, the uncritical celebration of artisanal work

masks the cultural and historical construction of skill and hides how meaning is implicated in a larger system of power relations.

### **3.5 Class Consciousness**

At the time of her ethnography Turner (1995:10) suggested that revolutionary class-consciousness was not a significant factor in Japan any more than it was in most other advanced capitalist nations during the same period. Despite an image of Japanese workers as cooperative, it would be inaccurate to suggest that there was no class-consciousness, opposition or critical thought. Japanese workers regularly take collective action or enter into relationships that attempt to influence institutional structures. Opinion polls suggest that ninety percent of Japanese have identified themselves as belonging to the “middle-class” throughout most of the post World War II period.

Cole’s (1971) ethnography of two small-unionized manufacturing firms explored the role of class-consciousness, collective action and workers’ feelings towards workplace authority. The ethnography conveys a sense of workers’ choices towards speaking out against management, remaining silent or accommodating unpopular decisions. Cole conveys an uneasy sense of contradiction among the workers who were, on one hand reluctant to take collective action and demonstrated a deep loyalty to their companies, and on the other hand, regularly voted to select Socialist and Communist Party supporters as union leaders and in local and national elections. In his attempt to explain this contradiction, Cole (1971:266) proposed that the support of the political left was more symbolic than a reflection of class-consciousness.

Making a somewhat different argument, Ishida Takeshi (1984) sought to explain the same type of contradictions seen among Japanese workers through what he described as “dependent revolt” that expresses workers’ “ambivalent feelings” towards taking collective action in the workplace. Ishida suggests that Japanese workers, as members of both companies and labour unions, have mixed feelings and allegiances to both of these institutions. Influenced by the institutional hierarchies in which they belong, when workers express their opposition it is often presented to employers as a demand for “better treatment.” Ishida suggests that this reflects a “paternalistic dependency.” Demanding “better treatment”, the idiom often used by workers, expresses a desire on the part of workers to fight for their own personal interests, yet the workers are challenging authority within the weight of industrial and social organizational hierarchies.

Thomas Smith (1988) described the tensions amongst pre-World War II Japanese workers as the “right to benevolence.” Smith described how workers in this period went to great lengths to avoid challenging the legitimacy of the hierarchy within firms when taking collective actions. Smith suggests that although workers took steps to influence their working conditions, they did not challenge the moral claim to hierarchical justice. What Ishida (1984) and Smith (1988) draw attention to is that when Japanese workers challenge authority it is important to pay attention to how they conceive of hierarchies, social relations, justice and opposition.

Turner (1995) suggests that the prevalence of hierarchies of power, status, and authority within Japanese industrial organizations has produced many uncritical assumptions about the dependent submissiveness and passivity of Japanese workers. Cole (1971) even questioned how democratic Japanese workers participation could be in

the context of strong hierarchies of authority. Yet, Rohlen (1974:176-191) and Dore (1973:210) approached questions of paternalism, hierarchies, efficiency and flexibility in the Japanese workplace as social and cultural questions. Through ethnographic investigations into the daily activities in Japanese firms, they demonstrated how hierarchies are mitigated through horizontal relations within work groups and how training programs reinforced cultural and social behaviours favourable to the smooth operations of the organization.

However, little research into Japanese firms extended much beyond the high growth period and until Turner's (1995) ethnography no researcher had examined the conceptual and practical lives of workers attempting to shape the direction of economic adjustments or the restructuring of workplace authority and power. Turner's ethnography of worker controlled struggles during the seventies and eighties probed questions about the social forms and cultural conceptualizations of capitalism, work, authority and opposition.

### **3.6 Masking of Class Differences**

Steven (1988) suggests that the Japanese working class has the reputation of being hard working, loyal to its employers and lacking in class-consciousness. Western managers were envious of the harmonious and cooperative environment of industrial relations in Japan. Many of the Japanese elite also tended to explain harmony and cooperation through cultural values unique to Japan. However, Steven (1988) argued that a better explanation resided in how people are ranked by sex, age and education and how these qualities channel people into classes and stratifications within the working class.

Steven (1988) suggests that because the Japanese aristocracy, middle-class and labour aristocracy are predominantly middle-aged men from prestigious educational institutions, differences between classes look similar to differences within the working class. He suggests that the power of the ruling class and the better than average conditions of the labour aristocracy appear to originate from the sex, age and education of the individuals instead of the positions they occupy within the process of production. Therefore, differences between classes are less visible and Japan looks less like a class society and more like a stratified society.

Steven also suggests that the loyalty Japanese workers show to their employers, and their sense of rank are the results of the processes through which people are channelled into classes. Since the same types of people go into the same types of positions, the determinants of class power remain hidden from the visible attributes of the individual. The dominance of the ideology of the traditional family is effective in masking class in Japan because the same elements that determine one's rank within the family structure are the same that grant access to ruling class positions.

Steven divides Japan's working class into three main fractions: the labour aristocracy, the mass worker and the reserve army. The first group of workers belong to the large corporations, or monopolies. This group of workers has the greatest stake in capitalism through their higher than average wages. To minimize the threat of working class action from this large group of workers, Steven suggests capital must stabilize their standard of living to ensure their loyalty. The second group of workers belongs to medium and smaller sized companies that co-exist with large corporations. The uneven accumulation within industries dictates these workers receive lower wages than the



labour aristocracy. The wage differential is essential so that workers in the first group maintain a sense that their positions are privileged. Finally there is the reserve army that serves to adapt to the uneven accumulation of capital during periods of recession. This group of workers must become unemployed but remain available for re-employment when accumulation resumes. More recently, David Slater suggests that *freeters* and other irregular workers represent Japan's "new working class" which includes "those working in service-oriented jobs, with little stability and few benefits, jobs that characterize the bottom of the Japanese labor market as in many other post-industrial economies" (Slater 2010b:140).

Since this dissertation is concerned primarily with irregular workers, I will outline how Steven describes the role that the reserve army of labour plays since this is the area in which most irregular workers find themselves. The function of the reserve army reduces the value of working class labour power which permits the movement of workers in and out the labour process according to market demands without threatening capitalist relations. Steven (1988) suggests that Japan had been very successful in comparison with other advanced industrialized nations in using its reserve army as evidenced in its relatively smooth reproduction of capitalist relations in the post World War II period. At the time that Steven was writing, women made up the bulk of the reserve army. However, they were also joined by four different categories of men: non-regulars, part-timers, day labourers and the unemployed.

Steven (1988:104) suggests that the enterprise unions function primarily to control workers and contain class struggle instead of being vehicles through which to express dissent. Union membership is predominantly limited to regular workers in the

same firm. Therefore, unions exclude day labourers, part-timers and temporary workers. As such, he suggests that enterprise unions should not be considered the organizations of the working class, but rather a particular layer operating within the family hierarchy of the firm that contributes to the obfuscation of class relations. He suggests that enterprise unionization has been tolerated because it can be used to control workers. When militant labour unions gain power, the response has not taken the form of an attack on unionization in general. Rather, companies usually encourage the development of a rival company union that can be used to bring workers into line with the dictates of the company. Because enterprise unions are limited to organizing within their own company, it is extremely difficult for militant unions to create effective organizations. Company unions do occasionally organize militant strikes but because union members are limited to full-time regular employees of the same company, the firm holds a disproportionate amount of power over the workers.

### **3.7 Conclusion**

To appreciate the significance of the union movements under ethnographic study in this dissertation it is necessary to understand the role that conflict and class have played in the construction of social science knowledge within the broader field of Japan Studies in the post World War II period. With the dominance of functionalism structuring much of the social science inquiry into Japan from the 1950s to the 1970s, examples of conflict were downplayed or dismissed in favour of social phenomena that more readily supported the harmony model of Japan. With the growing recognition of the limitations of functionalism in the 1970s and 1980s researchers brought new

sensibilities characteristic of the period by exploring the divergent experiences of marginal groups, including women, minorities and others. As the functionalism paradigm continued to fall out of favour, it was not supplanted by another dominant paradigm; rather a variety of different paradigms were used to ask questions about business practices and popular culture from the 1990s onward. Researchers exploring identity, gender, ethnicity, business competition and popular culture phenomena were more open to understanding how conflict shaped contemporary experiences.

Yet, despite the explosion of research about Japan's newfound diversity, class has been largely neglected. There are likely a variety of factors contributing to the reluctance to take class seriously as an important variable cross cutting other dimensions of power in Japan. There is the theoretical legacy of functionalism with its staunch anti-Marxism. There is also the tendency of North American trained scholars to be suspicious of organized labour as an appendage of imperial legacies making it less worthy of study than the experiences of more marginalized groups. There is also the colonial legacy of anthropology with its primary interest in mapping out distinct cultures as opposed to explicating the web of relationships within global capitalism and imperial expansion. There is also the perception that in post-modern societies class-based identities are being replaced by other collectivities of affiliation like gender, ethnicity, consumerism and leisure activities around which identity is formed. Identity politics are therefore replacing labour politics as a potent vehicle for social change. However, what these research agendas and arguments fail to sufficiently account for is the resurgence of what appears to be a class based labour politics and the cultivation of a proletarian consciousness among the growing ranks of the irregularly employed youth in Japan.

In addition to the theoretical challenges in assessing the importance of social class in Japan, there is also the debate about how much class-consciousness Japanese workers actually demonstrate. In the post World War II period Japanese workers gained the international reputation of being loyal, hardworking, cooperative and lacking in class-consciousness. An explanation for this was that for much of the postwar period class dynamics operated outside or only on the peripheries of reflective experiences. Since standards of living rose sharply in conjunction with political pressure to reinforce social unity and sacrifice for the advancement of the national body, the idiom of social class as a conscious element of identity construction was largely absent, only to be found on the peripheries of mainstream society.

The presence of strong hierarchies of power, status and authority within Japanese workplace organizations has led to many uncritical assumptions about the passivity of Japanese workers. However, Japanese workers in the postwar period regularly engaged in collective action or attempted other means to influence their institutional structures (Turner 1995). It is essential to recognize that as members of both companies and labour unions, workers have mixed feelings and competing allegiances to both institutions. Critique is often framed as a demand for “better treatment” which expresses a desire for workers’ self interests, done under the weight of institutional and social hierarchies.

In Nakane Chie’s influential *Vertical Society* (1971) she argued that Japanese society was “vertically” organized as a hierarchy and therefore contrasted with class and caste based societies. Steven (1988) however argued that the way in which people are ranked by sex, age and education masks how people are channelled into different classes and stratifications within the working classes. Since those with power in the Japanese

aristocracy, middle-class and labour aristocracy tend to be middle-aged men coming out of the same elite educational institutions the differences between classes appear less pronounced. The ideology of the traditional family as a metaphor for the workplace has also been effective in masking class in Japan since the same qualities that determine one's rank within the household, namely sex and gender, are the same qualities that lead to ruling class positions.

In the next chapter I extend my discussion of conflict and class by locating the union movements within the broader development of the Japanese labour movement and the trajectory of Japanese civil society. The next chapter focuses on how recent union movements challenge traditional union organization and overlap their concerns for social justice with activities typically seen within civil society activism. The aim of the chapter is to provide additional context for understanding why unions for *freeters* and other irregular workers are a recent and significant development with the Japanese labour movement.

## **Chapter 4: Locating *Freeter* Unions in the Japanese Labour Movement**

### **4.1 Introduction**

In addition to appreciating the role of social class in postwar Japan, both as an analytical tool amongst scholars and in shaping class-consciousness amongst Japanese workers, it is also necessary to consider how the union movements attempting to organize *freeters* and other irregular workers are located within the broader development of the Japanese labour movement. These union movements are part of a new form of labour organization in Japan that emerged in the 1980s to cover those workers excluded by the dominant enterprise union system for full-time employees. These unions target part-time, contract and temporary workers and often overlap their concerns with issues of social justice. As such many of these new unions serve the purposes of both traditional labour unions and services akin to non-governmental organizations located in the arena of civil society. This chapter therefore provides a brief overview of the post World War II Japanese labour movement with attention to the role of new labour unions in organizing protest and shaping the political discourse around *freeters* and other irregular workers.

### **4.2 The Japanese Labour Movement**

In the 1960s, a number of Japanese scholars began to write about the merits of a paternalistic “Japanese-style” of management (Mouer and Kawanishi 2005:33). Japan’s high economic growth during this period lent support to questioning the assumption that American-style democracy was a superior path to economic success and that all of

Japan's prewar practices needed to be abandoned as they were feudal, economically backwards and ultimately led to its defeat in the Asia Pacific War. The argument behind the merit of Japanese-style management was that Japan's work practices emerged from a "unique" culture that attached an especially strong value to hierarchy, to group solidarity and to consensus. These cultural values were readily embedded in the practices of seniority wages, lifetime employment and enterprise unionism. Moreover, some authors argued that Japanese-style management was a superior form of organization as it blended economic rationalism with humanistic structures. Some authors even took the argument as far as ascribing to it the moral essence of being Japanese.

In the post World War II period, Japan's enterprise union system was widely understood as comprising one of the three pillars of the Japanese industrial system. Along with lifetime employment and seniority wages plus promotion, enterprise unionism was seen as an integral part of Japan's particular form of industrial organization (McMillan 1985). Such organization was credited for its post World War II economic growth. One of the defining features of Japanese labour unions was that they were limited to only one company. Further, the unions were limited to only the full-time regular employees. The unions were also supportive of the company's policies to expand the firm, and contribute to the growth of the national economy. Unionism in Japan has been described as operating on the principle of "one firm, one union" (*ichikigyou ichikumiai*) (一企業一組合) (Kawanishi 1992:1).

### 4.3 The Enterprise Union

The above characterization of Japanese labour unions is not without challenge. For instance, Skinner (1980) argued that Japanese work organizations demonstrate far more conflict than the idealized image of harmonious work relations would suggest. Similar to many other critiques that argue against homogenous depictions of post World War II Japan, Kawanishi Hirosuke (1992) argues that the perception that enterprise unions in Japan are solely limited to one company overly simplifies unionism in Japan. In Japan, the enterprise union is the most basic autonomous unit of the union movement (Kawanishi 1992). Unions are organized at the level of the business firm (*kaisha*) (会社) or the place of business (*jigyosho*) (事業所). Both are considered “enterprises” *kigyō* (企業). During the postwar period, labour unions in Japan have been predominantly organized at the enterprise level. However, since many companies have several places of business it is common for each enterprise to have its own union, which are coordinated through a firm-wide federation. Membership in the union is restricted to employees of a given enterprise. However, not all employees can join the union. Union membership is usually restricted to full-time regular employees (*seishain*). Irregular employees such as part-timers, contract workers and others are typically excluded. Moreover, it is also common for more than one union to operate within the same company. The Japanese Trade Union Law allows as few as two people to form a union. Therefore it is possible for small unions to form within companies around the special interests of a small number of employees. Historically, one of the strategies of management when faced with a powerful left-wing union was to create a competing second union sympathetic to the interests of management within the firm.



Working conditions in postwar Japan have been significantly shaped by the shifts in the balance of power between labour and management (Mouer and Kawanishi 2005:199). Immediately after the war, the rate of unionization was very high, reaching more than fifty percent of workers. During this period labour organization was centered on strong industrial unions headed by socialist-inspired leadership. There were efforts among unions to “democratize” the organization of work to keep in step with the American-led Occupation policy to democratize the nation. In some instances unions assumed the role of management within their firms as part of the “production control movement” (*seisan kanri undo*) (生産管理運動). There was also a movement to establish a wage system that tied wages to the life cycle needs of each employee known as *densangata chingin* (電産型賃金体系). Organized labour was in fact so powerful in the early days after the war that in the late 1940s Japan was on the verge of becoming a socialist society (Moore 1983). However, the next twenty years saw a massive struggle for power between organized labour and organized management for the “soul of Japan’s workers” (Kawanishi 1992).

The ideological tug-of-war between organized labour and management often centered on the argument of “national competitiveness.” In order to remain prosperous and competitive, management advocated wage restraint and the deferral of social welfare benefits. Labour called for an increase to universal safety nets. The *densangata* system of tying wages to the lifecycle of the worker has often been a target of reform for management who have tried to replace it with a system of compensation more attuned to individual productivity.

#### **4.4 The Political Left**

The left in Japanese politics has a long history of ideological fragmentation (Mouer and Kawanishi 2005: 204). One of the consequences of these political divisions is that Japan's labour movement has lacked overall unity. Early in the twentieth century, before World War II, radical intellectuals were divided. Their support varied for different forms of communism, socialism and anarchism. The reasons for the divisions amongst the Japanese left are long and complex but Mouer and Kawanishi (2005) provide some of the reasons for fragmentation that include the high cost of strategic failure, the emotional toll of secrecy and suspicion required to foster social change in the face of state repression, tensions between theorists and grassroots organizers, personal rivalries and group loyalties, the personal qualities of those committed to bringing about social change, outside pressures from the Comintern, various Christian socialists and from competing factions after the Sino-Soviet split as well as the gap between foreign predictions of the unfolding nature of capitalism and the realities of daily life in Japan. Moreover, the prewar Japanese authorities repeatedly attempted to repress the left's competing ideologies. This pressure forced many activists underground. This further contributed to disorganization and fragmentation of the labour movement.

#### **4.5 National Labour Centres**

The Americans first legalized labour unions during the Occupation in December 1945. Given the various groupings of Japan's political left, various factions began wrestling for positions of power at the national level. By 1946, four national labour

centres were formed but after the early 1960s, two national centres came to dominate the union movement, *Sōhyō* (総評) and *Dōmei* (同盟). These national centres provided competing ideological trajectories for industrial and local level unions. *Sōhyō* affiliated with the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) with a stronghold in the socialist bloc in Eastern Europe. *Dōmei* was affiliated with the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) with affiliations in Western European countries and supported by many industrial federations in the United States.

Formed in 1951, one of *Sōhyō*'s main aims was to foster a sense of working-class solidarity. Its main activity was the organization of an annual “Spring Offensive” (*shuntō*) (春闘) that included May Day demonstrations and slogans emphasizing working class solidarity. The other major national center, *Dōmei*, was created in 1964 to provide a more conservative democratic movement than *Sōhyō*. *Dōmei* supported economic unionism and waged its “Wage Offensive” in competition with *Sōhyō*'s annual Spring Offensive. By the 1980s support for *Sōhyō*'s militant unionism began to decline. Several of *Sōhyō*'s main affiliates in the public sector, including teachers and employees of the Japan National Railway suffered major defeats through a significant campaign against left-wing unions by the government and the media.

#### **4.6 Industrial Federations and Industrial Unions**

The next tier in the structure of the Japanese labour movement includes industrial federations and industrial unions. Although the numbers of industrial unions have declined recently and many industry-level organizations have become federations, some powerful industrial unions remain and include the Japan Teacher's Federation (*nikyoso*)

(日教組) and the Seamen's Union (*kaiin dōmei*) (海員同盟). Industrial federations and industrial unions provide significant research to the labour movement. They encourage the sharing of information among affiliates and work towards creating industry wide standards. Furthermore, through their international affiliations they also coordinate their demands to a principle of international standards. Industrial unions and federations often echo the ideology of the national centres and pass on their message through their affiliates at the workplace.

By the late 1960s, working conditions in Japan's large firms had greatly improved. Having achieved their right to strike, many private sector workers' support for *Sōhyō* decreased despite the ongoing battle of the public sector to achieve the same right. By early 1970s the majority of union members in the private sector supported *Dōmei*. During this period the union movement was politically fragmented in its support for the Japan Socialist Party, the Democratic Socialist Party and the Japan Communist Party. In an attempt to unify the labour movement leaders from a number of the major private sector industrial federations began to discuss strategies behind the scenes and in 1987 leaders of the national centres created *RENGO* (連合) (Japan Union Confederation). Some unions also created *Zenrōkyō* (全労協) (National Trade Union Council) and *Zenrōren* (全労連) (National Confederation of Trade Unions) as competing national centres.

Enterprise unions operate fairly independently and possess their own assets. The industrial federations that they are affiliated with provide information and support but do not issue direct orders to the unions. Most enterprise unions focus primarily on improving the working conditions for their immediate members. Common issues that are

negotiated include wages, company transfers, retirement age and benefits, company welfare provisions, hiring and firing procedures, education, training and the number of hours worked.

Japan's move away from manufacturing towards high-tech and service industries has created new challenges for the labour movement. Industries prefer having "flexibility" in their hiring practices to better meet the ebb and flow of the demands of market capitalism. As Japan's economy has transformed during the postwar period, unionization rates have declined. Debate surrounds the reasons for the reduction in rates in unionization but what is clear is that starting at 40 percent in 1946, the rate of unionization remained at about 35 percent until 1975 and then steadily declined to 20.7 percent in 2001 (Mouer and Kawanishi 2005: 200-202). A report by the International Labour Organization (ILO) suggests that the pattern of falling unionization rates seen in Japan reflects a much broader worldwide trend in post-industrial economies (including the United States, the United Kingdom and Germany) (Cited in Mouer and Kawanishi, 2005). The key factors identified by the ILO include legislation affecting unionism, new technologies, changing labour-force participation among particular groups, the use of casual workers, downsizing of companies and growing unemployment.

In Japan, changing work practices appear to be influencing additional segmentation of the labour market. One of the strategies in creating a competitive edge for Japanese firms is to use greater numbers of part-time and non-regular employees since these workers are given lower wages and the firm is not contractually obligated to keep them when their services are no longer needed. One of the consequences of this

segmentation is that enterprise unions have become increasingly unappealing to an ever widening range of employees.

The role that unions play in Japan has also come under question. In the 1960s and 1970s the labour movement had a clear purpose in improving the material standards of living. One of their common demands was to match their wages with those of European workers. In the mid-1970s unions demanded shorter hours of work or at least the designation of a standard work week that would recognize overtime.

As the material quality of life improved from the 1960s to the 1980s most Japanese came to believe that through hard work anyone could join the middle-class. Along with improved material conditions people began building their lives around less tangible status symbols and style attainable through consumerism. With workers' material lives improving, interest in the political activity of unions waned and union membership became taken for granted. In addition to changing material conditions and lifestyles of Japanese workers, the ability of enterprise unions to protect employment for their members was unclear. Instead of protecting jobs, enterprise unions often worked with management to implement early retirement packages. When the economic bubble burst in the 1990s many enterprise unions were ineffective in protecting the jobs of all of their members. In addition, many enterprise unions did not come to the aid of the many female employees that were laid off, help new graduates secure decent employment, block transfers of the semi-core male workforce to smaller subcontracting firms, or protect a growing number of middle managers who were being fired.

The inability of unions to significantly improve work-life balance since the 1980s has also undermined the political potency of the labour movement. In the late 1980s,

“death from overwork” *karōshi* (過労死) became a significant social issue as workers began to openly question why they needed to work such long hours and why they had so little control over their own work schedules. The issue of long working hours by Japanese full-time workers, who were mostly male, fed into concerns about the consequences of absentee fathers within the family. As public concern over work-life balance became more pronounced in the 1990s, it was actually Japanese firms, not unions, which responded by adjusting more flexible work schedules (Sato 1997). The response from employees has been positive since it provides them with a choice between earning more income through working longer hours or having the opportunity to work fewer hours and spend more time with their families (Morishima 1997). Mouer and Kawanishi (2005: 222) suggest that as long as management is seen as responding to the needs of its employees the value of union membership will continue to be questioned.

The image of cooperative industrial relations during Japan’s postwar period conceals a more contentious history of industrial conflict at the national, industrial and enterprise levels. This period also involved conflict between competing unions within the same enterprises, ideological divisions within the political sphere, several “red purges” and the Japanese government’s stubborn refusal to negotiate with the Japan Teacher’s Union and Spring Wage Offensives. A thirty-year power struggle shifted power from Japan’s industrially based unions to enterprise unions. Successive conservative governments and management put considerable effort into containing and controlling unionism. There were also power struggles between core (unionized) and non-core (non-unionized) workers. There were other power struggles between the permanent white-

collar employees (unionized) in Japan's large firms that lined up against the less-educated and less-skilled permanent (unionized) employees in their own firms.

#### **4.7 Future of the Japanese Labour Movement**

Mouer and Kawanishi (2005) suggest that the future of the enterprise union will be significantly shaped by how it deals with inequalities among workers within each firm's internal workforce. One challenge is to find a unifying concept as many enterprise unions have moved away from simplistic Marxist concepts. Although enterprise unions have remained committed to functioning as protective organizations as do worker's councils in Germany and Unions in America, they have had less influence in certain areas such as controlling the speed of the conveyor belt, controlling job rotations and shifts, and employee promotion while exercising significant power in other areas. During the 1990s, enterprise unions removed several CEOs from a number of large Japanese firms over concerns with overly authoritarian decision-making, poor direction from management and weak performance by the firm.

During most of the postwar period full-time male employees in Japan's large firms have dominated the union movement but several new forms of unionization (*shingata rōdō kumiai*) (新型労働組合) have emerged. Unions for non-regular workers, unions for managers and unions for women have been created to address the specific concerns of each group. More recently, the national centres have come to promote unionism for these groups in an attempt to reverse the downward slide of unionization rates.



The enterprise union is not well positioned to organize workers without a stable base in a single firm. There has been an increase in various types of irregular workers whose workplaces may shift frequently including part-time workers (*pāto*) (パート), temporary workers (*arubaito*) (アルバイト), *freeter* (フリーター), dispatch workers (*haken*) (派遣労働者) and others. Beginning in the late 1990s RENGO attempted to address the needs of these workers by creating regionally based unions (*chiiki yunion*) (地域ユニオン) but their efforts met with limited success. By June 1997, RENGO had only recruited 150,000 new members nation wide, much lower than its initial target. Part of the reason for RENGO's limited success was that the organization had not engaged in a membership drive for some time and was unprepared for the demands of such a campaign. Perhaps more important was the fact that organizers had difficulty explaining the benefits of unionizing to the different types of irregular workers who associated unions with protecting the interests of Japan's full-time core labour force, often at the expense of those in non-regular positions.

The future of the Japanese labour movement and the role that unions will play has by no means been settled. Japan is at a point of transition. Mouer and Kawanishi (2005) argue that the vacuum in economic leadership in Japan may provide an opportunity for the labour movement to return as a significant force on the national stage. The shape that the union movement will take remains unclear but there are a number of identifiable factors exerting pressure on its direction.

Mouer and Kawanishi (2005) predict that the future of the Japanese union movement will be influenced by the dynamic interaction of global capitalism with the particular qualities of Japanese social relations and ethics, the power relationship between

labour and management at both the political level and the level of daily interactions and the changing consciousness of Japanese workers. With technological change and the preference for a more flexible segmented labour force, enterprise unions will likely need to respond by broadening their membership to include many non-core employees, by addressing a broader range of issues facing the peripheral labour force as the “core” labour force becomes more diverse and by shifting the organization of unions away from single enterprises towards broader platforms for membership. The cultural and ideological changes that have accompanied gentrification, the re-stratification of Japanese society and higher levels of affluence and education are influencing questions about what constitutes a “good” life (particularly the role of the father in relation to work and family) and what role social equality and fairness will play in society.

Given the complexity of the labour movement in Japan, making any clear predictions about its future is daunting. It remains to be seen how the labour movement will align itself with different political parties. The internal dynamics of the different levels of organization within the labour movement will have an impact. The National centers will likely maintain their high public visibility as they engage in national political debates. However, given their high public exposure the national centres must provide a legitimate philosophical trajectory for the labour movement if they hope to continue to attract new members.

Industrial federations will likely continue to set the standards for working conditions. The enterprise unions will likely continue to implement work rules and regulate work practices within the workplace. One of the key tensions will be the concern

for social justice that will be most loudly articulated by the national centres and the desire for productivity on the shop floor.

Mouer and Kawanishi (2005) suggest that with the segmentation of the labour force different unions may form around three key groups of workers. Out of the current enterprise union system, unions may form to protect the interests of elite employees in the career tracks leading to managerial positions. These unions would likely be closed organizations. A second type of union may emerge around the interests of members of the permanent core labour force who have highly specialized skills in immediate demand, but not necessarily needed for the long-term viability of the firm. These employees may work on medium-term contracts, and thus create strong professional unions that could be national in scope. A third type of union could aim to organize those in the peripheral labour force into general unions organized by industry or regions. Members in this latter grouping may develop proletarian-type working class consciousness. The first two types of unions would likely be most concerned with productivity, while the third would be most concerned with social justice issues. However, if such a scenario develops accommodation between the different types of unions would be needed to constitute a viable union movement as a whole.

This dissertation does not address all of the different transformations happening within the different levels of Japan's labour movement. My ethnographic studies of union movements are representative of the third type of union described by Mouer and Kawanishi (2005), namely those workers in the peripheral workforce organizing general unions. As Mouer and Kawanishi rightfully point out, these unions are most concerned with social justice issues and creating a proletarian consciousness amongst their members.

The reason for presenting this general overview of the history of the postwar Japanese labour movement is to provide both a sense of the complexity of power relations and to locate the union movements that are the subject of the following chapters within the political world of work in Japan. I do not purport to suggest that my ethnographic study is representative of the whole of the Japanese labour movement. However, my study does provide an important ethnographic lens onto the experiences and perspectives of those organizing and participating in a relatively new form of union organization in post-industrial Japan. One of the defining qualities of labour unions for non-regular employees in Japan is their ability to overlap labour issues with social justice issues. In the process these union movements effectively blur the boundaries between organized labour and civil society. In the next two sections I will further elaborate on why this is an important element in organizing marginal workers in contemporary Japan.

#### **4.8 Community Unions**

As previously stated, labour unions for non-regular employees are relatively new in Japan. One type of new union is the “community union” (*komyunitii yunion*) (コミュニティユニオン) that emerged to cover those outside of the enterprise union system for full time salaried workers (*seishain*), including part-timers, other non-regular workers, workers in small firms and foreign workers (Suzuki 2008). Community unionism is a process of organizing workers based on geographic areas rather than through workplaces. Community unions are a response to the decline in traditional organizational patterns because of the rapid increase of non-unionized workers under labour market deregulation and economic globalization. Community unionism is possible since Japanese labour law

allows just two workers to form a union (Weathers 2010:69). Moreover, companies are legally obligated to negotiate with even one worker over compensation or grievances.

Another distinguishing quality of community unions is that they regularly partner with left-leaning social movements and engage in advocacy in addition to traditional labour activities (Suzuki 2008). Community unions often pride themselves as fighting for social justice. In particular, community unions often fight for the rights of women, young and non regular workers and foreigners (Weathers 2010:69). These forms of collaboration blur the lines between community unions and social movements (Stewart 2006:756; Suzuki 2008; Weathers 2010:69).

Although creating community unions is relatively easy, making an impact on Japanese labour practices has been more challenging. Community unions tend to be small and it is estimated that their total membership is only around 30,000, which accounts for only about 1% of the total (10 million) unionized workers in Japan (Suzuki 2008). The overall Japanese labour movement, as in other countries, has seen a decline in both membership and influence since the 1990s. Community unions have been most successful in helping individuals and small groups of workers but have not been able to significantly influence labour reform. However, community unions may still have a revitalizing effect on the Japanese labour movement given the increase in the number of non-regular workers.

#### **4.9 Japan's Invisible Civil Society**

Many community unions are grassroots organizations with a focus on social justice. As such, their efforts overlap with the activism characteristic of civil society

organizations. The activist quality of many of these new unions contrasts sharply in character from some of the more conservative enterprise unions concerned primarily with productivity and job protection for their core full-time workforce. This distinction is important since civil society activism in Japan has been shaped by some significant post World War II power struggles between the state and activists.

The union movements that I engaged with fit into what Patricia Steinhoff (2008a) identifies as groups within Japan's "invisible civil society." She describes these groups as essentially "invisible" to the mainstream until they suddenly emerge in the media or during very visible marches or public demonstrations. The roots of this are in the protest efforts of the 1960s. The 1960s protest movement failed in many ways to achieve its aims but it left behind a protest movement culture that is responsible for what we are seeing today.

Steinhoff suggests those involved in the protest movements in the 1960s learned that the state was too powerful to confront directly and the cost of protest could be too high. Also, many of the people involved have come to avoid the big national leftist organizations since they are often preoccupied with their own agendas, exhibit high levels of internal conflict and must endure heavy state surveillance. The result has been a development of an alternative protest culture operating outside political institutions and below the level of state authority. These groups achieve this level of autonomy by essentially being organizationally flexible. They have little to no institutional reality, beyond a name, members and a postal savings account. They rely almost totally on volunteer labour, have little or no staff, usually no office and rent local facilities when

they need to host a meeting or an event. They are different from non-profit organizations because they are not registered with the state.

Internally, they are characterized by relationships of trust emphasizing equalitarianism among members and are open to socially excluded and marginal people. The results are fragile groups which can often develop strong individual members who gain skills at running these organizations by putting out regular newsletters, organizing protest events and learning how to network with other groups. Since many of the individuals belong to more than one group, or move from one group to another, the skills they learn are effectively passed on.

#### **4.10 Recent Protests (Activism)**

Although the protest culture in Japan has been significantly shaped by the protest cycles of the 1960s and 1970s, today a generation gap appears to exist between some young activists and many of the older generation of activists. Tensions exist around ideologies and strategies (Mōri 2005). During the 1960s and 1970s the Japan Socialist Party (JSP) and the Japanese Communist Party (JCP) were effective in mobilizing youth in the pacifist and anti-war movements (Sasada 2006: 117). In the early 1960s, radical Marxist groups, student organizations and labour unions mobilized together in large demonstrations focused on national security issues. Left-wing parties continued to appeal to youth until the 1980s. However, since the 1990s these parties have lost major influence with younger people in Japan.

Mōri (2005) highlights various significant differences between the current wave of protest and the activism of the 1960s. One major difference is that the current activism

is being led by underemployed youth instead of by the students in the 1960s and 1970s. Furthermore, the current styles of protest often involve elaborate “cultural” displays. These are similar to protest patterns seen in Europe and North America. Graeber (2009) and Virno (2004) have argued that this reflects a post-modern protest model that blurs the distinction between the political and the cultural. Public demonstrations and marches often have a carnival like atmosphere that include music, dance and art displays. However, the playful qualities of these protests are considered to be more appealing to youth. Many of the older members of Japan’s traditional left-wing parties have been dismissive of the cultural elements of youth protests suggesting that the playful atmosphere lacks the anger and militancy necessary to bring about political change. On the other hand, contemporary youth activists are equally critical of the traditional left as out-dated and lacking relevance to contemporary issues.

Anne Allison (2009) argues that contemporary youth activism in Japan is being shaped by the socio-economic conditions of a more flexible economy based less on manufacturing and more on service, driven by information, communication and speculation. Allison draws on the works of Michael Hardt (2008), Antonio Negri (Hardt and Negri 2004) and Maurizio Lazzarato (1996, 2007) in their arguments that as capitalism is transitioning away from the production of material goods to the immaterial production of information, communication and affect there are important implications for activist cultures. Within this new climate, it is “immaterial labour” (the mass media, Internet, advertising, service providers) that shapes the logic and trajectory of 21<sup>st</sup> century capitalism and resistances to it.



Lazzarato describes “immaterial labour” as the dominant form of labour under post-Fordist capitalism. In contrast to the 19<sup>th</sup> century enterprise that emphasized the inner workings of the production process and management of markets of raw materials and labour, the focus today is outside the production process and focuses on supervision in areas of sales and the relationship with the consumer. The post-industrial commodity is produced through a creative dialectical process that involves both the producer and the consumer.

Similarly, Hardt argues that there have been three distinct economic paradigm successions in capitalist countries since the Middle Ages each defined by a privileged sector of the economy. The first was when agriculture and the extraction of raw materials dominated; the second occurred with industry producing durable goods; and the third and current paradigm is characterized by providing services and manipulating information. Just as human relations were altered by industrialization they are now being altered through the “informationalization” of the economy.

There are three distinct types of immaterial labour that drive the informational quality of the global economy. One is the mixture of information and communication in industrial production that transforms manufacturing into a type of service. The second involves the production and manipulation of symbols, ideas and codes. The third type is the production and manipulation of affects, which require human contact and proximity. This third type of immaterial labour requires the adjustment and use of emotions for commercial purposes (Hochschild 1983). It is the last category of “affective labour” in which Allison sees subversive potential.

Allison suggests that in this new economic shift to immateriality, youth occupy a special position given both their technological pliability and their vulnerability to economic flexibilization. Although affective labour has become directly productive of capital, it also has the potential to be channelled into anti-capitalist subversion. Since affective labour is driven by emotions, passions and community it is part of what Foucault identifies as bio power—the way power works through the social body (Allison 2010:92). Allison interprets new forms of youth-oriented activism in Japan aimed at precarious labour conditions and the material, psychological and social instability produced by the economic shift as a form of “affective activism.” This is a form of activism that “attempts to care for the wounds youth have incurred in a capitalist society where the reserves of care have dried up” (Allison 2010:92).

Other theorists have also attempted to identify how social justice and anti-corporate globalization activists in North America, Europe and Latin America are developing new and innovative ways to express their emerging political imaginaries (Juris 2005:192). Juris and Pleyers (2009:58) identify new political movements as representing “alter-activism” which they define as an emerging subcultural political praxis among young people that is indicative of broader social changes related to political commitment, cultural expression, and collaborative practice. Alter-activism is characterized by lived experience and process; horizontal networked organization; creative direct action; the use of new information and communication technologies; and the organization of physical spaces and action camps as laboratories for developing alternative values and practices. What distinguishes alter-activism from previous social movements is its emphasis on youth, global connections, networks, openness to

collaboration and the utilization of new technologies. It is also suggested that as a relatively recent phenomenon additional studies of alter-activism are needed to not only better understand global justice movements but also to illuminate how these movements reflect key aspects of contemporary social change (Juris and Pleyers 2009:73).

#### **4.11 Conclusion**

Another important dimension for understanding the rise of community unions and labour activism among young irregular workers is to appreciate how the enterprise union system and the postwar Japanese labour movement have shaped the current context. In the postwar period the enterprise union came to be widely understood as one of the three pillars of the Japanese industrial system along with lifetime employment and seniority wages plus promotion. Enterprise unions were also seen as supporting the company's mission to expand the prosperity of the firm and to contribute to the growth and strength of the nation. However, this popular depiction of the role of enterprise unions greatly over simplified unionism in Japan. Representing a cultural discourse emphasizing homogeneity, this description of enterprise unionism ignored the more tumultuous power struggles of the labour movement in post World War II Japan.

Working conditions in post World War II Japan have been significantly influenced by the power struggles between organized labour and management. Immediately after World War II, unionization rates were high and the labour movement was being led by strong industrial unions in a society on the verge of becoming socialist. However, the next twenty years saw a massive struggle for power for the direction of industrial organization. An added complexity to this power struggle was that the left in

Japanese politics had a long history of ideological fragmentation. Because of the divisions, the labour movement lacked overall unity.

As working conditions steadily improved through much of the postwar period, and the material quality of life improved from the 1960s to the 1980s, most Japanese came to believe that through hard work anyone could join the middle-class. Because people's material lives were improving, interest in the political activities of unions became less important and union membership was more or less taken for granted. But with the economic downturn in the early 1990s and as the economy transformed away from manufacturing towards high-tech and service industries, enterprise unions have not adequately responded to the changing needs of the workers. Enterprise unions have been unable and/or unwilling to incorporate a greater number of part-time and non-regular workers that now make up an increasingly important segment of the work force. One response has been that several new forms of unionization (*shingata rōdō kumiai*) have emerged to specifically address the concerns of different groups within the workforce such as non-regular workers, managers and women. The national centres have come to promote unionism for these groups in an attempt to boost unionization rates.

The union movements that I studied ethnographically can be classified as part of these new forms of unionization, specifically community unions. Some of the distinguishing qualities of community unions are that they organize workers geographically, are open primarily to non-regular workers excluded by the enterprise union system and they often partner with various movements seeking social justice. Since community unions overlap their concerns about working conditions with broader

social concerns they also blur the boundary between the labour movement and civil society activism.

Japanese civil society is largely invisible to much of the mainstream society until it suddenly bursts into the public realm in the media or during public marches or demonstrations only to retreat again out of sight. This characteristic of Japanese civil society has been shaped by the history of activism in post World War II Japan, particularly the protest cycles of the 1960s and 1970s when activists learned that the state was often too powerful to confront directly and that the cost of protest was too high. The result has been the development of a protest movement culture operating outside large political institutions and at a distance from the state. These groups are run by a network of committed individuals that support each other through relationships of trust. However, there are divisions between the current wave of youth activism and the older generation of activists from the 1960s and 1970s.

Whereas students led the protest cycle of the 1960s and 1970s, today's protests are being spearheaded by irregularly employed youth. While the protests in the 1960s and 1970s were more militant, today's protests have a more playful quality. One interpretation of current protest models suggests that the socio-economic flexibility characteristic of post-industrial economies carry within them the potential for youth activism. Precarious labour conditions that cause psychological and social instability can lead to an "affective" activism that attempts to protect and heal the wounds inflicted by capitalist societies.

In the next section of the dissertation I present my ethnographic research on four different union movements attempting to organize young irregular workers into

community unions. I adopt a similar approach to that used by Christina Turner (1995) in that I engage the role of protest and conflict as vehicles for understanding how Japanese irregular workers conceptualize their own positions within a democratic industrial society in a period of transition towards a “mature” post-industrial economy. Like Turner I pay careful attention to social processes to illustrate how the workers themselves understand their own acts of acquiescence, accommodation, resistance and protest within Japan’s employment system during this neoliberal moment. In each movement I critically examine how the rhetoric of class is deployed in conjunction with the strategies used to create a sense of class-consciousness among the movements’ members.

## Chapter 5: Dancing in the Streets: Domesticating *Precarity* in the *Tokyo Freeter Union*

### 5.1 Introduction

In the previous chapters I focused on the theoretical, cultural, social, historical and political contexts necessary for understanding the significance of new union movements organizing young irregular workers. In this chapter I present my ethnographic research on the *Furītā Zenpan Rōdō Kumiai* (フリーター全般労働組合) (FZRK), literally the “*Freeter* General Labour Union” (hereafter referred to as the *Tokyo Freeter Union* for simplicity). This chapter traces the contours of a potentially significant shift occurring in conjunction with the changing employment system in Japan; namely attempts to politically mobilize *freeters*. In this chapter I present my ethnographic research on the *Tokyo Freeter Union*, a labour union organized to protect and improve the working conditions of *freeters* and other irregular workers. What I focus on specifically are the strategies of the union to frame the discourse around *freeters* as political through the adoption of the politics of “*precarity*” or the “precarious proletariat.” I trace some of the union’s arguments, strategies and tactics in adopting elements from a global political discourse around economic inequality as they blend them in creative ways with the local context in Japan in an attempt to transform *freeter* identity from marginal workers into political actors. Although attempting to mobilize *freeters* is itself a potentially significant shift in Japan, I also aim to show that attempts to instil class-consciousness in *freeters* is a complex process of negotiation that is sometimes

passionately embraced, other times contested and sometimes even rejected by *freeters* themselves.

The ethnographic information presented here is based upon participant observation research at the union office, their meetings, demonstrations and other public events. I interviewed members and interacted and conversed with event participants. I also collected material they distributed, listened to their public speeches and analyzed them. I received updates on the group's activities through their on-line mailing list, read their on-line blog, and gathered mainstream and alternative media coverage of the group.

## **5.2 The “Sound Demo”**

On May 3, 2008 I attended a demonstration in Tokyo for irregular workers who wished to draw attention to their working conditions and protest against increasing economic inequality. About one thousand young *freeters*, part-timers (*pāto*), temporary workers (*arubaito*), and dispatch workers (*haken*) had gathered. At the center of the demonstration was a flatbed truck outfitted with oversized speakers and turntables, with a DJ playing a relentless stream of dance music. As the demonstration inched along the streets of Tokyo, the truck led an animated parade of protesters through the streets. Some of the youth danced along with the music, others wore costumes, flew flags, or carried placards with clever political statements on them. The organizers of the event called this mixture of popular culture and protest a “sound demo” (*saundo demo*) (サウンドデモ). Part of the reason people had come was to have fun but the event was also far more serious than a simple opportunity for play. The heavy police presence suggested that what was happening might in fact be dangerous.



This sound demo was part of a series of protest events I attended in the spring of 2008 organized in part by the *Tokyo Freeter Union*, in collaboration with a network of other civil society activists. The theme for the event was entitled “May Day 2008, Freedom and Existence: Precariats Multiply and Connect” (*Jiyū to Seizon no Mēdē 2008: Purekariāto wa Zōsyoku/Renketsusuru*) (自由と生存のメーデー 2008 : プレカリアートは増殖／連結する) (See Figure 1).



Figure 1: Advertisement for the 2008 Tokyo Mayday demonstration (Source: *FZRK*). Reproduced with permission.

Prior to the start of the sound demo the organizers had rented out a large room in a community hall in Tokyo's Ogikubo district but the event attracted more people than the organizers expected. Consequently the room was overflowing with people and I was barely able to squeeze in. Inside the room, for an hour and a half, representatives from different groups addressed the crowd about mounting economic inequality under neoliberal policies and their consequences for the group they represented. Labour activists, *freeters*, artists, journalists, disability activists, peace activists, anti-poverty groups, and others took turns laying out their reasons for joining the demonstration. The diversity of views and politics was dizzying at times, but what they all shared was a desire to express their opposition to "*kakusa shakai*" or "disparity society," a neologism used to describe the sense of growing economic inequality since the Heisei recession of the early 1990s. This demonstration was giving voice to the dramatic paradigm shift that appeared to be occurring in Japan with the public discourse breaking with the view of society as monocultural with little internal divergence and stratification into a society that is now becoming increasingly socially divided with sharp class differences and inequalities (Sugimoto 2010). One of the factors driving this shifting perception is the erosion of job stability, once considered a pillar of the Japanese economy.

Once the speeches had ended people poured out of the community hall into the narrow alley in front of the building in anticipation of the main event. The gathering of young *freeters*, flanks of riot police and curious onlookers milling about waiting for the demonstration to begin added to the chaotic and frenetic energy of the scene. One of the lead police officers, seemingly trying to establish his authority and brandishing a long baton, shouted orders at the pick-up driver. The driver, seemingly unfazed by the police,

with an aloof expression on his face, readied the truck to lead the throngs of *freeters* gathering at his bumper into the streets for the planned two-hour march through the streets of Tokyo. Part of the reason for the tension between the police and demonstrators stemmed from the arrests of protestors in previous Mayday sound demonstrations. Soon after everyone left the community hall the sound truck lurched forward and the crowd flowed into the streets. The police scrambled into position. The demonstration had begun (See Figures 2 and 3).



**Figure 2: Truck leading the "sound demo" through the streets of Tokyo (Photo by Robin O'Day)**





**Figure 3: Mayday protesters dance behind the moving "sound truck" while the riot police try to contain the protest (Photo by Robin O'Day).**

### 5.3 *Freeters* as Precariats

Pierre Bourdieu (1999) describes *precarity* as a condition that is now everywhere but often most readily apparent in the conditions of unemployment and exclusion. The *precariat* is a combination of the words “precarious” and “proletariat” and operates as a concept aimed at identifying and imagining the precarious, contingent, and flexible worker as a new kind of political subject with its own forms of collective organization and style of expression (Neilson and Rossiter 2008:52). In Japan, precarity and the precariat (*purekariāto*) (プレカリアート) have been popularized through the writings and activism of Amamiya Karin (2007, 2008), herself a *freeteer* who recounts her own experiences of struggling in Japan’s irregular employment market.

The Tokyo Mayday demonstration described above was in part inspired by the Euro Mayday protests. Euro Mayday was first organized in Milan in 2001 by a collective

of activists which included members of a social center, a radical trade union and a group of self-organized precarious workers (Matoni and Doerr 2007:131). The event was organized as an annual day of action against “*precarity*.” In 2006, over 300,000 people were mobilized in over 20 European cities around the issue. The Euro Mayday movement seeks to draw attention to the experiences of workers such as migrants, part-timers, contract workers and others that fall outside the traditional reach of organized labour. Central to the Euro Mayday parade is the use of art through posters, postcards and other visual creations as a way to subvert mainstream popular culture.

In the days leading up to the Mayday 2008 demonstration in Tokyo, two of the members from the *Tokyo Freeter Union* posted a video on the Euro Mayday blog (in English) introducing their union and the Mayday protests in Tokyo to European activists. One of the members, identifying himself as “Noiz,”<sup>6</sup> explained his desire to bring Euro Mayday and Tokyo Mayday together in solidarity (See Figure 4).

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<sup>6</sup> This is not a pseudonym. He identifies himself as “Noiz” on the video. However, this is not his “real” name.

**EuroMayDay**  
EuroMayDay blog

29 Apr **Freeters Union - Organizing the Precariats in Japan**  
in mayday 2008

Freeters is a compound of 自由 (free) in English and the German 半日労働者 (half-day worker). It is a neologism used in the everyday life of today's Japan, where the once promised life-long employment for the entire nation is a story of the Fordist (or Toyota-ist) past, and the post-war slogan of building a middle class dominant society is buried under the debris of omnipresent construction sites. It means those who are forced to earn their livelihoods permanently by odd jobs, precisely what we nowadays call the precariat.

**Message to EuroMayDay**

We're organizing a "Freedom and Survival MaydayDemo" here in Tokyo too,

YouTube

In Japan the majority of young people are moving from one temporary job to another, without much prospect for ever grabbing a permanent position, and this includes even most university graduates who once were thought destined to be national leaders. Meanwhile homeless people, mostly over middle-aged men who lost their jobs after the mid 1990s recession, are sleeping under blue tarps extemporaneously installed in the parks, next to shopping malls, and on highways, for one can find them prefer to spend

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= March 2010  
= February 2010  
= January 2010

**Figure 4: On-line post by members of the *Tokyo Freeter Union* on the Euro Mayday blog.** (Source: [www.euromayday.org/blog/?p=1235](http://www.euromayday.org/blog/?p=1235)) (FZRK 2008). Reproduced with permission.

Along with the video, they also included a written statement in which they explained their understanding of how the experiences of Japanese *freeters* resonate with European precariats. The following excerpt from the blog entry entitled “Freeters’ Union – Organizing the Precariats in Japan” explains that:

Freeters is a neologism used in the everyday life of today's Japan, where the once promised life-long employment for the entire nation is a story of the Fordist (or Toyota-ist) past...It means those who are forced to earn their livelihoods permanently by odd jobs, *precisely what we nowadays call the precariat*...What the members share as a principle is anti-neoliberalism and ultimately anti-capitalism. This position derived from a new cultural and political identity that grew out of the young generation since the early to mid 1990s, the time of the burst bubble. In postwar Japan, a set of ideals—graduating from a good university, becoming an executive, marrying at an early age, buying a car and house in the suburbs, having two children, and so on—was imposed on the whole nation. These achievements assumed the measure for the social hierarchy. Today in the post-recession climate, they have nothing but the absurd and cruel fetters for the youth. Thus the new generation, the generation of freeters, inexorably questions the authenticity of the value system within which they have been judged and marginalized. By criticizing the value system, their politics and culture look for a way to get out of it. (FZRK 2008) [emphasis added]

In the on-line post the members of the *Tokyo Freeter Union* explicitly make the argument that Japanese *freeters* are precariats. They do so by providing their own alternative reading of the historical, political and economic reasons for why they have become *freeters* in post-industrial Japan. The on-line post frames the experiences of Japanese *freeters* as Japan's version of the precariat. By extension, the members of the *Tokyo Freeter Union* link *freeter* identity to the associated global critique of neoliberal capitalism in which the notion of the precariat is embedded. This bold type of political framing of *freeters* by the *Tokyo Freeter Union* has led some to proclaim that the group represents the vanguard of the Japanese labour movement (Guillemet 2009).

However, I suggest that accepting the argument that *freeters* are precariats at face value ignores a more complex cultural negotiation necessary to frame the *freeter* as a political actor. The aim of this chapter is to explore the process of making *freeter* identity political through the adoption of the politics of “precarity.” Drawing upon Arjun Appadurai's (1996:32) observation that it is critical to pay attention to how global cultural flows are “indigenized” as they move from various metropolises into new



societies, I trace some of the ways the members of the *Tokyo Freeter Union* are borrowing elements from a global political discourse focused on economic inequality but are combining them in creative ways with the local context in Japan. Following Millie Creighton's (1991, 1992) observation that foreign ideas are able to be domesticated in Japan by creating meanings for them that are consistent within the existing fabric of Japanese society, I aim to show how the members of the *Tokyo Freeter Union* are adopting and adapting the global politics of *precarity* by effectively linking them with the economic and social marginalization experienced by Japanese *freeters*. To explain my position, I now turn to additional ethnographic descriptions of the union's activities.

#### **5.4 The *Freeter* Union**

Only a short walk from the imposing twin towers of the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Offices (*Tochō*) (都庁) and across Shinjuku Central Park sits a non-descript low-rise office building nestled amongst a mixture of residential apartment blocks and other small commercial buildings. On the second floor, the space is occupied by the Tokyo Managers' Union, a volunteer based white-collar labour union that was formed in 1993. Just before the entrance to the main union office, and off to the side, there is a long narrow hallway that leads to a backroom which is the shared "office" of the *Tokyo Freeter Union*, and the *Contract (haken) Worker's Union*. The *Tokyo Freeter Union's* space is simply a rather crowded desk in the corner of the room. Piles of materials and a computer jostle for space at the work desk. Hanging above the desk is a crowded shelving unit with an abundance of materials including folded up protest banners and a megaphone.

On the homepage of the *Tokyo Freeter Union* website they describe the purpose of the union in the following way:

The *Tokyo Freeter Union* is a general union that anyone can join including *freeters*, part-timers, temporary, full-time, contract, and non-regular workers. Please contact us if you are having trouble at work. Through the revival of union power, we will protect the rights of workers.

Consult us before you leave your job for any of the following reasons; layoffs, long working hours, low wages, industrial accidents, unpaid wages, wage cuts, no paid leave, relocation, sexual harassment, and power harassment. We can help. (FZRK, 2010)

This short explanation is followed up with their telephone, fax, and e-mail information, a map to access their office and their telephone hotline consultation hours. The *Tokyo Freeter Union* website is full of information aimed at helping all types of Japan's irregular workforce. The website includes such information as workers' legal rights, copies of their e-mail magazine, an on-line blog, a list of their activities, media coverage, links to other similar unions, social movements and political events (See Figure 5). Every day after work, members of the union volunteer to answer phone calls from distressed workers seeking help.



# PAFF

PART-TIMER, ARBEITER,  
FREETER & FOREIGN WORKER...

[パフ]

すべての非正規労働者に一人前の賃金を!

トップページ: フリーター全般労組

お知らせ

PAFFとは?

フリーター全般労組

組合なら解決できる

活動報告

フリーター法律知識

討論紙: 地球公論

メールマガジン

メディア報道

規約・綱領

労組ブログ

労働相談

活動

資料

レビュー

リンク

## フリーター全般労働組合



フリーター全般労組

**お知らせ**

＊『フリーター全般労働組合10共同代表ごあいさつ』を掲載しました。  
(2010/08/29)

＊ホットライン  
毎週月曜日(19時-22時)、土曜日(12時-15時)です。

フリーター全般労働組合は、フリーター(アルバイト)・パート・派遣・契約・正社員問わず、誰でも、一人でも加入できる労働組合です。職場での悩み、納得いかないことなど何でもご相談ください。非正規雇用だって同じ労働者。組合に集る仲間の力で、労働者としての権利を守っていきましょう。フライヤー-0802.pdf

過剰勤務・強要、長時間労働、低賃金、労働災害、賃金未払い、時給の切り下げ、有給休暇の取得妨害、配置転換、セクハラ、パワハラ・・・なんじゃこりゃ!!! と思ったら、辞める前にまず相談。手はあります!

★2010年8月16日から新事務所に移転します。電話番号は変わりません!

〒160-0023 東京都渋谷区代々木4-29-4西新宿ミノシマビル2階  
電話: 03-3373-0180 F A X: 03-3373-0184

京王線・初台駅から徒歩5分 小田急線・参宮橋駅から徒歩8分 JR代々木駅から徒歩15分



Figure 5: Homepage of the Tokyo Freeter Union (Source: [www.freeter-union.org/union/](http://www.freeter-union.org/union/)) (FZRK 2010). Reproduced with permission.

## 5.5 History of the Union

During my interview with Tanaka Hiro<sup>7</sup>, the Vice Head of the Executive Committee of the *Tokyo Freeter Union* at their office in the Shinjuku ward of Tokyo in September 2008, he explained to me that the origins of the union could be traced back to August 2004. Then it was a group of university students from Hosei University in Tokyo studying labour issues who were interested in the working conditions of part-timers, *freeters*, foreign workers and others in non-full time employment in Japan. Out of this study group they formed a group called *PAFF* (Part-timer, *Arubaito*, *Freeter*, and Foreign Worker) (See Figure 6).



**Figure 6: Part-time, *Arubaito*, *Freeter* and Foreign Worker Logo:** (Source: [www.freeter-union.org/union/](http://www.freeter-union.org/union/)) (FZRK 2010). Reproduced with permission.

The original motivation for establishing *PAFF* came from the many conversations the students were having with each other about the tough labour conditions in Japan. Through their discussions they began to see many parallels between the challenges faced by the marginal workers they were studying and their own difficulties as students. The

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<sup>7</sup> This is a pseudonym. Tanaka had been previously arrested at the first sound demo he attended. Because of the arrest I have used a pseudonym to help protect his identity.

students themselves were feeling squeezed in trying to both study and pay their tuition fees.

One of the issues that emerged during their many conversations was the sense that they were unable to fully concentrate on their studies because of their educational costs. In order to pay their tuition, many of the students needed to work part-time, take on student loans, or try to earn scholarships. They began to ask themselves whether they were really students or just workers. During their discussions they decided that they wanted to try to do something to improve the situation.

The members of *PAFF* came up with the idea to organize a union. They began talking about creating a labour union in April 2004. They organized their first public demonstration a month later in May. They established the union three months later in August. The *Tokyo Freeter Union* grew out of the *PAFF* organization, but the creation of the union soon produced divisions and arguments between the members. There were disagreements about the placement of the *freeter* union within the *PAFF* organization resulting in many of the original members leaving the organization. At the time of my fieldwork only two original members from *PAFF* remained as members in the union and even the remaining members were less involved than they used to be.

During my research, the union claimed approximately one hundred and twenty members. They estimated that nearly two thirds of the members were men, although the head of the union is a woman. The bulk of the members are in their twenties and thirties, although they do have a few members that are older. They all have different kinds of employment arrangements. Some of the members do have full-time jobs but the majority

of members are in various forms of irregular employment as *freeters*, part-timers, temporary workers or contract workers.

Monthly membership fees support the union. They also sometimes receive money from successful negotiations with companies over unfair dismissals. When they help workers negotiate with companies, and win, they occasionally receive compensation. From the compensation the workers receive, the union asks them to donate a certain portion of the money to the *freeter* union. They also solicit donations, but the amount they receive from donations is actually quite small. They do not receive any financial support from any other larger union organizations, like RENGO (Japanese Trade Union Confederation).<sup>8</sup> However, they do receive some indirect support from the Manager's Union which provides them with some office space and which is available to provide advice when asked.

## **5.6 Place, Affect and Anomie in the *Tokyo Freeter Union***

One of the handouts I picked up at an event spelled out the group's vision for what they see as the ultimate purpose of their organization. Figure 7 is a copy of the handout. My translation follows.

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<sup>8</sup> In fact, when I asked whether the union receives any financial support from RENGO, my question was met with a sneer, and a response that they did not get anything from "them."

# FZRK フリーター全般労働組合

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Web: <http://freeter-union.org/union/> Log: [http://d.hatena.ne.jp/spiders\\_nest/](http://d.hatena.ne.jp/spiders_nest/)

生存への責任が放棄された社会で、いまや生は際限のない競争の果てに与えられる不安定な褒賞と化した。フリーターなど非正規雇用労働者だけでなく、失業者、野宿者、周縁労働者として移入される外国人、農民、零細自営業者、請負仕事をする人々が、法的、経済的、社会的排除の中でこの変化に直面している。安定しているとされてきた正社員、公務労働従事者などもこの変化から逃れることはできない。彼らはつねに貧困への転落に脅けつづけられ、際限のない労働強化と過労死に向き合わされている。

しかし生きることは、このような理不尽に耐えることではない。

だから多くの人々が、生を毀損するすべての制度・思潮を拒絶する潔さと気概とを頼りにして、そこここに結び目を作り始めている。フリーター労組はそのような人々が、世界を這いまわり不穏に出現するための結び目のひとつである。

私たちは不安定な生を強いられるすべての人々が、理不尽な扱いに反撃する手がかりとしてありたい。フリーター労組は不当に敢然と抗議し、抗議する人を孤立させない。

2008 年 2 月

フリーター全般労働組合

【最近の解決事例】歯科医院（アルバイト・解雇）／地域物産の販売店（アルバイト・賃金未払い）／ネットワークビジネス（正社員・解雇）／医療機関夜間受付（派遣・解雇）／飲食店（アルバイト・解雇、深夜の割増賃金未払い）／予備校（講師・雇止め）／宝飾チェーン（アルバイト・解雇）／建設会社（アルバイト・解雇・賃金未払い）／某大手製パン会社（正社員・待遇改善問題）／小売店（アルバイト・解雇・違法な賃金控除）／観光業（正社員・残業代未払い）etc.

〒160-0023 東京都新宿区西新宿 4-16-13 MK ビル 2 階

（都営大江戸線西新宿 5 丁目駅から徒歩 3 分）

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郵便振替: 00110-6-317603（口座名: フリーター全般労働組合）

私たちが本当に持たないものは、実のところたかだか貯蓄くらいのものではない。いまこの瞬間も、私たちは尽きることのない声と知恵と希望と共にある。

Figure 7: The Tokyo Freeter Union Mission Statement (Source: FZRK). Reproduced with permission.

Their mission statement reads:

In this society the responsibility for survival has been abandoned. Life has become just an unstable prize that is given to you after endless competition. All kinds of different people are facing this change including *freeters*, part-timers, and the unemployed, the homeless, foreign seasonal workers, farmers, small business owners, and contract workers. They are facing this change in a reality in which they are excluded legally, economically and socially. Even full-time employees and public employees who used to be stable cannot escape this change either. They are all constantly threatened by the possibility of falling into poverty. They are forced to work so hard that they even face death from overwork.

But living should not be the same thing as enduring this kind of unreasonable situation.

Therefore, many people are starting to connect with each other to reject this kind of system that hurts our lives. The *Tokyo Freeter Union* is one of these connections where people can connect while struggling in this world. We would like to be the tool to fight back for all people who are mistreated and forced to live unstable lives. The *Tokyo Freeter Union* will never leave those people alone who try to fight against this kind of treatment.

The short statement down the right hand column of the handout reads:

What we do not have right now is money, but we have our voices, knowledge, and hope. So we are okay.

Peeling back the layer of the mission statement, in my conversation with Tanaka, he explained that the goals expressed on the website and in the various materials they produce are pretty grand. They know that these goals are impossible to achieve and that they are really an ideal dream of what the members would like. The statements serve the purpose of providing a vision for the organization. On a more personal level, Tanaka explained that what he communicates to people who seek out their organization is as follows:

...the first message we have for *freeters* and part-timers is that they tend to think it is their fault that they have this hard situation. They think they are incompetent



or losers and that is why they suffer. But we are trying to tell them that it is not really you, it is the society. That is one message that we are trying to give. The other message is; because they think it is their fault, they don't speak up. So we are encouraging them to speak up because nothing is going to change if they don't say anything. These are the two core messages we are telling people.

Tanaka explained that many *freeters* who approach the union do so with a feeling that the difficulties they face in their working lives are a reflection of their own personal failures. This resonates with Mary Brinton's (2011:183) observation that many young Japanese tend to internalize their struggles in the labour market. Understanding that this is a barrier for organizing *freeters*, the members of the *Tokyo Freeter Union* are attempting to re-frame *freeters*' labour struggles from the common sentiment that the fault lies in the individual to the message that the fault lies within Japanese society, or at least in the neo-liberal turn in Japanese society.

Moreover, members of the *Tokyo Freeter Union* see their organization as providing something more than just a group that simply negotiates with companies about their members' working conditions or salaries. They see themselves as a group of people helping each other. Tanaka expressed to me that relationships and support among the members are really the core of the union when he said:

...I would like to make this group be about helping each other, not just about negotiating with companies. This is because negotiations with companies can only be done if there is a clear mistreatment of the worker by the company, then we can go and negotiate with the company. But most of the time the problems that the workers are having are complex and it is not clear exactly what the problems are. People come to us and tell us that they feel isolated, or they are not doing well, but don't know why. Most of the time when they are on the edge, if they have been fired, or if they are not doing well, it is easy to identify the problem and do something about it, but I think most of the time it is not clear. They just feel isolated, or they just feel that their life is just hard. So when they are feeling like that, this place can be a place where they can come and just talk and the members can just support each other. That is the basic principle of the

union. So, I would like to make this union a place that they can come and try to support each other in many ways beyond the negotiation part.

Attention to the nurturing of human relationships within the union is one of the qualities that the members of the *Tokyo Freeter Union* believe distinguishes them from more traditional labour unions whose primary function is to engage in collective bargaining on behalf of their members. Similar to Anne Allison's (2009) argument that youth protests in Japan are the product of "affective activism" that attempt to care for the wounds youth have received in a capitalist society where the reserves of care have apparently run out, it is notable that it is the search for emotional connection that Tanaka sees as the driving impulse to create the union. An emphasis on the affective qualities embedded in the activities of the union was evident when Tanaka further explained to me that he saw the union as a place to offer emotional support. If members are feeling sad, isolated, or angry they can come to the union office and talk with someone. This is why some of the members consider the *Tokyo Freeter Union* as a '*Seizon no Kumiai*' or a "survival union."

The term "*seizon*" can be translated as "survival" but it also carries with it the sense of "existence." It is an important concept for understanding the *Tokyo Freeter Union*. The notion of "survival" frequently surfaced when members of the *Tokyo Freeter Union* expressed how difficult it was to simply survive as *freeters*. The challenge of surviving was in part about economics, but the critique went beyond low wages to their general sense of well-being, in part rooted in a lack of social relationships. This is why "survival" was one of the themes of the 2008 May Day Protest along with "*Jiyu*" or

“freedom.” Tanaka explained how the notion of “survival” fits into the fabric of the union when he explained that:

We are trying to make the union a place where we can support each other, but not just support in terms of labour, but also support for each other as human beings. Survival as a human being includes labour of course, but there is also a cultural aspect and a social aspect. It is about everything, not just about labour.

The popular image of *freeters* in Japan often emphasizes their sense of freedom. This is commonly understood because *freeters* are considered to be “free” from the duties and obligations associated with full-time work that are embedded within complex networks of social relationships. Those having to negotiate working relationships on a daily basis often appear to look upon *freeters*’ sense of freedom enviously, but what is becoming clear is that there are also negative social consequences to having few social obligations through one’s workplace. The result is that many *freeters* feel isolated and disconnected, what can also be described as a profound sense of *anomie* (Durkheim 1984 [1893]).

The *Tokyo Freeter Union* aims to help *freeters* who feel socially isolated. Tanaka explained how he saw the role of the *Tokyo Freeter Union* filling a need to support marginal workers in Japanese society by drawing upon two recent news events, the Akihabara Incident, and the Kamagasaki Riot. Both events had just recently occurred and they were being seriously discussed in the activist circles I was moving in.

The shock of the Akihabara Incident was still fresh in everyone’s minds. On Sunday June 8, 2008 a twenty-five-year-old dispatch worker at an automobile factory in Shizuoka prefecture went on a murderous rampage in Tokyo (Asahi 2008a). Kato Tomohiro drove a rental truck into a crowd of weekend shoppers in Tokyo’s Akihabara

district.<sup>9</sup> He drove the truck at high speed into a crowded pedestrian walkway killing and injuring people in his way before leaping out of the truck to stab and slash people indiscriminately with a knife. When it was all over, he had killed seven people and seriously injured another ten before being overcome by police officers who managed to tackle him to the ground and subdue him. During police interrogation Kato said that his motivation for the attack stemmed from the instability of his job and strained family relationships. Kato did not get along with his parents and rarely returned to his family home in Aomori prefecture. He claimed that his parents were strict and forced him to study. He was accepted to a top local high school, but he did not perform well there. He was quoted by police as saying that “My life went well until I entered high school...After that, it did not go as I wanted” (Asahi 2008b). He had become severely frustrated at work and the factory had informed the dispatch workers that many would have to quit soon. Kato was later told that he could stay, but he got into an altercation about a missing uniform and went home three days before the attack.

In contrast to the high profile nature of the Akihabara Incident, the 2008 Kamagasaki Riot hardly made a ripple in the public’s consciousness and the mainstream media reports of it were sparse. The alternative media sources that activists relied upon were the main sources in communicating the story. The riot took place in Osaka’s infamous Kamagasaki district, a marginal space that is home to Japan’s largest day-labourer population. Kamagasaki also has a history of social unrest although this was apparently the first riot in eighteen years. After a riot in 1961 the city took steps to

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<sup>9</sup> Akihabara is Tokyo’s electronic district, and has become the cultural engine of Japan’s video game and comic book culture. It is the center of *Otaku* or “geek” culture in Japan. Perhaps the association of Akihabara as a place of youth, fantasy and play made the violence even more shocking.

change the name of the area to Nishinari in an attempt to curb the association of the place with defiance. The incident in question occurred on Thursday, June 12, 2008, when police detained and questioned a 54 year-old unemployed man on suspicion that he was causing a disturbance at a local restaurant (Mainichi Shimbun 2008). Activists claim this tactic was part of a larger sweep by police authorities cracking down before the G8 finance ministers' meeting being held in Japan later in the summer. The man claims police tortured him during their interrogation. After he was released, a large angry mob of about two hundred day labourers descended upon the police station throwing cans, stones and bicycles at the building. The riot lasted into the early hours of Saturday morning resulting in ten more arrests and reports of slight injuries (Asahi 2008c).

Making reference to these two incidents, Tanaka explained to me what role he sees the *Tokyo Freeter Union* filling in contemporary Japan. He explained:

You know the Akihabara incident? The young guy Kato-kun<sup>10</sup> is comparable to the Kamagasaki riot. Kato-kun was having a problem with work so he decided to rent a truck. His original plan was to shut down the factory where he worked because he was angry with the company and he wanted to cause the factory trouble. He told other coworkers about his plan to disrupt the factory, but nobody wanted to join him, so instead he rented a truck and drove to Akihabara and murdered all those people. Whereas in the Kamagasaki case one guy was mistreated by the police and everyone got angry and everyone went to the police and did a huge riot for this one guy. But Kato didn't have any support like the guy did in Kamagasaki. He didn't have any social network or support. So Kato-kun didn't have anyone he could talk to and if this *Freeter Union* was there for him and he told us that he wanted to shut down the factory we could support his idea and at least talk to him. I think Kato-kun's problem was that he didn't have any social support. So I hope that we can have many different little unions to help out guys like Kato-kun.

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<sup>10</sup> “*Kun*” (-君) is a gendered and respectful term of endearment that is used by attaching it to the name of someone close to you. In contrast, “*San*” (さん) is more formal. Tanaka's use of “*Kun*” in reference to Kato, someone he has never met, was interesting as he was deliberately extending a gentle and inclusive sentiment towards someone who had just committed a shocking and horrific crime.

Tanaka's observation about the increasing social isolation of Japan's new generation of temporary workers like *freeters* in contrast to the experiences of day labourers points to a shift in the organization of Japan's temporary workforce. In his ethnography on Japanese day labourers, Tom Gill (2001) made a similar point. Gill saw how the social organization of marginal workers in Japan was shifting away from day labourer work organized around the physical spaces of the neighbourhoods (*yoseba*) to *freeter* work that was more dispersed. He was concerned about the ability of *freeters* to organize themselves since they are more spatially dispersed and fragmented than day labourers. He explained that in contrast to the *yoseba*, or casual labour markets, like Kamagasaki, where men live and congregate to get work, *freeters* do not gather in the same place. *Freeters* find employment from a variety of sources including employment magazines, from the pages of sports newspapers and from the Internet. Gill expressed concern about what the consequences might be if marginal workers no longer have any sense of physical community suggesting that it could undermine the potential for solidarity and rebellion (Gill 2001:198). It is significantly telling that Tanaka contrasted the Akihabara Incident and the Kamagasaki Riot in terms of the level of social support available to each marginal worker. Both Gill and Tanaka recognize the importance of social connection for Japan's marginal workers. Even the *yoseba* (day labourer markets), despite the presence of violence, alcoholism, homelessness, and crime still provide an opportunity for social involvement that seems preferable to the potential social isolation of being a *freeter*.

## 5.7 Creating *Freeter* Class-Consciousness

While the *Tokyo Freeter Union* offers support to those who feel isolated it is important to recognize that such support is not politically neutral. There is an effort to instil a form of class-consciousness both within its membership and among those that join its events. The statement on the Euro Mayday blog that *freeters* are precariats masks a more complex and subtle negotiation involved in creating a sense of class-consciousness amongst *freeters*. However, class-consciousness is not passively received by *freeters* themselves. Often it is negotiated, contested and sometimes rejected. In the next section I draw attention to several different examples.

### 5.7.1. What's in a Name?

I came to learn that calling the organization a “*freeter union*” was a deliberate choice. Since *freeters* had come to be associated with laziness and other negative qualities, the members felt a *freeter union* would have shock value. The name was chosen because they wanted to change the image of how people think about *freeters* in Japan. To an extent I think the organizers were correct. Often when I explained to Japanese people, outside of my sphere of research, that I was doing fieldwork amongst *freeter unions* I often received curious looks and questions about whether such unions actually existed.

However, people do not always respond positively to the idea of a *freeter union*. For instance, the *Tokyo Freeter Union* shares office space with the Contract (*haken*) Worker's Union. In fact, their desks are next to each other. When people come to the

office to seek labour consultation for the first time, they are asked whether they would prefer to speak with someone from the *Haken Union*, or someone from the *Freeter Union*. What the members of the *Tokyo Freeter Union* have noticed is that people who have a lot of pride in what they do for a living usually choose to speak with someone at the *Contract Union*. They think this is because the word “*freeter*” has such a negative connotation. People who take their work seriously may not want to think of themselves as “*freeters*.” In reality, the representatives from the *Freeter Union* and the *Contract Union* do not see much difference between these types of workers, nor is there much difference in the advice that they can give them since they are both irregular workers.

#### **5.7.2. Gasoline Stand Union**

Another example of the complicated nature of instilling class-consciousness in *freeters* is the case of a group of gas station attendants that approached the *Tokyo Freeter Union* seeking help when they found out they were going to lose their jobs. The gasoline station where they worked was transitioning from full-service into self-service. The management had informed the full-time employees that they were going to eliminate the part-time employees but did not share this information with the part-time employees themselves. The management began by gradually scaling back on their working hours until eventually the company gave the order to fire them.

The young temporary employees did not know what to do. They had been simply doing their jobs and following the orders of their superiors. They assumed if they just cooperated and did their jobs everything would be fine and they would be able to continue to work. When they realized they were going to be fired they began to try to



figure out how to keep their jobs but the part-time workers had no idea what they could do. As Tanaka put it to me, when the members of the gasoline station came to the *Tokyo Freeter Union* “they didn’t know what to do, they didn’t know what they could do, nobody told them what they could do, or what rights they had or what the company had.”



**Figure 8: Members of the *Gasoline Stand Union* carry their banner during the 2008 Mayday demonstration (Photo by Robin O'Day)**

The *Tokyo Freeter Union* helped the gasoline station workers organize their own labour union (See Figure 8). They then helped the members of the new “Gasoline Stand Union” (*Gasorin Sutando Yunion*) (ガソリンスタンドユニオン) enter into negotiations with the company. As it was described to me, the part-time workers never imagined that they could talk to the company’s managers and express their opinions to them. To the

surprise of the gasoline station workers, they actually forced the gasoline company to reverse their order to fire them.

Inspired by their victory, and emboldened by their new found class-consciousness, the members of the Gasoline Stand Union prepared themselves for what they felt would be a rapid expansion of their union. As news of their victory spread, they anticipated that thousands of part-time workers from gasoline stations throughout Japan would join their union. They felt that it would be easy for all temporary workers at gasoline stands to see the problems with the job as they now understood the problem to be. They seemed to believe that their case would help make their issue bigger and create momentum for others to join them. However, no other part-time workers joined their union. The frustration the *Gasoline Stand Union* members experienced at not being able to attract anyone else to their union eventually led all of the members to quit their jobs at the gas station despite having forced the company to take them back. Even with such a mixed result, the members of the *Tokyo Freeter Union* still felt the outcome of the case was not a total loss. As Tanaka explained to me, “Well the result is the result, that’s what it is. But more than the result, I think that through this union those young guys got really active in labour issues and they fought for themselves.”

### **5.7.3. Message of the Sound Demo**

Tension also existed around the organization of the sound demonstrations and whether a strong political message should be attached to the event (See Figure 9). I attended a meeting after the 2008 Mayday demonstration that was organized to discuss the outcome of the event. At the meeting some people expressed frustration at the

limitations of the Sound Demo. Some of the members wanted to use the demonstration to communicate a stronger political message to the public about inequality. Although the *Tokyo Freeter Union* was involved in putting out a general call for volunteers to organize the event, they let anyone who was interested in playing an active role join the organizing committee. Since the organizing committee was comprised of people from a variety of backgrounds, they had a difficult time agreeing on any ideological message beyond one of trying to have “fun.” Getting fun out of the event is something that everyone can generally agree upon. “Fun” became central to the sound demo because it is something many of the participants lack in their ordinary lives. Yet, some participants at the meeting expressed their frustration that “fun” is simply not enough. They want to see a stronger political message but could come to a consensus on the message.



**Figure 9: Members of the *Tokyo Freeter Union* speak at the 2009 Mayday demonstration (Photo by Robin O'Day)**

#### 5.7.4. Public Spectacles

In addition to the sound demonstrations, members of the *Tokyo Freeter Union* also organize other social and cultural events. For example, the *Tokyo Freeter Union* organized a series of different events under the banner “Anti-War and Resistance Festival 2008” (*Hansen to Teikō no Matsuri <Fesuta> 08*) (反戦と抵抗の祭り<フェスタ>08). I received word of the event through their e-mail list. As part of the event I was invited to join what they were calling “A Reality Tour.” The message that arrived in my inbox had a playful and facetious tone to it. Part of the message is translated as follows:

This is the “Reality Tour” Notification.  
The *Tokyo Freeter Union* is proposing a group negotiation with Prime Minister Aso.  
Everyone please come.

The Message continued:

Reality Tour  
--- #2: What is JPN¥6.2 billion like? Look at Prime Minister Aso’s House ---  
  
Our destination this time for the second tour is Prime Minister Aso’s House who was “properly” assigned to be our Prime Minister. He is a Prime Minister who has ordered ten tailored suits per year, at JPN¥300,000<sup>11</sup> per suit, for the last 45 years....The land alone that his mansion sits on is valued at JPN¥6.2. billion.<sup>12</sup> Let’s go and take a look at his house since he is part of the “magnificent group” (of elite).

On the day of the event, about forty people turned up in front of Shibuya Station for the tour. The plan was to gather and collectively make their way to the residence located 10 to 15 minutes walk from Shibuya Station. Honda-san<sup>13</sup>, the organizer and tour leader,

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<sup>11</sup> JPY¥300,000 was equivalent to approximately US\$3210 at the time.

<sup>12</sup> JPY¥6,200,000,000 was equivalent to approximately US\$66,340,000 at the time.

<sup>13</sup> This is a pseudonym.

began by holding up an event poster while imploring the general public passing by to join in their march (See Figure 10). This was not unusual since political activists of all kinds in Japan often campaign in front of train stations, particularly busy ones like Shibuya station, because of the high volume of pedestrian traffic. Honda-san began by making reference to the wasteful excesses of Prime Minister Aso and pointed to his family wealth and elite status. He then contrasted the Prime Minister's wealth and privilege with the poverty facing *freeters*. He encouraged the public to come and see the disparity of wealth between the Prime Minister and ordinary people by going together to look at his estate as a visible symbol of inequality in Japan. However, the group did not get very far. As they began to walk, the police moved in and arrested three of the members of the *Tokyo Freeter Union*, thus bringing the event to an abrupt end (See Figures 10 and 11).





Figure 10: A member of the *Tokyo Freeter Union* holds up a poster for the "Reality Tour" in front of Shibuya Station (Source: YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Uw701vV15U>). Reproduced with permission.



**Figure 11: A member of the *Tokyo Freeter Union* is arrested during the "Reality Tour" (Source: YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Uw701vV15U>). Reproduced with permission.**

Other members of the *Tokyo Freeter Union* were video taping the event and quickly posted the footage of the arrest on YouTube. The footage quickly went viral and attracted over 180,000 hits (McNeill 2009). The public reaction was overwhelmingly supportive of the *freeters* and critical of the police. The members of the *Tokyo Freeter Union* were arrested for violating the public safety ordinance and obstructing official duties but they were eventually released from police custody (Asahi Shimbun 2008d). However, because of the video, the incident did become an embarrassment to the police. The arrests even led to some harsh questioning by politicians in the Diet (the name for the Japanese Parliament). Although the tour never made it to Prime Minister Aso's house,

the event attracted a significant amount of attention to the activities of the *Tokyo Freeter Union* and their efforts to politicize the plight of *freeters*.

Although it is hard to measure what impact this event had on the class-consciousness of Japanese *freeters* in general, there is no denying that the message of the “Reality Tour”, that massive economic gaps exist between the political leaders and those on the bottom of the employment system, reached a significantly wider audience than one might reasonably expect a few dozen *freeters* could reach. The *Tokyo Freeter Union* has been quite successful at attracting public attention. These types of events, and the publicity they attracted, were part of how the *Tokyo Freeter Union* managed to exercise some influence over the general discourse about Japan’s emerging “unequal society” (*Kakusa Shakai*) and the place of *freeters* in it.

## 5.7 Conclusion

The aim of this chapter has been to draw attention to a union movement that has been attempting to re-frame *freeter* identity as political. Specifically, I explored some of the strategies that the members of the union attempt to use in order to turn *freeters* into precariats, including union organizing, demonstrations and public spectacles. Members of the union constructed their argument by drawing parallels between the economic and social exclusion *freeters* and other irregular workers have experienced since the early 1990s with the political concept of precarity that frames the precarious, contingent and flexible worker as a new kind of political subject.

In addition to paying attention to how the *Tokyo Freeter Union* was constructing its political and ideological arguments about the place of *freeters* within Japanese society,



I also drew attention to how the union sought to offer their members a space in which to seek support if they were feeling alone or isolated. The union was attempting to offer a place that would contribute to their members' "survival." Survival was conceived broadly to include not only monetary compensation, but also social and psychological support. The support the union offered was situated in an organization that was attempting to politicize and mobilize young irregular workers. The strategies used to instill a sense of class-consciousness included various events that reinforced the message that *freeters* are precariats. However, the participants in the activities of the *Tokyo Freeter Union* were not simply passive recipients, but also negotiated and contested the political message of the union.

At the beginning of the chapter I drew attention to how members of the *Freeter Union* had posted a statement on the *Euro Mayday* blog in which they provided a radical re-framing of Japanese *freeters* as precariats. For some *freeters* involved in the activities of the union, like the members who created the message on the Euro Mayday blog, Tanaka, and Honda who organized the "Reality Tour," were all articulating clear messages that *freeters* are political. However, instilling class-consciousness and mobilizing *freeters* is more easily said than done. Although creating a "*freeter*" union was intended to draw public attention to the plight and political potentiality of *freeters*, not all irregular workers want to identify themselves as *freeters* because of the negative associations that accompany the term. As such, some *freeters* avoid interacting with the union since they do not want to identify themselves as *freeters*. Nor are all *freeters* who join the union's events willing to accept a strong political association with being a *freeter* as the debates about the message of the sound demo suggest. Even when class-

consciousness was “awakened” in the members of the *Gasoline Stand Union*, they soon became frustrated with their own limitations in attracting other members to the movement. Their frustration led them to quit the very jobs they fought so hard to initially protect. Yet, despite the complexities of transforming *freeters* into precariats, events like the sound demos and “reality tour” to then Prime Minister Aso’s house have been quite successful in attracting public attention to the political potential of being a *freeteer*.

In the next chapter, I provide an ethnographic description of another *freeteer* union based in the city of Fukuoka. While the general political orientation is similar to the *Tokyo Freeter Union*, I provide a closer examination of how the union movement attempts to create an alternative space to support the needs of its members. In so doing, I attempt to provide an additional perspective on how *freeteer* identity is being cast as political.

## Chapter 6: Creating an Alternative Place in the *Freeter Union Fukuoka*

### 6.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter I described some of the strategies that the *Tokyo Freeter Union* was using to frame *freeter* as a political identity by connecting it to the activist discourse of *precarity*. In this chapter I turn to my ethnographic description of the *Freeter Union Fukuoka*, another union attempting to organize *freeters* and other irregular workers. While in the last chapter I focused more on the external activities of the union, in this chapter I narrow my ethnographic lens to take a closer look inside this *freeter* union to show how the group provides their members with an alternative space to find support and a sense of belonging. In this chapter, I provide an overview of the union by describing its origins, membership, activities and purposes. I also explore the group's philosophical orientation and where they locate their politics through some of the personal narratives of the members. In so doing, my aim is to provide another example of a labour union for *freeter* and other irregularly employed youth that is actively seeking to reshape the discourses about *freeter* and challenge an employment and economic system that many of the members feels is taking advantage of their youth and instability.

### 6.2 Union Office

I first came across reference to the *Freeter Union Fukuoka* via websites and blogs about the May Day Sound Demonstration protests. While in Tokyo I made contact with the Fukuoka group through their website by sending them an e-mail message explaining

who I was, what my research project was and why I was interested in their group. I then followed up through a telephone conversation with Ono Toshihiko, one of the founders of the group. We arranged for me to visit their office and speak with them about their activities. Fukuoka is a city that I know well. During my three years on the Japan Exchange and Teaching Program (J.E.T.) from 1999-2002, I lived in Saga-city in Kyushu, about 50 kilometers from Fukuoka city. I spent a considerable amount of time in Fukuoka during that period. When I return to Japan I often spend time there.

The first time I met Ono was in Fukuoka. We arranged to meet in front of the Daiei Department Store in Tenjin, the commercial center of the city. I was told the union office was located only a short distance away. After introducing ourselves we made our way together towards the office. While winding our way through the backstreets we got to know each other a little bit better by discussing our backgrounds. I learned that Ono and I were the same age, in our early 30s at the time. He had until recently been a doctoral student at Kyushu University studying labour issues. He had left the program before completing it but did not elaborate as to why he decided to do that. He struck me as an articulate, informed and sophisticated individual. He certainly did not fit the image of an immature young person refusing to take responsibility, nor a bewildered youth unable to appreciate why he was unable to find full-time work.

We eventually entered a medium sized office building. There was nothing unusual about the building itself but the union office was in a unique location. We went up several floors in the elevator and got off on a non-descript floor of the office building. We then went through a door at the end of a hallway into a maintenance area then up a short staircase into the “union office.” It was a large room that I assumed was initially

designed for storage that had been converted into a combination of an office and what might be described as a clubhouse. Inside the one large room they had arranged tables, chairs and bookcases. The walls had been plastered with some of their own posters and newspaper clippings featuring the activities of their union. They even had a rice cooker and dishes. The room also had access to an outdoor balcony space. The office was unconventional and its location would be inappropriate for most businesses but for the *Freeter Union Fukuoka*, its spatially marginal location, off to the side and out of sight of the regular companies of the office building, seemed symbolically fitting. Like *freeters* themselves within the employment system, the office was like an appendage off to the side of the mainstream companies, but still lurking in the shadows. I later learned that one of the appealing qualities of the space was its affordability since most businesses would be uninterested in the space.

### **6.3 Origin and Purpose of the Union**

As I sat down in the union office, Ono introduced me to Takemori Maki, who like Ono was one of the original members of the union. She was a middle-aged teacher who I later learned had experience in a Teachers' Union. Ono explained to me that the group began in March 2006. He and some other anti-war activists started to build a group they called the "*Freeter Network Fukuoka*." At the beginning it was a small group of people that had met through their anti-war activism with some of them connecting with each other through the Internet. In the beginning they had two main ideas about what they wanted to create. The first was a loose network of many people who come together over social justice issues. The second was a more rigid labour union. The group began with

only three or four people. To get exposure they began by handing out flyers at public places. In June 2006 they formed the *Freeter Union Fukuoka*. Through their discussions they decided that they did not need to have a narrow concept of what a labour union could do. They understood that a labour union is supposed to engage in activities like collective bargaining, negotiating with companies over labour conditions and protecting their members from any type of abuse but they also did not want to be limited by common expectations. They wanted to take the idea of having the right to organize in a broad sense through demonstrations and events. They also wanted to create the union so that they could rent a space where their members could gather (See Figure 12). Most of the members were young and had very little experience being part of any kind of social movement. Only Takemori, as a teacher, had experience being in the labour movement by participating in a teacher's union.

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Freeter Union Fukuoka  
フリーターユニオン福岡

[・フリーターユニオン福岡の理念](#)

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(「♦」を「@」に変えて下さい)

↑労働相談、生存相談などこちらからどうぞ↑

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090-9980-2106

Figure 12: *Freeter Union Fukuoka* Website (Source: [www.fufukuoka.web.fc2.com](http://www.fufukuoka.web.fc2.com)) (*Freeter Union Fukuoka*, 2012). Reproduced with permission.

## 6.4 Membership

When I asked Ono and Takemori about the kind of work that the members do they explained to me that their members are in a variety of non-regular employment. While I was doing research, the mass media was focusing quite heavily on the issue of *freeters*, poverty and the new class society (*kakusa shakai*). As a result the *Freeter Union Fukuoka* was often receiving inquiries from different media outlets interested in interviewing a “typical *freeter*.” Ono explained that what the media asks for is problematic for their group:

They want to find a “typical” young *freeter* who is working for the wage of JPN¥600 (per hour) or something, and working too much, but cannot overcome poverty. They have always been trying to find that type of typical image with us. Sometimes we have had to refuse because we do not really have anyone who fits that typical image of a “*freeter* in poverty.”

In fact, the members of the union worked a wide variety of jobs. Most of the jobs were part-time, freelance, contract or temporary positions. Ono used to work as a part-time teacher at a preparation school for students wanting to enter universities, but had recently changed jobs. Takemori was a teacher. Several of the members worked as freelance illustrators. Another member worked as a freelance editor and copywriter. Another member worked for a non-profit organization. Three members worked at a special facility providing support for mentally disabled patients. Other members had moved through a variety of part-time jobs. They even had one member who held a full-time job, but this was unusual for their union. One of the qualities of the *Freeter Union Fukuoka* that the members felt distinguished their union was that some members were unemployed, and in some cases had never worked.

## **6.5 Ono’s Personal History**

Ono explained to me that while he was a graduate student he started working as an instructor at a school that prepared students to enter college. He worked there for several years as a part-time English language instructor. However, he felt that the company was taking advantage of his part-time status. Eventually the company’s president wanted to fire him, but he fought against the company’s attempt to get rid of him. Through a long and protracted fight he eventually won a settlement from the



company and received some financial compensation. After receiving his settlement he left the company and registered as a contract worker (*haken*) at one of the large temporary employment agencies, *Fullcast*. However, he never did any work through the employment agency since he was able to find a new job at a company that employed him as a bilingual telephone operator.

His new company is small and employs mostly international graduate students from Kyushu University who can speak Japanese and at least one additional foreign language to do interpretation and translation work over the telephone. He explained that his new job requires him to work part-time at the office where he acts as a telephone operator connecting calls with foreign language interpreters in Japan who work from their mobile phones at home. Sometimes, he also receives phone calls at home to do translation work over the telephone. When he works from home he acts like a free agent who receives payment based upon each phone call. Even though he works in two separate spheres of the company, he considers himself to be a part-time worker.

He explained to me that in contrast to his old company, his new company treats its employees well. He told me that the company's president was a nice guy and he treated everyone with consideration, but the company was small with only about ten or so agents working there. Ono explained that there were actually few people who have the linguistic skills to do his job so his experience as a part-time worker in this particular company was quite different than the treatment other part-time workers were experiencing in jobs that required less specialized skills. The other union members' experiences as part-time workers are generally more similar to what Ono experienced at his last job. He felt that most companies using part-time workers feel that they can

exploit them for their labour when it is needed and then get rid of them when they are no longer needed. He also felt that this attitude was more pronounced in smaller companies since it is easier for them to get away with this type of practice. Larger companies, he thought, are more concerned with their public image. In general, larger companies are more sensitive to criticisms that they are taking advantage of part-time workers than smaller companies that have less reputation on the line.

Ono was reasonably happy with his current working arrangement. He likes how the flexibility of his work allows him to pursue other interests that include spending time with his girlfriend and pursuing union activities. He told me that his boss has asked him if he would join the company as a full-time worker but he declined the offer. He said he receives a decent wage for the work he does but then qualified this statement by explaining that his salary is in fact not really enough money to live off indefinitely. However, in combination with his girlfriend's salary, the two of them can live together relatively comfortably and still find time to balance their domestic life.

He then half joked that he felt he had perhaps become the ideal neoliberal worker. In his new job he was accustomed to working in a flexible way outside the full-time employment structure without being dissatisfied. He said that in a certain way he enjoyed his work but he recognized that the kind of work he did, first as a teacher and now as an interpreter, was quite different from many of the more mundane jobs most part-time workers do. Although he felt the conditions of his previous teaching job were exploitative, the actual practice of teaching required a higher degree of creativity and autonomy in the classroom to communicate the lessons to his students. However, in his current job as an interpreter, he is also free to work independently as a translator. The

contrast that Ono described between his current work and the work done by other members in the union is similar to Braverman's (1975) argument that through the history of capitalism there is a progressive degradation of work through an increasing division of labour by separating manual and mental work. However, Ono's work still requires a higher level of mental engagement than the work done by other members in the union.

Ono definitely enjoyed some aspects of working part-time at his present company. He had less responsibility and fewer expectations placed upon him from his employer. It was easy for him to take days off from work without any serious consequences and when he needs time to work on union activities he is able to do so. Although there were many aspects of his present employment that he enjoyed, he recognized that his current position was unstable. At the moment the company he was working for was doing quite well but, he explained to me, that everything could easily change. Since he was working for a small company, there was little protection. Larger companies can offer more protection for their workers than smaller companies. Since his company was doing well he said that he felt no immediate concern or anxiety over having to make a living. However, when he reflects on where he will be in five years or ten years he believes that he cannot easily predict where he will be located in his working career.

I asked Ono how much he identifies with his current job and he replied that his work plays little role in how he sees himself. He explained that he works at his current job because he has the ability to do so and needs an income to support himself. He was not interested in pursuing interpretation as a professional career. For him, being part of the union was more important than his job. He felt that the union allowed him to take an active role in society.

## 6.6 Philosophical and Ideological Perspective of the Union

As I sat with Takemori and Ono our conversation turned towards the philosophical underpinnings of the group. I asked them what they considered to be the main reason for creating the union. Takemori sarcastically replied “revolution”, and then smirked facetiously. Clearly amused by Takemori’s statement, Ono replied that “that’s another difficult question, because to answer that in a single word is the goal.”

Ono went on to explain that it was actually difficult for them to define the group since it included a variety of different people. Some of the members are ordinary part-time workers, other members work as freelancers, some members had faced firings only to be protected by the union, while others were “*hikikomori*” (shut-ins) coming out to the meetings and events hosted by the union, but unable to work. While the members did not necessarily see their experiences as synonymous, they did share a general feeling of opposition towards an economic system they sensed was at the root of much of their difficulties in making a living. Ono felt the group was against the capitalist system in a very broad sense. He then clarified that their group was not as radical as *Zengakuren*, the communist student group (subject of Chapter 8) who adopt a clear Marxist perspective to guide their activities. The *Freeter Union Fukuoka* did not adopt the same perspective but he felt their respective critiques were related. Ono then explained it as follows:

...the so-called precarity or precariousness of many workers these days is influenced by the so-called neoliberal tendencies and that neoliberalism is the release of the instincts of capitalists...If I can put it very very simply, that is what neoliberalism looks like. In general we are against that kind of tendency. So one thing that is clear is if someone thinks it is okay for society to go in the direction of neoliberalism or capitalism, then that is not our union member.

## 6.7 Locating the *Freeter Union's* Politics

Ono explained to me that one of the major distinctions of the *Freeter Union Fukuoka* was that they included both employed and non-employed members. This was something in which the group took great pride. As a group they were trying to create an organization for both the employed and non-employed to come together and connect with one another. The point of the union was not to devise strategies to make it easier for members to find work or become “normal” full-time workers. Rather, they were trying to create something meaningful out of their struggles of working part-time, being unemployed, being withdrawn and being NEET. They were not denying these experiences but rather treating them as valid experiences upon which to build a space or organization to which they could belong. Therefore, they were trying to build a new type of organization under the banner of a labour union. As Ono said, “I believe we are struggling to find a new meaning, a new way of being a labour union.”

He explained to me that their union had a fundamentally different message than most established and emerging labour unions. As he saw it, most other unions are united in the sentiment that the solution to current labour struggles is to recover the welfare state. Speaking about other labour unions, Ono summarized his perspective as follows:

They want to recover the “good old days” back in the 1950s or 1960s, I don’t really know, but when people were covered by social security...and they want to turn the clock back to the good old days of the welfare state. But basically when you hear the voices of the Communist Party or Social Democratic Party they are trying to go back to a time we do not really know or understand. But I think we have a new kind of passion in our generation, which is not to recover some old state of this country but rather to create our own society.

A generation gap appears to exist between some young activists and many of the older generation of activists from the 1960s and 1970s. Tensions exist around ideologies and strategies (Mōri 2005). During the 1960s and 1970s the Japan Socialist Party (JSP) and the Japanese Communist Party (JCP) were effective in mobilizing youth in the pacifist and anti-war movements (Sasada 2006:117). In the early 1960s radical Marxist groups, student organizations and labour unions mobilized together in large demonstrations on security issues. Left-wing parties continued to appeal to youth until the 1980s. However, since the 1990s these parties have lost major influence with younger people in Japan.

Mōri (2005) highlights various significant differences between the current wave of protest and the activism of the 1960s. A major difference is that the current activism is being led by underemployed youth which contrasts with the student led protests of the 1960s and 1970s. Furthermore, the current styles of protest often involve elaborate “cultural” displays. Similar to protest patterns occurring in Europe and North America (Graeber 2002, 2009), Virno (2004) has argued that this reflects a post-modern protest model that blurs the distinction between the political and the cultural. Public demonstrations and marches often have a carnival like atmosphere that includes music, dance and art displays. The playful quality of these protests is considered to be more appealing to youth. Many of the older members of Japan’s traditional left-wing parties have been dismissive of the cultural elements of youth protests suggesting that the playful atmosphere lacks the anger and militancy necessary to bring about political change. On the other hand, contemporary youth activists are equally critical of the traditional left wing as out-dated and lacking relevance to contemporary issues.

As we spoke further it became evident that Ono did not see the line separating the older generation of labour activists from young activists as neatly divided by generation. He explained that plenty of youth activists are influenced by what he called the “old mindset.” As far as he was concerned, the most dominant voice emanating from labour unions in Japan was the protection of full-time employment. While he acknowledged that some young people might want full-time employment this was not the primary objective of the *Freeter Union Fukuoka*. He explained:

...but in a way many of us do not want to belong to a single company. That was the kind of norm in society, especially Japan, because you know when you were hired by some company, you stick with that company, and gradually year by year your status goes up, your (social) insurance becomes bigger, your salary gets bigger and you identify with the company...but some people...never want to identify with one company and find a stable working condition under a single company. That is the kind of mentality more and more people have these days.

The *Freeter Union Fukuoka*'s position is not that flexibility is in itself a problem, but rather it is the issue of who controls the flexibility in the workplace. Their union respects what they see as some young people's impulse to not identify with one particular company and move from job to job as they see fit. They see that as a kind of freedom available to youth. What they oppose is what they see as capital's abuse of this loosening of worker and company relations by firing employees as they see fit. Ono explained the battle over who controls the flexibility of the worker as follows:

That is a difficult point because companies are trying to make use of that mentality because if you do not belong to one company, you can easily say goodbye to the company, but it goes the other way around. You know the company can basically say goodbye to some workers when they do not need them, because you are a free agent, you are not an employed worker like it used to be...The company basically does not want you to identify with the company...So the problem is not simple. There is some kind of mentality that we have to respect among young people who put their priority into, in a way, freedom. But that should not be the freedom of the company to fire them. So that is when there

is a struggle, a negotiation. That kind of negotiation, maybe we can make use of it sometimes, but at the same time, the capitalists, the company, the business minded people make use of the (same) tendency.

As we continued to talk, Ono explained that the tensions inherent in the conflict they find themselves in as marginal workers in a neoliberal economy essentially pushes the discussion beyond finding solutions within the capitalist system. He felt that the real issue was not whether young people should choose to be either free agents or full-time workers. Rather what was most important is the desire and passion of youth to choose something different from both of these options and remake their own society along principles that are important to their generation. He understands that discussing the abolition of the capitalist system makes many people uncomfortable but he felt it was still important to talk about the possibility of overcoming it. Invoking Marxist thought, he sees capitalism as an historical stage that human beings have created and are moving beyond. This was the conceptual framework used within the union for conversation to help the members make sense of the various challenges they have experienced in the workplace as *freeter*. He then qualified this statement by saying that he did not consider himself as an extreme ideologically minded revolutionary but he still wanted to talk about the possibility of revolution. That is why Takemori somewhat sarcastically said the purpose of the union was “revolution” because this possibility is something they still felt was important to discuss within their union movement.

I then asked Ono and Takemori whether the group was ultimately driven by a socialist ideology. They replied that I could call it that if I wanted to but they felt uncomfortable with the kinds of prejudices associated with socialism. In particular they felt people tended to associate it with totalitarian regimes. Nonetheless, Ono said that



sometimes he feels that the group is moving to a form of communism but he recognized that it might be the wrong word to describe what they are trying to do. He then qualified where he saw the *Freeter Union Fukuoka* located within these ideological debates. He said on one side you have the capitalists who want to abolish the state and bring in free markets as the best thing for society. On the other side you have what he described as the “old socialists” who want to wrestle back state power so that they can control social justice. Ono explained that their group was outside of this debate. He, along with other activists, sees potential in oppositional networks.

## **6.8 Anarcho-Syndicalism**

Ono explained that the activism that emerged at the World Trade Organization protests in Seattle in 1999 were an inspiration for their group. One of the aspects of those protests they found attractive was how they were formed through networks of autonomous activist groups with no clear centre. He explained that he wanted to create something analogous to this form of activist organization in Fukuoka. He feels that a labour union can be the base on which to build this new form of activism. Part of the inspiration for this perspective in Ono’s opinion is the anarchist movement.

The etymology of “anarchism” as a concept of political philosophy derives its name from “anarchy” which in Greek literally means “no government.” Although a wide range of political beliefs are often covered by the term “anarchism,” Noam Chomsky has described it as the libertarian left or a form of voluntary socialism (Pateman 2005:133). Some of the early proponents of anarchism, Bakunin and Kropotkin, imagined an anarchist society as highly organized based upon organic units and organic communities.

These organic units were generally conceived as workplaces and neighbourhoods.

Through these basic units they could design a highly integrated social organization on a national or international scope through a federation of representatives from each unit. An important aspect of this type of organization is that delegates would always remain part of their organic community receiving no special privilege for engaging in political activities.

The idea that political representatives remain part of the community is to insure that the primary source of authority comes from the bottom up instead of from the top down. Anarchists place primary value on the freedom of the individual, but not necessarily in isolation since individuals can and often must work together. Anarchists generally oppose representative democracy because it centralizes power in the State. Anarchists criticize representative democracy as being limited to the political sphere since its influence over the economic sphere is minimal. They see democracy as limited in an economic system where workers must rent themselves on the market. This type of system breeds elements of coercion and oppression that undermine a healthy democracy.

Ono explained to me that specifically he was influenced by the branch of anarchism concerned with the labour movement, known as anarcho-syndicalism, which originated at the turn of the twentieth century. Adherents believe the movement has the revolutionary potential to replace both capitalism and the state with a new society democratically managed by workers. Anarcho-syndicalists seek to abolish the wage system that they view as a form of wage slavery. They also seek to abolish ownership of the means of production, either by state or private interests, since they view this process as responsible for class divisions. Anarcho-syndicalists also oppose the state since they

view it as a fundamentally anti-worker institution. They come to this conclusion based upon the premise that the state's primary role is defending private property, which leads to economic, social and political privilege. They also reject the Marxist-Leninist notion of a worker's state. Their opposition is rooted in the idea that power is inherently corruptible.

What anarcho-syndicalists see as an alternative to the state are organizational forms built from below. These grassroots organizations are based upon principles of self-management and direct democracy, which are united through federalism and confederation. Examples of organizations include networks of militant workers, strike committees, worker councils and radical labour unions. Through activities associated with class struggle including education, direct-action, self organization and mass assemblies, anarcho-syndicalists see themselves building a foundation for a new world order. They believe that only direct action, which is an action carried out by the workers themselves for a particular goal is the only way for workers to liberate themselves. Direct action contrasts with indirect action, which they see as the election of representatives to a government.

I asked Ono how representative anarcho-syndicalism was of their group's ideology. He explained that I needed to understand that not everyone in the movement was equally committed. However he also explained that having an ideological *raison d'être* was necessary when you protest regardless of the depth of people's commitment. This is because when they protest against something that they disagree with in society, they believe that the public demands they offer an alternative vision for society. He said that you cannot just express your dissatisfaction and leave it at that in modern society.

Complaining or critiquing society alone frustrates members of the public to the point that they demand you offer an alternative solution. Ono felt that, as an activist, if you cannot offer an alternative solution people will dismiss your expression of discontent. He believed this demand is placed upon him and the members of the union are somewhat misplaced since their groups are not bureaucrats charged with the task of redesigning a new society. While having the ideological principles of anarcho-syndicalism guiding their actions, it is their activities of protesting and offering an alternative model for organizing workers which they see as their most potent potential for shaping an alternative future society.

I asked Ono what influences they were drawing upon for the union movement. He had already explained that the World Trade Organization protests in Seattle had provided a networking model for organizing protests and activism. I asked him how much his graduate studies had influenced the group. He agreed that, of course, his own studies inform the movement but also acknowledged that Takemori's experience with the teacher's union had been invaluable for providing practical models for organizing. He also explained that their interest in anarchism had historical roots in Japan. Although he recognized that the anarchist movement in Japan in the early twentieth century had been small, it nonetheless existed, and learning about what he called "a small stream" of anarchist thought in Japan had helped inform the movement.

The anarchist movement in Japan is commonly traced back to the figure of Kotoku Shusui, born in 1871 (Crump 1993). Shusui did not start out as an anarchist but his outspoken liberal ideas as a journalist led to his arrest in 1904. While in prison he read anarchist literature including Peter Kropotkin's (1901) *Fields, Factories and*

*Workshops*. While in prison he began to formulate his ideas on opposing the Emperor as the locus of both power and capitalism in Japan. Criticising the Emperor was an idea that departed from most socialist lines of thought at the time. Upon his release from prison he moved to the United States and joined the International Workers of the World (the IWW, also known as the Wobblies).

Ono explained to me that the invasion of Iraq in 2003 was a significant turning point for new forms of activism in Japan. In response to the invasion, the first sound demonstration (subject of Chapter 6) was organized in Tokyo. He believed that this style of protest had been inspired from the “reclaim the streets” style of protest in the United Kingdom. This provided a model for young activists to organize artistic and rave-style demonstrations. However, Ono explained that he believed the biggest influence within the new movements in Japan can be traced back to the pre-war anarchism in Japan. He felt that this was an important distinction because previous generations of activists have overly focused on the importance of democracy after World War II.

Ono said that the discourse of democracy operates as a myth in Japan in that people accept the belief that through democracy and the constitution they were released from the totalitarian Imperial system that existed before and during the war. For the first time Japanese people had a new constitution with peace built into it in the form of Article 9. The politics, particularly from the older generation of activists, has been focused on protecting and preserving this “precious” democracy. Yet, he felt these older ideological arguments restrict newer forms of politics from emerging. Since World War II, the dominant form of left-wing activism has been locked in an ideological tug-of-war between socialism and capitalism. Ono explained that if you go back to the prewar

period in Japan you can find a stream of anarchism that was not influenced by big political parties or big ideologies. Anarchism emphasizes individualism and independence that are qualities of political consciousness that he wants to encourage in the *Freeter Union Fukuoka*.

Ono explained to me that he felt that anarchism was the political philosophy that could move activism forward. Since anarchist groups in Japan trace their politics back to the prewar history of anarchism, not the postwar democracy of Japan's traditional left this connects them with other anarchists groups around the world that he sees as part of a globally networked activism. He explained that through his own personal research into anarchism he was surprised to find an increasing number of anarchist inspired social movements in different areas of the world. For instance, while researching anarchism on the Internet, he came across movements in the United States, like the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), which appear to him to be inspired by anarchist principles.

*The Students for a Democratic Society* was revived in 2006, inspired by the 1960s radical student organization of the same name. The movement was revived in collaboration with a group of high school students and members of the original movement from the 1960s in an effort to unite fractured student groups. The movement describes itself as a radical multi-issue student and youth led organization working to empower schools and communities through participatory democracy (Students for a Democratic Society 2011). The movement has over a hundred chapters in high schools, colleges and universities in the United States and Canada.

He also explained that networking is an important part of new forms of activism. Anarchism, in his opinion, is a better form of organization for networked activism

because you need strong individuals and strong hubs within a network for it to operate. In his opinion, since political parties are hierarchical they do not encourage strong individual tendencies from all members and therefore do not work well for networking. He then qualified his explanation by stating that he did not know if the *Freeter Union Fukuoka* really fully qualified as a strong anarchist hub in a networked activist system. Yet, ideally these were the ideas guiding the group.

## 6.9 Structure of the Union

Translating their political beliefs into a practical organization is something the *Freeter Union Fukuoka* has been attempting. They began organizing the group by having some of the most active members become board members *shinkōiin* (進行委員). Ono originally took the role as the chair *iincho* (委員長). Collectively these members were the ones most interested in making decisions for the group. Those less interested in taking these roles of responsibility became regular members. In the beginning around one-third of the union members belonged to the board with the remaining two-thirds acting as general members. However, they had recently decided to eliminate the role of the *iincho* so that nobody could assume the role of the leader. Their decision was influenced by their belief in the benefits of a non-hierarchical decision making process. They wanted to make the group as democratic as possible.

Financially the group is supported through membership fees and donations from the public. Most of the work done for the union is voluntary. The money they do collect is used mostly for the rent of the union office space. Donations sometimes come to them after public demonstrations that result in some degree of exposure. For instance, their

2008 May Day protest in Fukuoka city became somewhat of a public spectacle. The members of the union had gathered in a public park in Tenjin, the center of Fukuoka's shopping district, to protest working conditions and then march through the streets. When the police blocked the march and refused to allow the demonstrators into the streets the confrontation became quite heated and was subsequently reported in various media outlets including newspapers and on television (See Figure 13). The confrontation drew both criticism and sympathy from the public. Because of the exposure, some members of the public donated to the group.



**Figure 13: Police block the *Freeter Union Fukuoka* demonstration. (Source: *Freeter Union Fukuoka*). Reproduced with permission.**

They also have a system called a *sanjyokai* (賛助会) where supporting members are expected to contribute JPN¥10,000 (about US\$107) per year. This was the way the



initial members decided they would try to support the group. The *Freeter Union Fukuoka* does not receive any financial support from any larger union or political organization. In contrast, Ono explained to me that he thought the Japanese Communist Party supported the *Tokyo Seinen Union (Tokyo Young People's Union)*. The *Tokyo Young People's Union* was probably the largest union representing young people in Japan, with a membership of around two thousand members. When I asked him whether the union would welcome that kind of support, he replied to me that he would not accept support from the Japanese Communist Party or any other large ideological group. He explained to me that it was important for their group to remain independent.

#### **6.10 “Personal Responsibility” (*Jikosekinin*) and “Survival”**

The members themselves also refer to their group as a labour and survival union (*Rōdō to Seizon No Kumiai*) (労働と生存の組合). This is because the members consider their union to be both an organization for working people as well as for those who have never been employed or have a fundamental disagreement with the working culture in society. For many of the members the issue is not how they can improve working conditions, but also how to survive without always having to work. Whereas most labour unions are primarily concerned with collective bargaining for their members, the *Freeter Union Fukuoka* also poses more existential questions about the role of labour for individual survival in post-industrial Japan.

Ono stated that not working was basically impossible. People always needs some kind of external support either from their parents, family, a safety net or the social security system. Their point seemed to be more the questioning of the values around the

culture of work in Japanese society. Practically speaking, they recognized that to survive they either needed to work or get financial support from their families or the state. They were not disputing this reality but rather questioning an attitude about whether a person has a right to survive even if they do not work. The attitude that if you are not a working, productive member of society you do not have the right to survive can be seen in different ways. Even if you are dependent on your family or the government he believes that you will be heavily criticized in this society for not working. He explained:

(the idea that) If you do not work then you do not have the right to survive is becoming stronger in this society. That is what is called “self responsibility” (*jikosekinin*). Have you heard of the word? You have got to invest in yourself, you have got to work hard to be in the small group of winners in this society, otherwise the government will not, nobody will care about you even if you die of hunger, you know? We can feel that kind of tendency in society.

The idea of “self responsibility” (*jikosekinin*) (自己責任) is another important neologism that captures the mood of post-recessionary Japan with important connotations for *freeters* and other marginal workers. Carol Gluck (2009) has traced the movement of the word “responsibility” (*sekinin*) (責任) in Japan from its entrance into the language in the mid-1800s to the present. It has been used to debate politics, society and self in modern times and has shifted its meaning along the way. Responsibility has moral, legal, political and social dimensions that are sometimes separated, but often conflated (Gluck 2009:84). Individual versus collective responsibility remains a subject of considerable debate in Japan.

Gluck explains that in the mid nineteenth-century, the Japanese translators of the English word “responsibility” chose “*sekinin*,” meaning office or duties of office. Their choice was a Chinese compound that had existed in Japan for centuries but was not in

common use though the two characters *seki* (責) and *nin* (任) were well known separately (Gluck 2009:86). *Seki* meant “charge with” (either as duty, or reproach) and *nin*, signified “office” (the obligations entrusted in a professional connection). Therefore, in the late nineteenth-century *sekinin* appeared to mean the responsibility of office or status.

From the mid-1860s and early 1870s, legal translators struggled with finding the appropriate use for the concept of *sekinin*. Its initial use was haphazard. Sometimes it was used for the legal or contractual notion of “obligation.” At other times the translators used the word to mean “duty”, “contract”, or “liability” (Gluck 2009:86-87).

As the word swiftly moved into common discourse, *sekinin* began to replace terminology previously used for familiar feelings of social obligation. *Sekinin* also began to replace older idioms used to describe suicide. Suicides were often explained by various terms through the idioms because a person had committed an act that was “dishonourable” with “no excuse” or where “no apology” would be sufficient. With the introduction of *sekinin* into the common discourse, suicide began to be described as an act of “taking responsibility” (Gluck 2009:89). Responsibility also came to be associated with the expectations each person was ascribed by virtue of their status or duty. The implication was that people should never avoid responsibility or fail to fulfill it. Throughout the twentieth century *sekinin* continued to move into new territory and absorb additional meanings associated with different words.

For example, Gluck explains that Japanese speak of “war responsibility” (*sensou sekinin*) (戦争責任). Immediately after World War II most of the critique focused upon the military and government as primarily responsible for leading the nation into war. By attributing war responsibility to those at the top, citizens became free to think of

themselves as victims of unscrupulous leaders. However, the meaning of “war responsibility” quickly broadened beyond this to questioning the roles played by society and individuals in the war.

By the 1990s, Gluck further explains that *sekinin* began to describe the mood of the times when people began to refer to it as the so-called “age of self-responsibility.” Investors were told that they were now “self-responsible” for their investments after neoliberal market-centered policies deregulated financial markets. The term moved quickly into different social spheres as well. For example, certain types of patients could be blamed as personally responsible for their illnesses because those illnesses were “lifestyle” driven. A *salaryman* who lost his jobs through restructuring was considered self-responsible for choosing to work for a company that ultimately fired him. The poor and others on the margins were responsible for their own poverty. Since the poor were responsible for their circumstances, this justified rolling back social programs designed to provide them with assistance. The notion of “self-responsibility”, Gluck (2009:103) suggests, took the notion of *sekinin* back to the time when it was easier for society to blame the poor for their poverty than to do something to improve it.

While taking “personal responsibility” is a mantra of global neoliberal capitalism, it is important to appreciate that *jikosekinin* in Japan is a form of personal responsibility that is defined in large part by an individual’s relationship to other people. Responsibility in Japan remains closely associated with the expectations of what a person is expected to do based upon their social position. This understanding remains close to the older meaning of the two characters *seki* and *nin* before the new word was created.

Whether a person is considered to be living their lives “appropriately” is often defined by the duties and obligations ascribed to their role and status within the group to which they belong. People always belong to more than one group simultaneously such as their immediate families, neighbourhoods, schools, workplaces, geographic regions and ultimately society and nation. With each group to which people are identified there are corresponding expectations of behaviour.

When Ono spoke about how the *Freeter Union Fukuoka* is opposed to the concept of “*jikosekinin*” in Japan, he was referring to how the concept of “self-responsibility” had come to embody a pervasive attitude towards *freeters* and others struggling in the neoliberal economy as both “personally responsible” for their own hardships and also failing to live up to their social expectations. It is the harshness of the rhetorical use of “self-responsibility” that Ono is referring to when he describes the *Freeter Union Fukuoka* as a refuge from what they believe is a streak of vindictiveness in present day Japanese society. They believe that it is specifically directed at them, and this is why they are collectively supporting members’ “survival.”

Survival is a central component of what the *Freeter Union Fukuoka* understands itself as doing. They see supporting their members “survival” as something outside the boundaries of what normal labour unions are expected to do. At the same time, Ono admitted that they were still trying to figure out meaningful strategies to support the member’s lives in addition to improving their working conditions. Figure 14 shows a protest banner at the 2009 Tokyo May Day Rally that expresses the sentiment of being trapped between cultural attitudes towards work and a lack of opportunity for better employment.



Figure 14: The banner reads "I'm sick of self responsibility!!" ([jikosekinin] *moutakusanda!!*) (「自己責任」もうたくさんだ!!); 2009 Mayday Demonstration; Miyashita Park, May 2009 (Photo by Robin O'Day)

## 6.11 Creating an Alternative Space

What became apparent, behind the political rhetoric, was how important it was to have a place and space to which the members feel they could belong. This point was made clear when talking with Ono about the purpose of the union. After discussing the consequences of neoliberal capitalism, he shifted his focus toward the more affective purpose of the union when he said:

...one thing is if we talk about our purpose...for example some members just want to have this kind of place where we can meet up and talk about the anxiety of life and work and stuff. It means a lot to some of them. Some of them, of course, just want to improve their working conditions, which is just (the task of) a simple labour union...but yeah, sometimes we define our activity like a kind of gathering place. We think, some young people these days need this kind of gathering place...you know we want to have an alternative place, an alternative space. It is a little bit abstract but it is very concrete for some members just to have this kind of place...it means a lot to some of the members I think.

I asked Ono how important it is for members to have a sense of connection and to have somewhere they can come where they feel they belong. His reply to me was:

I mean they have this kind of base. It supports them when they have to recover from anxiety before they try to find work or start working because they have this place to support them. In case something happens to them, like when they come across bosses who try to fire them and everything, you know there are a lot of them in society now, those kinds of cases. So some people just hesitate to just look for work because they are afraid about what is going to happen to them.

Our conversation continued to develop around the issue of the kind of social space they were trying to create. I asked whether he felt the union was a substitute for having lost the opportunity to identify with the workplace since the company operated as such a central part of peoples', particularly men's, lives in the post World War II period. Ono thought about my question and initially disagreed with the notion that the union was

simply filling a void left in workers' sense of identity, but he agreed that to a certain degree, the union did operate as a community. He explained the role of the union in its members' lives this way:

It is not like an alternative to the old way of the company that was in Japan; as much as you devote to some group you get the same (back), or the identification with a big group. It is not what I want to achieve, but I think it is a form of community. It could give them security in a certain way, but I still do not see the final form of care of what it can be. I think there is an aspect of this place being, to put it simply, a gathering place. But from a certain perspective it is a community, I think. I think it is an important aspect.

It seemed to me that many of the union members were not fully participating in “mainstream society.” The union was acting as a vehicle through which they could connect with a segment of a society from which they felt alienated. Some of the members have said that through the union they have gained confidence to speak to other people and have found the courage to express their opinions. Some of the members have been so worn down by their experiences of trying to live up to normative expectations that they have become afraid of even answering the phone at home.

How the union encourages *freeters* to re-engage with “mainstream” Japanese society is not to simply find them better jobs or turn them into cooperative full-time employees. If a member is unhappy with something at their workplace, for instance, the union helps devise a strategy for the member to confront the company with the complaint. Ono saw these types of interactions as the ways for them to help their members re-engage society. This “re-engagement”, however is confrontational. The *Freeter Union Fukuoka*'s goal is not primarily to find their members jobs but to provide their members with a sense of confidence so that they might more easily survive in Japanese society. If



the new society is harsh, then their members need to learn how to fight. Ono explained it to me this way:

Even to just protest against what we do not like is being part of society, in this democratic society, to have a different voice from the majority. That could be one of the goals. It does not bring you a salary or wages, but it is an important part of your life. To speak out what you think against the society, against the power. But when you need to be employed to survive, of course it could be, for some of them, an important goal... We do not force upon them some goal that they should be employed or make a contribution to society in a certain way. That is what capital or state powers force upon us. We do not do that of course.

## **6.12 Instilling Class Consciousness**

Consensus building within anarchist movements requires a high degree of organization (Graeber 2009). The process of collective decision-making can at times be an unwieldy process demanding a high degree of autonomy and discussion. Making a flat consensus model work in European and North American contexts is complex because it requires everyone to agree. Adopting this model of organization in Japan, as the *Freeter Union Fukuoka* was doing conflicts of course, with a cultural model of collective decision-making. As Nakane Chie (1970) argues, Japanese social relations operate largely on a hierarchical model where factors such as gender, age, position and experience significantly influence how individuals interact with one another. In general, those individuals at the top of the hierarchy make decisions and those lower down the hierarchy follow instructions. Therefore, an anarchist model of decision-making is a different style of decision making from what most of the members of the *Freeter Union Fukuoka* would have been accustomed to growing up in Japan.

I asked Ono whether he felt having a non-hierarchical and “leaderless” organization style was an effective organizational strategy. I asked him whether seeking

consensus slowed down the ability of the movement to make decisions. He explained to me that the decision to flatten out the organization and eliminate a hierarchical model of organization was based upon the desire to encourage more of the union members to speak up and express their opinions and desires.

Part of the activities of the *Freeter Union Fukuoka* was to encourage and cultivate an activist consciousness among the members. Some members, of course, played a more dominant role within the union but the goal of the union was not to recreate a hierarchical model of organization with a few leaders and a large group of followers. Inspired in part by anarchist principles, the group's aim was to build up individual members to be independently critical and to take a more active role in decision-making. Ono admitted to me that he wanted more union members to find their voices and speak out more strongly but many of the members still found expressing their personal opinions and concerns difficult.

### **6.13 Accomplishments and Obstacles of the Group**

When I asked Ono what he considered the main accomplishments of the union, he explained to me that they had made several concrete accomplishments. The union had grown to include twenty-four members from just a handful of activists in the beginning. At the time I interviewed him they had managed to secure and maintain the union office for about three years. What he called their "reclaim the streets" tactics of demonstrating, using music and handing out flyers had grown in size and made their group increasingly visible, especially amongst those interested in labour movements and other activism.

They had also led several successful labour negotiations for their members that resulted in financial compensation being paid. Ono bragged to me that they had never yet lost a case against a company. I was surprised to hear that and asked him why. He explained that the labour laws are actually quite protective of workers but companies that take advantage of *freeters* and other part-time workers simply ignore the laws and use irregular workers any way they see fit. Part of the reason that companies get away with these practices is that many part-time workers are unaware of their own rights. When a worker comes to the *Fukuoka Freeter Union* seeking help, it is generally easy for the union to demonstrate to a court how the company's treatment of the worker is illegal. So far, the courts have sided with the union.

I asked Ono whether they hoped to make the union larger. He explained that expanding was not the primary goal. What they wanted to be able to do is provide members with appropriate support. He was concerned that if the union grew too fast they might not be able to give each member and each labour negotiation enough attention. He told me that in fact only a few of the members were capable of entering into negotiating with companies. Realistically they can only handle a small number of negotiations at a time.

## **6.14 Conclusion**

This chapter provided a general description of the *Freeter Union Fukuoka* with attention to how the members of the organization understand their own activities. The *Freeter Union Fukuoka* emerged as a social movement out of the anti-war activism with respect to the Iraq war in 2006. The initial members aimed to create an organization that

would support *freeters*, part-timers and irregular workers. Also, the members felt their labour union could do more than simply mimic the activities of other labour unions and could create a space to bring together those who worked and those who did not but who shared a mutual critique of working culture in Japan. Although the members have a diverse set of experiences, what they all share is a general sense of opposition to the trend within neoliberal capitalism that leaves workers unstable and poorly compensated for their labour. The members of the *Freeter Union Fukuoka* see themselves as opposed to neoliberal capitalism and also experience themselves as alienated by the politics of the “old left” that seeks to reclaim the welfare state as the solution to the current labour woes.

Rather than aligning their politics with the Communist Party or the Social Democratic Party, the union draws inspiration from the prewar anarchist movement in Japan. They reject what they see as the dominant perspective running through the traditional left’s fetishization of Japan’s postwar constitution and democracy. The youth in the union insinuate that whatever freedom Japanese citizens felt they won from the totalitarianism of the Imperial system after the war has simply been replaced by a new form of totalitarianism dictated by the market. The *Freeter Union Fukuoka* also draws inspiration from anarcho-syndicalism as the branch of anarchism that is concerned with the labour movement. They are modeling the organization of their union after the principles of anarcho-syndicalists that seek to create a non-hierarchical structure of strong individuals. They see their union as a “hub” within a global network of an emerging politics of anarchist groups.

Beyond their ideological perspective, the union itself offers its members practical forms of support. Like a traditional labour union they protect their members by holding

employers to legal standards. When their members are mistreated, the union will fight for compensation. At the same time the *Freeter Union Fukuoka* aims to offer much more to its members who often feel alienated or worn down by trying to work in a system where many of them struggle to make ends meet. The union offers the members an alternative place to come and share their personal struggles with others experiencing similar difficulties. This is why they call their union a “labour and survival” union because the psychological and communal dimensions of labour also require support in a working climate where everyone is “self-responsible” for their own survival. The union is growing gradually, or as the anarchists would say “organically”, winning small victories in labour negotiations and slowly providing the members a space to cultivate their own voices of critique.

In the next chapter I turn to another ethnographic description of a union movement aiming to organize irregular workers into labour unions. In contrast to the two *freeter* unions described thus far, the movement that is the subject of the next chapter involves a network of labour and civil society activists that aim to improve the image of the labour movement in the eyes of youth. As with the two *freeter* unions, this group of activists also seeks to frame *freeters* as a politically mobilizable group. They also aim to remove what they see as the preventative barriers to political activism.

## **Chapter 7: Union is Hope: The Role of Youth, Networks and Digital Media in Organizing Japan's Irregular Workers**

### **7.1 Introduction**

In chapters five and six I presented the activities of two *freeter* unions with an emphasis on some of the strategies they were employing in re-framing *freeters* as political actors. In this chapter I shift my attention to another group of labour activists that was also attempting to encourage young *freeters* and other irregular workers to join labour unions. In contrast to the *freeter* unions, this group was composed of a network of labour activists organizing a campaign aimed at improving the image of labour unions in the eyes of young people. Through a description of the campaign I draw attention to some of the strategies used by the group to circumvent and challenge the mainstream media's depiction of young irregular workers. I also explore some of the negotiations among the activists in re-framing the labour movement in such a way as to attract youth. In so doing, this chapter explores another example of how class is being re-articulated in post-industrial Japan through organized strategies of politicizing *freeter* work.

### **7.2 The *Union Yes! Campaign***

In the summer of 2007 I spent a month in Tokyo exploring potential sites for doing fieldwork on the subject of *freeters*. Some of the labour activists I had recently begun to network with invited me to join one of their meetings at the Shibuya Labour and Welfare Center. Tokyo's Shibuya district is an important location for Japanese youth

since it is one of the main locations for emerging trends in Japanese popular culture. The meeting I was invited to was also about Japanese youth but it involved a more serious atmosphere than what was transpiring in the trendy boutiques close by.

An informal network of labour activists organized the meeting. They were gathering to discuss a campaign to encourage young people, particularly the irregularly employed (*hiseiki koyō*), to join labour unions. This was the first meeting for the group. In fact it was a “pre-meeting” aimed at working out some of the details for the official campaign kick off three months later. The meeting attracted around sixty-five people. It was an eclectic gathering. There were many young people in their twenties and thirties in attendance but many of the organizers were older more seasoned labour activists. There was a fairly even split of women and men in attendance. The purpose of the meeting and the campaign is summarized in the poster for the event. The poster reads (See Figure 15):

# 一緒につくりませんか ユニオンYes! キャンペーン



マンガ：一花花  
<http://18787.main.jp/>

いつからだろう。  
働き、生きることがこんなにも苦しく不安定なものになったのは。  
パート、派遣、フリーター。いや正社員だって安心してはいられない。  
残業代も、有給休暇もままならない。  
文句をいえば「明日から来なくていい」という返事が返ってくる。  
「貧しさ」も「過労死」もすべては「自己責任」、努力しない者が悪いというわけ。  
みんな独りぼっちにされ、あがいている。

わたしたちにだって 明日を夢見る権利があるはずだ。  
200年以上も昔から働くものはユニオンを作って助け合ってきた。  
雇い主と闘ってきた。  
そして8時間労働制を実現し、簡単に首を切られない権利を獲得してきた。

いまパート・派遣・フリーター・青年・女性のユニオンが今、続々と生まれている。  
ユニオンに入ろう！  
ユニオンをつくろう！  
奪われた自分たちの権利をとりもどすためにわたしたちが立ち上がれば世の中はかわる。  
ユニオンYes!

いまこそ出番だ 労働組合

## ユニオンYes! キャンペーン・プレ集会

- 7月25日（水）18時30分開演（開場18時） ★参加費 500円
- 渋谷勤労福祉会館2F 大会議室（東京・渋谷駅10分パルコそば・03-3462-2511）
- ＜内容＞
  - ・トーク～組合を作った若者達／雨宮処凛（作家）ほか
  - ・ユニオンチューブ「私もユニオンYes!です」試作動画初公開
  - ・レイバー映画祭作品紹介
- 主催 ユニオンYes! キャンペーン 9月から本スタート

連絡先 レイバーネット日本 TEL03-3530-8590 <http://www.labor.net.jp.org/>

Figure 15: UNION YES! Campaign Poster (Source: Union Yes!) Reproduced with permission.



Shall we make it together? *Union Yes! Campaign.*

When did it start?

When did work and life become difficult and unstable?

Part-timers, dispatch workers, *freeters* and even full-time employees cannot feel secure.

Over-time pay and paid holidays are non-existent.

If you complain, they will reply “you do not have to come back to work tomorrow.”

Poverty and “death by overwork”<sup>14</sup> and everything is “self responsibility”,<sup>15</sup> and they say that it is because you do not work hard enough.

Everyone is left alone to struggle.

We should have the right to dream about the future.

For more than 200 years workers have supported each other through unions.

They have been fighting against their employers.

Because of that we have achieved the eight-hour workday and our right not to be fired easily.

Now a lot of unions have been created for part-timers, dispatch workers, *freeters*, youth and women.

Let’s join a union!

Let’s make a union!

If we stand up together to reclaim our rights the world will change.

Union Yes!

Union, this is your time to act.

The poster continues with an open invitation encouraging anyone to join the event for a scheduled talk, to discuss the campaign’s plans and to view labour films. The plan for the initial campaign was for it to run from September to December 2007 with a series of events and activities that included a graphic design contest for the movement’s logo, offering free labour consultation to the public, a labour festival and the launch of an on-line media project.

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<sup>14</sup> “Death from overwork” (*karoshi*) is a medical-legal phenomenon in Japan that recognizes excessive overtime as contributing to premature death (North 1999).

<sup>15</sup> “Self responsibility” is a reference to the *jikosekinin*.

### 7.3 *Labor Net Japan*<sup>16</sup>

Behind the campaign was a network of civil society activists connected through *Labor Net Japan*. The campaign was not just for one particular community union. Rather it was to encourage the process of unionizing for youth and there were a number of individuals and community unions involved<sup>17</sup>. The *Union Yes! Campaign* also received endorsements from some high profile figures, included writers, journalists, academics and activists. Some of them wrote the following messages of encouragement for the campaign:

We cannot survive without fighting. We cannot survive without connecting. I am supporting the *Union Yes! Campaign* fully. (Amamiya Karin—writer)

Fighting is the only way since we've been treated badly to the point where there is nowhere else to go. Let's build a society that is fair and peaceful. (Takao Saito—journalist)

The poor are fighting back!... (Nakagawa Kei—labour activist)

I feel that societal expectations and needs for the labour movement are getting bigger. At the same time I think there is a need for a variety of social movements which aim to improve the situation for irregular workers and regular workers with low pay while cooperating with other labour union movements. I hope a lot of people will join this campaign. (Goto Michio—Professor) (*Labor Net Japan* 2007a:1)

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<sup>16</sup> I have kept the spelling of “Labor” in “*Labor Net Japan*” consistent with how the organization renders the spelling in English rather than changing it to “Labour” to match the Canadian/British spelling.

<sup>17</sup> In the Tokyo area the following unions supported the campaign: Tokyo Eastern Labour Union; Metropolitan Young People Union; Tokyo Women's Union; Metropolitan *Nakama* Union; *GatenKei* Rentai; NPO Posse; National General Labour Union Southern Tokyo; *Zentoitsu* Union; All Japan Port Labour Union; Post Office Labour Union; Kanagawa City Union; Self Governing Union/Saitama Public Service Union; Tokyo General Labour Union; Tokyo Music University Branch Union; and Transportation Union. In the Kansai area the unions included: Kansai Irregular Labour Union; Union *Bochi Bochi*; *Nakama* Union.

In conjunction with individuals and labour unions, *Labor Net Japan* provided the main support for the *Union Yes! Campaign*. *Labor Net Japan* is a website that operates as an informal gathering place for labour union activists (*Labor Net Japan* 2010). The website was launched in 2001 (See Figure 16). It is connected to *Labor Net* in the United States, *Labor Net* in the United Kingdom and *Nodong* in South Korea (Chan 2008:106-109). Their members include mostly individual labour unionists and activists. When I spoke with members of Labour Net Japan in July of 2007, I was told that the *Labor Net Japan* website was receiving around 1500 hits per day. By February 2009, they had 388 members and their website had been accessed 1.8 million times since its launch in 2001, with 800,000 of those hits occurring in the last two years alone (*Labor Net Japan* 2009:2).



レイバーネット日本

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●福島原発事故ユーストサイト 原子力資料情報室・たんば舎・岩上チャンネル (IWJ)・ビデオニュースドットコ

「辞めたいのに辞めさせてくれない」相談事例の3月分から抜粋です。NHK「クローズアップ現代」も大きく取り上げました。1、在宅医療スタッフ。患者宅の巡回を自分の車で行かされている。体調も崩したので退職を申し入れたら「最低でも3ヵ月前でなければ許可しない」と言われた。2、正社員。「人手が足りないから」と退職届けを受け取って貰えない。3、アルバイト。「辞めたい」と社員に相談したら「今は辞められない」と大声で怒鳴られた。4、契約社員。「有給休暇を使用しません」という誓約書の提出を求められた。退職を申しでたら「研修費を会社が負担している。どうしてくれるのか」と辞めさせてくれない。5、建設業。大工。フルタイムで働くアルバイト。雇用契約書も就業規則も無い。辞めたいが



明日のイベント

レイバーネットTV第32号放送「米労働運動とオキュパイ運動」

非戦を選ぶ演劇人の会 in 伊丹 ビースリーディング vol.1 「私(わん)の村から戦争が始まる ～沖縄やんばる・高江の人々が守ろうとするもの～」

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Figure 16: Labor Net Japan Homepage (Source: www.labornetjp.org) (Labor Net Japan 2012a). Reproduced with permission.

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*Labor Net Japan*'s purpose is to provide a forum for labour union activists to explore alternatives to the economic structure of Japan. One of the reasons they give for its existence is that cross-company and cross sector mobilization is difficult in Japan. Company based unions and industry based unions are organized under the national labour federations. The national labour federations provide policy recommendations to business federations and the Japanese government, attempt to raise base salaries, improve safety nets, reduce overtime, eliminate unpaid work, and stop unequal informal work conditions. However, they do not critique capitalism. The members of *Labor Net Japan* meet once a month to exchange information, organize campaigns and organize their annual "Laborfest" (Chan 2008:106-107). Yasuda Yukihiro, one of the founding members of *Labor Net Japan* explains the purpose of the organization as follows:

I think we concentrate on and build on the alterglobalization movement, that is, against unchecked neoliberalism. We have seen the results of the neoliberal economic policy of the Japanese government manifested in many ways: the dramatic increase in the informal work sector, including part-time work and contract work, through the so-called dispatch agencies; the precarization of women's work that dominates the informal sector; underemployment that is not reflected in the stable unemployment rate of 5 percent; and the end of the lifelong employment system. There is of course also the issue of migrant workers who, often because of their illegal working status, are subject to various kinds of discrimination. (Quoted in Chan 2008:107)

Some of the distinguishing characteristics of new forms of activism emerging in Europe and the Americas is the preference for diffuse, informal and participatory forms of organization (Juris and Pleyers 2009:65). In contrast to previous movements that used centralized structures for communication and coordination, new technology allows activists to interact through horizontal, peer-to-peer contact (Juris 2005). This "alter-activism" creates broad umbrella spaces, where diverse individuals, organizations,

collectives, and networks collaborate around common issues, while preserving their autonomy. This process of organization seems to have better appeal to youth. *Labor Net Japan* similarly uses technology to its advantage in creating an alternative space for Japanese labour activists to exchange information and organize strategies.

#### **7.4 Origin of the *Union Yes! Campaign***

One of the main organizers and faces of the *Union Yes!* movement was Tsuchiya Tokachi, an activist in his mid-thirties. I was first introduced to Tsuchiya through activist networks that I was beginning to network with in Tokyo. A mutual acquaintance took me to meet Tsuchiya at his workplace in Yokohama. Tsuchiya is a freelance filmmaker and his workplace was an apartment that he shared with other filmmakers.

As I talked with Tsuchiya he explained to me that the main purpose of the campaign was to encourage young people to join labour unions. Although that seemed like a straightforward project, the organizers of the campaign felt that there were a number of obstacles preventing this from happening. The campaign aimed to circumvent and subvert some of the elements they felt stood in their way. This chapter explores this campaign and the strategies used by the group to spread the message of unionization amongst young irregular workers. In doing so my aim is to gain insight into some of the political activities of the group and understand how this group is framing the working conditions of *freeter* and other irregular workers.

## 7.5 Media as a Tool of Decentralized Communication

Tsuchiya explained to me that, in his opinion, the mainstream media in Japan has had too much power and influence in shaping public opinion around the issue of *freeters* and other irregular workers. He also believed that labour issues were not being properly reported. In the case of *freeters* and other irregular workers, he believed that the media was misrepresenting them. The truth of their lives and the working conditions many of them face are not properly depicted in many media reports and this is what most of the public seem to base their opinion on when judging the working circumstances of young people. He said to me:

I consider myself to be a *freeteer* so I am sympathetic to the situation. I think that it is the media that bashes *freeters* all the time. I think that this is almost intentional on somebody's part to manipulate the public view. This will give them the excuse to treat *freeters* worse. This has been happening since the bubble burst. This works out for companies because they can get cheap labour, and they do not have to take good care of these employees. I think this is wrong and its time for *freeters* to fight back. So, that is what we are doing.

Tsuchiya's criticism of the media was not naïve. He had worked in the media industry himself. Frustrated with it, he had begun producing his own independent films when he became cognizant of media's ability to shape public discourse.

He directed the documentary film "A Normal Life, Please" (*Futsu no Shigoto ga Shitai*) (フツーの仕事がしたい) (Tsuchiya 2008). The film exposes the harsh working conditions of Kaikura Nobukazu, a 36 year-old cement truck driver working within the subcontracting system of Sumitomo Osaka Cement Company. Kaikura was working an average of 552 hours per month without receiving overtime pay, social insurance payments or the ability to take time off. The film follows Kaikura's and other drivers'

acceptance of their exploitative working conditions as something they were resigned to since they had no control over their working conditions. As the economy worsened, the company sought to cut costs by putting more pressure down through the levels of their subcontracting chain to save money. In order to make a living the drivers had little choice but to flaunt safety regulations by overloading their trucks. Moreover, because of the commission system they had to work long hours that put their health and safety at risk in order to make enough money to make the job viable. Although accidents and fatalities were occurring, government officials were tacitly accepting the practice of bending and breaking the rules.

Kaikura reaches his breaking point when the company changes its payment system away from a commission system to an amortization system where all of the overhead costs to keep the trucks on the road are downloaded onto the truck drivers. Out of desperation at no longer being able to make a living he approaches the *Solidarity Union of Construction and Transport Workers of Japan (Rentai Yunion)* (連帯ユニオン) although he is ambivalent towards the union and does not want to lose his job. Kaikura quits the union briefly after receiving a small sum of money from the company but then reconsiders and re-joins the union because he feels that his situation remains untenable.

Because of the stress of the long working hours and the abuse he receives from his employer, Kaikura becomes sick and is eventually hospitalized. The subcontracting company then sends hired thugs to his home to harass him. In the process his mother dies. Even at her funeral the thugs arrive, threaten and assault Kaikura. At this point union representatives and Tsuchiya himself intervene to protect Kaikura.



All of this is captured on film, the footage of the assault is provided to the police, and charges are laid against the subcontracting firm. The parent company distances itself from the controversy by laying blame with the subcontracting firm and refuses to meet with union officials. In response the union broadcasts scenes of the assault on a mobile screen set up in front of the company's headquarters. Afraid of the bad publicity, the parent company agrees to negotiate with union leaders and severs ties with the subcontracting firm. Kaikura receives a settlement and takes a different job that allows him to embark on a "normal life." The irony in this story is that although the subcontracting firm was forced out of business, it is soon back at work under a new name.

Kaikura Nobukazu's experiences are extreme but they speak to a shared sense that irregular workers are taken advantage of. Long working hours are deeply embedded in Japanese work culture. In 2006, the average annual hours of work per worker was 2288 (nearly 700 hours more than the EU average of 1600) including 408 hours of overtime (Morioka Koji quoted in Weathers and North 2009:616). Overtime is considered a virtual necessity for regular employees (*seishain*) since their job and livelihood are considered closely tied to the firm. A good strong job and livelihood security are supposed to justify long work hours for full-time workers. Although the foundations for employment security have significantly weakened since the early 1990s (Weathers and North 2009:618). In many cases the expectations for overtime often extends to non-regular workers without the added job security or benefits.

Tsuchiya identified with Kaikura's experience of working in post-bubble Japan. I learned that the instability he himself experienced working eventually drew him to the labour movement. Tsuchiya was born in Kyoto in 1971. After graduating from high

school he went through university on a newspaper scholarship. These working scholarships offer subsidized housing in the company dormitories and a small paycheck in return for delivering newspapers as a part-time worker. He graduated from Ryukoku University in Kyoto majoring in law and then moved to Tokyo in 1995. After working at a bookstore and factories part-time, he started to work at a movie production company in 2000. In March 2002 he was fired. The company was struggling financially and their solution to save money was to fire their employees. Tsuchiya believed his firing was unjustified. This experience led him to examine what rights he had as a worker. Through this process he came into contact with unions and labour activists. With his severance package he bought a video camera to begin to document what he saw as patterns of abuse towards the workers of his generation.

Believing that *freeters* and other irregular workers face an uphill battle to gain public support and understanding, Tsuchiya and other labour activists involved in the campaign discussed ways to subvert the mainstream media's message. Tsuchiya explained it this way:

It has only been the last few years since the Japanese media started to focus on *freeters*, demonstrations and everything. The media is not really interested in improving the situation. The media is interested in the percentage of people who are watching. I think that the media is focusing on it just because it is hip and fashionable. It is a hot topic right now. That is why they are focusing on *freeters*. Our concern is that the media might stop after a little while. Then there will be nothing for *freeters*. So what we are doing now is trying to set up the structure, a kind of system where we can still appeal to the public using other types of media, because the mainstream media will stop their coverage.

During the period of my fieldwork there were often media reports about *freeters* and other irregular workers and the question for activists like Tsuchiya and others centred

on how they could channel that attention and public interest into something concrete that would actually improve the lives of *freeters* in a direct way. Media reports of *freeters* and other irregular workers ranged from the sensational to the sympathetic but even the sympathetic reports rarely offered any solutions. Tsuchiya explained to me that he felt that labour unions offered the best way for *freeters* and others to improve their working conditions.

Community unions can hold employers legally accountable for how they treat their employees in a way that individual workers often feel that they cannot do on their own. As many of my interviews with *freeters* bore out, it was not that the legal framework for workers' rights was necessarily lacking but rather that irregular workers were particularly vulnerable to abuse because most of them seemed largely unaware of their legal rights. If individual workers are faced with circumstances such as long hours, harassment, or low wages, they often believe that their only choices are to either endure whatever is demanded of them or quit. If they quit, they are open to accusations of failing to take responsibility and are thus "choosing" their *freeter* lifestyle. The first step in the campaign was to attempt to spread the message that young people should look towards labour unions for help. Since members of the campaign did not see the mainstream media as a viable option for communicating this message, they planned to do this on their own.

One of the first goals of the *Union Yes! Campaign* was to use the Internet as a means to exert some control over the messages surrounding *freeters* and labour unions. Specifically they created a digital media project called "Union Tube." Matsubara Akira,

another one of the organizers of the *Union Yes! Campaign*, explained the purpose of Union Tube this way:

...we thought about making a website system for posting videos modeling “YouTube” in order to send our Union Yes! messages to the world. Using the videos and the Internet as a combination allows us to communicate with a lot of people in Japan and around the world...

Tsuchiya explained that the Internet provided the campaign with an ability to spread their own unfiltered message. He said:

Our main plan “Union Tube” is a system where we can report our union activities on demand. It allows us to communicate the real voice of labour union members and what is happening in our labour fights and all other activities widely and correctly.

Union Tube officially launched in September 2007 (See Figure 17). It is an interactive website which allows anyone to freely post their videos and opinions about labour issues in Japan. Within two months more than forty videos had been posted and access had reached 40,000 (*Labor Net Japan* 2007b).

PUBLISH

BROWSE


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News and Events : [UnionTube](#) Posted: 2007-08-21

はたらくものの動画投稿サイト「ユニオンチューブ」によるこそ。メンバー登録（無料）すれば、動画投稿・コメント書き込みができます。右上の「登録」をクリックして下さい。ユニオンチューブは「レイバーネット日本」の全面協力で運営しています。またユーチューブでも同じ動画が見られます。

Latest Videos :

 私たちは大森で働きます！！@工場閉鎖撤回闘争 2012-03-23 5 minutes 35 seconds




2012年3月17日東京・大田区にあるクリーニング工場ダイベンロイリネンサプライ㈱は、正当な理由もなく工場を閉鎖し、そこで働く労働者に希望退職を通知。労働者は工場閉鎖撤回を要求、生活を守るため完全と闘った。

 原発いらない！3.11 福島県民大集会@県民からの訴え 2012-03-14 6 minutes 9 seconds



2012年3月11日全国で反原発・脱原発の行動が行われた。福島県・郡山市において原発いらない！3.11福島県民大集会が、16,000人が参加するなか開催された。

 私たちは大森で働きます！！@工場閉鎖反対！希望退職反対抗議決起集会 2012-03-10 6 minutes 19 seconds



all tags

3分ビデオ laborfesta, 2009 ガテン系連帯 メーデー ユニオンYes！レイバーフェスタ 労働組合 反貧困 若者が代弁分 団結まつり 国労闘争団 国鉄闘争 平和運動 教員 東京東部労組 東部労組 派遣 郵政ユニオン 首都圏青年ユニオン



希望は、ユニオン。



Figure 17: Union Tube Website (Source: [www.video.labornetjp.org](http://www.video.labornetjp.org)) (Labor Net Japan 2012b). Reproduced with permission.

After the website's launch there were several reports in which members had used Union Tube to leverage better treatment from their employers. A cab driver made a short film about his workplace and posted it on Union Tube. The video put pressure on the company to improve the conditions at his workplace. A hairstylist union in collaboration with the Metropolitan Young People's Union released video footage of their negotiations with companies and thereby successfully received their overtime pay because the companies did not want the negative publicity.

Not all videos have been successful. For example, a young woman contesting her dismissal as a reporter from a national newspaper made a video to draw additional attention to her court case even though she ultimately lost her case. In this situation, the company was not sufficiently embarrassed to settle out of court.

Emergent forms of youth activism differ from previous youth movements in the innovative use of new information and communication technologies (Juris and Pleyers 2009:67). Alter-activists today use email, electronic listserves and webpages to circulate information, post documents and calls to action, circulate contact lists, provide a forum for discussion, post reflections, analyses, updates, links and logistical information. Interactive websites with open publishing projects also allow users to post information freely. Some trace this phenomenon to Indymedia founded during the Seattle protests in the late 1990s. The Indymedia project has developed into a transnational network of local Web-based projects with over 120 Indymedia sites around the world that allow alter-activists to freely post information (Juris 2005).

## 7.6 Improving the Image of Labour Unions with Japanese Youth

A second major goal of the *Union Yes! Campaign* was to improve the image of labour unions with Japanese youth. As Tsuchiya explained to me, labour unions are not particularly attractive to Japanese youth. The first major obstacle that he saw was that labour unions have a major image problem. He explained to me that: “Historically Japanese do not have a good sense of what a union is. They see no point in joining the union because they just take their money without giving anything back.” Tsuchiya suggested to me that the public views enterprise unions as ineffective.

Japan’s major unions have been described as the most cooperative in the democratic world (Weathers 2010:67). Those who support the enterprise union system point to Japan’s rapid economic growth in much of the post-World War II period. However, this success was in part based upon the neglect of the working conditions of female, irregular and small-firm workers. What Tsuchiya wanted to communicate is that in contrast to large enterprise unions, community unions challenge the cooperative approach of the large unions by emphasizing social justice and equality for low-wage workers. Since nearly half of all young workers are employed irregularly the members of the *Union Yes! Campaign* are trying to inform this group of workers about their rights.

Part of the “pre-meeting” in Shibuya was devoted to a discussion on how to improve the image of labour unions with youth. The strategy they decided upon was to come up with a catchy slogan to be paired with the movement’s logo. Everyone was encouraged to submit their own slogan in advance of the meeting with the intention that the best one would be chosen to represent the movement. A list of sixty potential slogans for the movement was circulated for discussion. The different slogans were quite

revealing about how the members of the campaign wanted to re-frame the image of labour unions in Japan. Some of those slogans included:

- ❖ If there is a union, there can be change
- ❖ Enter the union, stop employee bullying
- ❖ Let's make and join the labour union and claim our working rights.
- ❖ If you are in a union you will make it
- ❖ The company is for a moment, the union for life
- ❖ If you are in a union, there will be no fear
- ❖ You are not alone, *UNION-YES CAMPAIGN*
- ❖ Let's fight now. Let's create our future and cooperate and make it together—  
Union
- ❖ We can't be beaten. Let's fight in a union
- ❖ A union will fix your instability
- ❖ The union is the weapon of the weak
- ❖ Union is the tool to survive. *Union Yes! Campaign*
- ❖ We should stop disposing labourers
- ❖ You can't just cry and say nothing. Join the union and solve your problem properly
- ❖ From the isolation forced upon you by the society to choosing to fight together
- ❖ *Union yes! Power harassment no!*

One of the members of the *Union Yes! Campaign*, Komura Keiko<sup>18</sup>, explained her reasoning behind her slogan, "It is okay if you have a union." She explained:

My image for the poster for this campaign includes an illustration of a workplace where there are employees who are bullied, an illustration of sexual harassment, an illustration of a boss that is forcing a female employee to quit because she is pregnant and an image of another employee whose salary is not being paid. In the middle of the poster there is a catch phrase, "It is okay if you have a union." I would put a subtitle underneath this catch phrase stating, "If you think this is wrong you should consult someone, even if you are a temporary employee, or even if you are just one employee, you can join a union.

What Komura draws attention to in her vision of what a campaign poster should look like are examples of what she thinks are the types of unfair practices that irregular employees may face and her view is clearly gendered. Yet, bullying is something both male and

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<sup>18</sup> This is a pseudonym.



female irregular employees face given the weakness of their positions in the workplace. Komura continues with her message that workers who feel they encounter practices that are unfair should seek out labour unions. Moreover, she is emphasizing that such an activity is reasonable. The implication in her message is that there are barriers in the minds of the public towards joining labour unions. In her opinion, the campaign needs to address those barriers. Komura continues:

...”Solidarity” (*rentai*) or “Unity” (*danketsu*) have an image of being part of the uncool left wing. Therefore, I think these words are not very good for the public. Also, these words give people the impression that once you join you really have to do political activities.

“Solidarity” (*rentai*) (連帯) and “Unity” (*danketsu*) (団結) are slogans of the labour movement in Japan, as in other labour movements worldwide, used in political rhetoric, written on posters and at times chanted during demonstrations. Komura is suggesting that this older image of the Japanese labour movement is alienating to the younger generation. Moreover, she suggests that the belief that joining a labour union would require a full commitment in engaging in the political activities of the labour union contributes to its unpopularity. Furthermore she says:

Considering the fact that there are no riots in Japan despite the fact that there are many unreasonable things being done, I believe that to “fight” (*tatakau*) (戦う), does not resonate with people. However, there are a lot of people who have been hurt by unfair treatment and are struggling with unstable lives, therefore I think it is very important to send the message “you are not alone” “talk to us anyhow”, and “it is not your fault.”

Again Komura is drawing a distinction between the qualities of Japan’s older labour movement that she believes are untenable if the campaign hopes to appeal to a younger group of workers. She suggests distancing the message of the campaign from

the impulse to “fight.” Instead she suggests accentuating the way people have been hurt by irregular employment and appeal to their sense of justice and fairness. She continues:

Moreover there are many people who believe that they do not have any rights if they are not full-time employees. There are many people who think they cannot be helped because they are non-regular employees. Therefore, I would like to include the message that this is not the case. These are the people who really need a union. (*Labor Net Japan* 2007a:2)

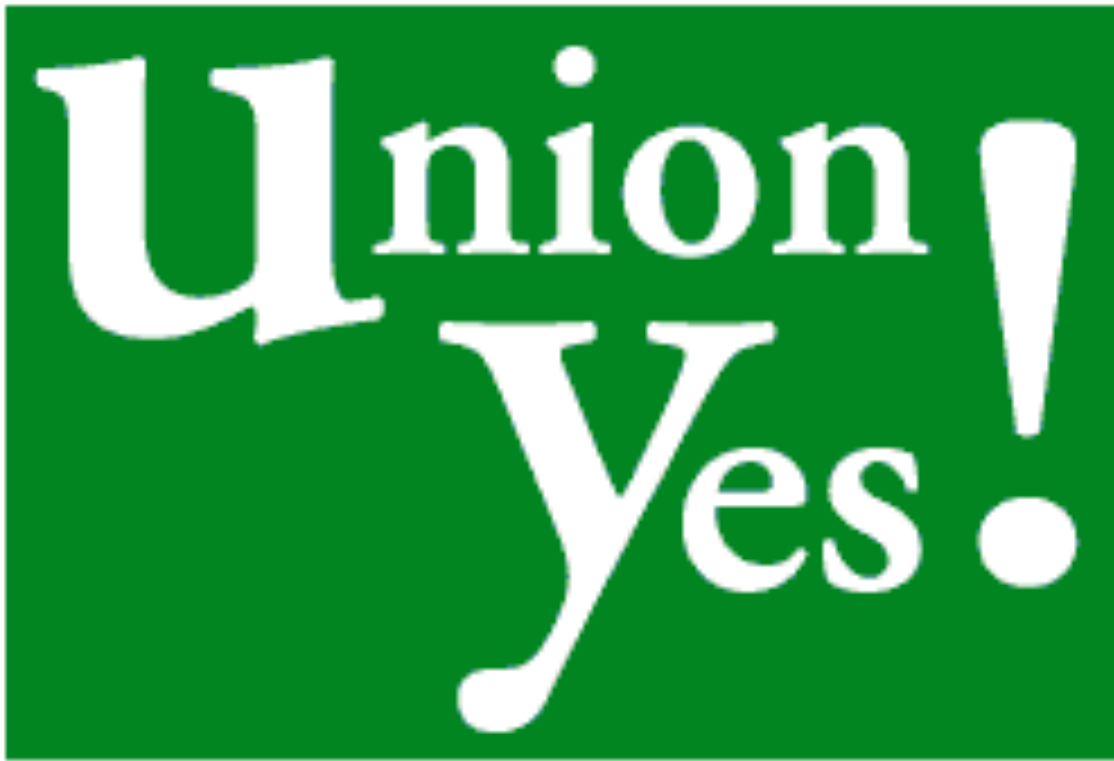
Komura is drawing attention to the issue that one of the problems in organizing young irregular workers is that they are unaware they have any rights and therefore it is important to communicate that all workers, even those that are not full-time employees, are protected under labour laws.

In her vision of re-casting the image of labour unions she advocates appealing to workers sense of fairness and justice in the workplace, communicating that labour unions are the vehicles through which to achieve this and spread the message that labour unions are open to all workers. She suggests that the campaign downplay elements of Japan’s more traditional labour movement with its emphasis on fighting, proclaiming unity and solidarity and expecting members to be fully committed to political actions.

Komura’s slogan, “It is okay to have a union,” was not ultimately selected for the campaign, however the organizers did agree on emphasizing a positive message for their campaign. The final decision for the slogan was “Union is Hope: Union Yes!” (See Figure 18).

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希望は、ユニオン。



**Figure 18: *Union Yes! Campaign Logo* (Source: *Union Yes!*). Reproduced with permission.**

The discussions around the campaign's slogan were examples of competing visions among labour activists of re-branding the labour movement in a way that they thought would appeal to young people. As the various slogans submitted for consideration attest to, there were certainly wide ranges of opinions about what part of irregular work should be emphasized. Those organizing the movement who debated the different elements involved and ultimately decided that a positive message of “hope” should be dominant.

## 7.7 Communicating “Hope”

Encouraged by the reception he was getting with his first film, Tsuchiya told me that he was currently working on another video project about labour abuses in the auto industry. Specifically, the film he was working on was about contract employees from Okinawa who formed a union to fight against their treatment in an automotive plant. As we were talking, he produced a recruitment flyer from an employment dispatching agency advertising opportunities to earn JPN¥290,000 per month (about US\$3100) working in an automotive manufacturing plant. This particular advertisement was from Okinawa but Tsuchiya explained that it was a common practice for recruitment agencies to advertise in rural areas where there are fewer employment prospects when they need fresh workers in Tokyo. The wage of JPN¥290,000 is a decent wage anywhere in Japan but it is especially attractive to people living in rural areas. The problem with the advertisement is that it is misleading. They would not be paid this much even with overtime. Furthermore, there is a big discrepancy between the treatment of the workers hired through an employment agency and workers hired directly by the company. Both contract workers and full-time employees can live in the company dormitory but contract employees have to pay a fee while the full-time workers do not. The full-time workers earn a higher salary although everyone does the same work in the factory. The system effectively created a two-tiered employment system in the factory.

Both the factory and employment agency were manipulating the labour laws to minimize the amount they would have to compensate the contract workers. Under current labour law if contract employees work for a year the company is obligated to hire them. In this case the company and temping agency were aware of the law but

deliberately did not follow it. They used a variety of tactics to avoid hiring any of the contract workers including job rotations, a series of short contracts and terminations. Some of the contract workers learned about the law after contacting a union and armed with this knowledge, they confronted the factory. As a result the company was forced to hire 200 to 300 contract workers as full-time employees. This particular case drew media attention (TBS 2007). It was a small but symbolically important victory.

Tsuchiya knew that these types of abuses of irregular workers were rampant in Japan and that the abuses are often subtle and largely unreported. However he felt that communicating these types of stories and showing how labour unions were able to rectify the situations was an important step in improving labour conditions in Japan.

In addition to Tsuchiya's films, the campaign began to circulate other examples of their members' successes with an emphasis on the message of "hope" that labour unions could bring to young irregular workers. At one of the meetings a young man who worked part-time at a post office shared his story. He explained that since joining a union the conditions of his job had improved. He explained:

Before, when I complained about how we take days off, or how we are positioned in the workplace to my supervisor. I was told to talk to the section head *Kachō* (課長). Then when I would speak to the section head, he would say to talk to my immediate supervisor. I was just being passed around. But when I negotiated with them through the union, they finally listened to me.

Another woman who worked as a travel tour guide expressed a similar experience:

For each tour that I do, I'm actually employed on a separate short contract according to each tour. Even if I work up until midnight, the daily pay is the same. I don't have social insurance. When some high school students asked me for advice about how to get a job as a tour guide, the only thing I could tell them was to try to get a different job. This is the reason I decided to make a union. We

were successful in getting late night overtime pay in some of the companies. I used to have a prejudice against unions, but now I am glad that I made a union.

These were the types of stories that the campaign members wanted to share. Union Tube was one of the ways that the campaign could use the voices and faces of young people involved in union activities and spread their experiences to a wider audience. As another one of the organizers, Matsubara, explained:

The first thing we would like to do is interview...young people who have just recently joined unions. We want to get their voices out by asking them about their experiences after joining labour unions.

## **7.8 Conclusion**

The *Union Yes! Campaign* was organized by an informal group of labour activists, connected through *Labor Net Japan*, with the intention of encouraging young *freeters* and other irregular workers to join labour unions. However, despite their belief that unions offered the best way for these workers to improve their working conditions, the organizers recognized that there were barriers in the minds of young people towards joining a union. Although opinions differed amongst the membership, some felt that the association of labour unions with Japan's "old" left with their emphasis on fighting and engaging in political battles is alienating to youth. Recognizing this tension the organizers decided to present labour unions as a source of "hope" in an otherwise bleak labour market.

The method the campaign used to spread their message was through the creation of Union Tube because they felt the mainstream media could not be relied upon to present the plight of *freeters* or the activities of labour unions accurately.

Communicating the experiences and stories of *freeters* and other irregular workers' struggles and how labour unions have been able to step in and change the circumstances for the better was the message of Tsuchiya's film "A Normal Life, Please." The model of this message has been incorporated by the campaign since the organizers believe it is a persuasive strategy for attracting young Japanese to the labour movement.

Framing the struggles of *freeters* as a labour issue by the *Union Yes! Campaign* provides another example of a group of Japanese activists contesting the meanings associated with irregular work in post-industrial Japan. Although the political message is dampened somewhat so as to avoid alienating youth, there is no mistaking the movement as political. In the next chapter I provide an ethnographic account of a group of labour activists calling themselves "*Workers Action*." In contrast to the *freeter* unions and the *Union Yes! Campaign*, they advocate a return to a militant form of activism by channelling the anger of youth to confront authority.

## Chapter 8: The Performance of Violence: Radical Students, Militant Unions and the Legacy of the 1960s' Protest Cycle

### 8.1 Introduction

In chapters five and six I explored how irregular work was being interpreted and re-framed as a political issue by two different *freeter* unions. In the *Tokyo Freeter Union* I emphasized how the use of elaborate street protests blended with the political discourse of *precarity* to interpret the issues surrounding irregular employment in Japan. In the *Freeter Union Fukuoka* I highlighted how the union itself operates as an alternative place for young *freeters* and other irregular workers to find companionship and support for some of the wounds they feel they have suffered in Japan's new employment system. In chapter seven I discussed how the issue of irregular work and Japanese youth was being framed as a political issue by exploring activist networks and digital technology in the *Union Yes! Campaign*.

In this chapter, I examine how groups within Japan's "old" left are also attempting to politicize *freeter* labour and mobilize young people into the labour movement. In contrast to the message of "hope" in the *Union Yes! Campaign*, a group calling itself "*Workers Action*" wants a return to militancy. Whereas the *Tokyo Freeter Union*, *Freeter Union Fukuoka* and *Union Yes! Campaign* encouraged youth to participate in street demonstrations, stand-up to their employers, unionize and ask themselves serious questions about the direction of Japanese society and their place in it as citizens and workers, *Workers Action* stands apart from these groups in its open



espousal of confrontation and violence to overcome inequality. Through an ethnographic study of *Workers Action* I explore how the group, composed of militant unions, student groups and individual activists frames the issue of *freeters* and other young irregular workers within an ongoing ideological struggle against capitalism that extends back to the pre-World War II era. By paying attention to two major groups within *Workers Action*, the *Zengakuren* (全学連) and *Chiba-Doro* (千葉動労), I explore how the historical legacies of these groups influence their efforts at politicizing *freeter* labour.

## 8.2 The Demonstration

In providing advice for doing fieldwork in Japan, Joy Hendry (2003) discussed the role played by serendipity. “Luck” can play a role in fieldwork and one of the benefits of doing long-term participant observation fieldwork is that it increases one’s chances of being in the “right” place at the “right” time to encounter something that can take one in a direction that had not and could not have been anticipated. As I discovered, this is even possible in a metropolis the size of Tokyo. For me, one such serendipitous moment occurred one morning in early March 2008, just three months into my fieldwork. I was out running personal errands and leaving the Shibuya Train Station and making my way across the large pedestrian area towards Shibuya Crossing.<sup>19</sup> As I was making my way through the crowd, someone thrust a flyer into my hand. I do not always accept the flyers offered to me in front of train stations in Japan because most of them are advertising for merchandize or services for which I have little use, but this time I was

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<sup>19</sup> Shibuya Crossing is an iconic location in Tokyo. It is a massive crosswalk where all of the traffic comes to a halt to allow pedestrians to simultaneously cross through the intersection from all directions. Images of Shibuya Crossing are commonly used to depict the hustle and bustle of urban Japan in photos and film.

happy that I accepted the offering. The flyer was a political call to action for people to gather the following Sunday at Yoyogi Park<sup>20</sup> to join a demonstration of workers who were planning to take a stand.

A group calling itself “*Workers Action*” (ワーカーズ アクション) was organizing the demonstration. They framed the demonstration as part of a global movement against the war in Iraq and the increasing tension with Iran. Japan had recently dispatched members of its Self Defence Forces to Iraq to provide “logistical support” to the coalition of forces led by the Americans. The decision by the Japanese Government to involve the Self Defense Forces was controversial. Many critics on the left saw this deployment as a violation of the spirit of their “peace constitution” and renunciation of war and militarism after their defeat in World War II, which is enshrined in Article 9 of the constitution. Some critics felt that the involvement of the Self Defense Forces overseas signalled an increasing right-wing shift in Japan and a harbinger of the eventual eradication of Article 9 from the constitution and the start of the re-militarization of Japan. The protection of Article 9 has itself sparked a movement of activists committed to peace and the preservation of the constitution (Creighton 2011).

However, a demonstration against war was not the only thing that caught my eye. What I found intriguing about the flyer was that one of the messages written on it implored young people to bring their anger to the demonstration to add to the revolutionary power of labour unions. The flyer went on to claim that the workers joining the demonstration were united in their opposition to stopping the war and united in trying to force both American President Bush and Japanese Prime Minister Fukuda out

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<sup>20</sup> Yoyogi Park is a large public park and gathering place in the center of Tokyo.

of power. On the reverse side of the flyer it explained that the demonstration, scheduled for March 16<sup>th</sup>, 2008, was in partial response to the arrest of two young workers earlier in the month, on March 9<sup>th</sup>, at an anti-war demonstration in Tokyo's Ikebukuro district. The flyer stated, "You will get thrown in jail for 12 days if you protest against the war!?" and suggested this was an unacceptable consequence for demonstrating against the war. In response to what they described as the heavy handedness of the police, the flyer asked people to come to the demonstration on March 16<sup>th</sup> for a global day of action and contribute to an "explosion of anger" (See Figure 19)

Troops out of Iraq and Afghanistan. Don't attack Iran.  
イラク反戦! イラン空爆阻止!

Global demonstration 15-16 March

# 全世界一斉デモ

**3.16** (sun)

代々木公園  
B地区野外ステージ

13:30 集会開始 15:30 デモ出発



青年の怒りを一つにしよう!  
労働運動の力で革命やろう!

われわれは奴隷じゃない。この社会を動かしているのは労働者だ。  
労働者には国を止める力もある。青年労働者をあくどく搾取し、  
戦争に突き進む福田・御手洗をぶっ倒せ! 職場から大反乱を起こそう。



写真は、昨年9.29フォーカス  
アクションの施設デモ

<http://workersaction.web.fc2.com/> workers\_revolution@yahoo.co.jp

ワーカーズ アクション実行委員会 (連絡先) 全国労働組合交流センター TEL.03-3845-7461 FAX.03-3845-7463 東京都台東区元浅草2-4-10 五宝堂ビル5F  
国鉄千葉駅労働組合 TEL.043-222-7207 千葉県千葉市中央区美町2-8 DC会館内

Figure 19: *Workers Action: Demonstration Flyer*—(Source: Workers Action). Reproduced with permission.

Intrigued by the flyer, I went to Yoyogi Park that Sunday afternoon to observe the different groups who were participating in the demonstration and to listen to speeches delivered by individuals and representatives from the different groups. This was the first demonstration I attended organized by *Workers Action* and I was immediately struck by four things: the large size of the crowd, how well organized they were, the heavy police presence and the disproportionately larger amount of middle aged and older workers in comparison to youth. The reason for the different feel of this demonstration in comparison to the *freeter* demonstrations, I would come to learn, is that the participants here were veterans of Japan's left with many belonging to organizations with a long history of labour and political struggles.

The demonstrators had gathered in one section of the park where they were using an open-air amphitheatre equipped with a stage. It appeared to me there were upwards of one thousand people in attendance although it was difficult to gauge the actual number with so many people milling about in the crowd. Reports from the organizers put the number around 1500 (*Zeishin* 2008). It was clear from many of the banners, signs and flags that were hoisted up throughout the crowd that there were representatives from various labour unions in attendance as well as some student groups and some non-profit organizations (See Figure 20).





**Figure 20: *Workers Action Protest, Yoyogi Park, Tokyo, March 16, 2008 (Photo by Robin O'Day)***

Information booths had been set up offering up an assortment of material. Most of the information took the form of flyers and pamphlets. There were also other items that included books and videos for sale. A series of speakers took to the stage one after another, speaking to a range of issues as to why they were joining the demonstration that day. Some speakers were subdued while others appeared to be trying to whip the crowd into a frenzy. Some of the messages being conveyed by the speakers included; “there could be a revolution through the worker’s movement; it was workers who were responsible for moving the nation forward and thus they should not be treated as slaves; it was time to defeat the Liberal Democratic Party and the rich capitalists they represent who are exploiting young workers and engaging in war; they did not want to contribute

any of their labour towards advancing the war; young people are angry at being called “losers” who always quit in the face of adversity; the “elite” of the labour movement are as much to blame as the politicians and capitalists; total revolution was the only solution.”

When the speeches concluded people were instructed to line up for a march through the streets of the Shibuya district. As the crowds lined up, it was an impressive display. People wore headbands and armbands; some shouted slogans through megaphones; there was a truck outfitted with speakers from which one of the organizers shouted instructions and encouragement; colourful flags representing the different groups flew in the air; and some people pounded on drums and blew whistles.

It was at this point when the level of police presence became most apparent to me. I had noticed a number of police vehicles lining the road as I made my way to the park. There were many buses, but there were also police cars and other vehicles used for crowd control. There were also large numbers of uniformed police officers milling about. When the demonstrators were almost ready to march, the riot police emerged in full riot gear. At this point the uniformed police seemed to exponentially expand. What also appeared to be members of Japan’s security services in plain clothes, but wearing earpieces for communicating, dotted the parade route. The police deliberately blocked the exit to the park to prevent the demonstration to move out into the streets.

Although most of the people at the demonstration appeared to be middle-aged or older, the young people migrated to the front of the demonstration. For several minutes the youth taunted the rows of police blocking their path. The tension at the front of the protest parade steadily mounted with the young people becoming exceedingly animated and the police becoming increasingly obstinate and repeatedly warning the protesters not

to leave the park and march in the streets. Suddenly the demonstrators moved forward en masse. The police, unable to stop the momentum, gave way to allow the procession into the streets.

As the demonstration moved into the streets the protesters chanted slogans, blew whistles and shouted out their support. The sheer number of participants in the demonstration took over the street as the crowd made its way from Yoyogi Park through the trendy shopping district towards Shibuya Station. No longer attempting to stop the demonstration, the police simply attempted to contain the situation by surrounding the crowd as it moved slowly through the streets. I witnessed several scuffles when police tried to arrest demonstrators by pulling individuals from the crowd. For the most part, the crowd of demonstrators were able to pull whomever was grabbed by the police back into the crowd but a major confrontation soon came when the demonstration reached Shibuya Station. The police had temporarily cordoned off Shibuya Crossing to prevent traffic and pedestrians into the intersection in an attempt to allow the demonstration to pass. It was not clear to me who instigated the confrontation but a rather dramatic scuffle between some of the student protesters and police unfolded in front of the captive audience waiting to get through the intersection. Shouting, pushing and an inordinate number of cameras appeared to capture the moment when police hauled off four members of the student demonstrators into waiting vehicles (See Figure 21).





**Figure 21: Confrontation between police and members of *Workers Action* at Shibuya Crossing; March 16, 2008 (Photo by Robin O'Day).**

That night on the evening news, there was a brief acknowledgement of the event but it was not *Workers Action* or workers taking a stand against the war that was the focus. Rather, the broadcaster simply and briefly stated that four members of the *Zengakuren* were arrested for demonstrating in Shibuya before swiftly moving on to the next story. As I would come to learn, confrontations, scuffles and arrests between members of the *Zengakuren* and the police were a frequent occurrence.

### **8.3 The *Zengakuren***

The spirited young people at the demonstration were members of the *Zengakuren*. These student activists have a long history of radical political activities in Japan that on occasion have escalated into bombings, hijackings, kidnappings and even killings. The

most extreme activities occurred in the 1960s and 1970s when their activism was most visible. In recent decades, although the numbers of members and the political influence of the *Zengakuren* have declined, the *Zengakuren* still maintain a presence in Japan as evidenced by this demonstration. As I was to learn, the *Zengakuren* also had a political stake in attempting to define the discourse about *freeters* and other young irregular workers.

The *Zengakuren* officially formed in 1947 (Ikeda 1970:9) but they trace their roots back to the pre-war era (Smith 1970). When World War II ended in 1945, students slowly began to return from the war and begin their studies anew. The repressive atmosphere on campus in the years leading up to and including the war had been removed and students were able to express their thoughts openly without threat of retaliation. Many students were embittered by their experiences in the war and blamed the state institutions and the political and military leaders who had led the nation into conflict. The beginnings of the student movement focused on removing military influences from the campuses, facing the humiliation of losing the war, dealing with the lingering presence of U.S. forces on military bases and a turn towards a more humanitarian outlook opposed to nuclear weapons (Dowsey 1970:5; Matsunami 1970:42).

Living conditions were harsh immediately after the war with little food, clothing and insufficient transportation and facilities. As a result, university students began to organize themselves into Livelihood Associations to pool their resources to provide one another with cheap meals, clothes and books. These organizations grew into student councils that critiqued the old university system and demanded more power for students.

In 1948 a student federation was formed calling itself the *Zen Nihon Gakusei Jichikai Sorengo* (全日本学生自治会総連合), which became abbreviated to *Zengakuren* (全学連). Representatives from 145 different universities were involved representing 300,000 students. In the beginning the formation of the *Zengakuren* was supported by the Japanese Communist Party (JCP). However, as the group developed, it split from the JCP and internal divisions fragmented the movement into several different factions.

The *Zengakuren* came to prominence and worldwide attention in 1960 when they opposed the revision of the U.S.—Japan Security Treaty known as “ANPO.” In June of that year, hundreds of thousands of protesters surrounded the Diet building in the centre of Tokyo to oppose the Japanese government’s approval of the treaty they believed favoured the interests of the United States over those of Japan. Students in the *Zengakuren* battled police inside the Diet compound. During the confrontation one young female activist was killed. By the time the protests were over the protestors had forced the cancellation of then U.S. President Eisenhower’s state visit to Japan and they eventually forced then Japanese Prime Minister Kishi from office because of his handling of the protest. A decade later, in 1970 on the anniversary of the ANPO struggles, Tokyo was again awash in conflict with hundreds of thousands of protestors clashing with police.

The 1960 ANPO crisis was the most dramatic confrontation between the two main political factions to emerge in postwar Japan (Krauss 1974:3). Since the 1940s Japan’s political culture had polarized into those on the left and those on the right. On the left were the “progressives” (*kakushin*) (革新) which included intellectuals, students, labour unions and the Socialist and Communist parties. On the right were the “conservatives” (*hoshu*) (保守) which included business persons, shopkeepers, farmers

and the ruling Liberal Democratic Party. During all of the confrontations between the left and right camps during the 1960s, the Japanese student movement played a key role. The *Zengakuren* operated as the “shock troops” of the left, often escalating incidents by battling with police and in so doing changing the course of the struggle.

The Japanese student movement, like similar student movements elsewhere, peaked in the late 1960s. Internal conflict within the *Zengakuren* led to a series of tit-for-tat killings between the different factions. These activities fragmented Japan’s New Left, gave the state reasonable justification for increasingly repressive tactics towards these groups and significantly tarnished the public’s opinion of the student movement and the left in general (Chan 2008:22). Many activists describe the political left as declining in the 1970s and 1980s even though many of the founders of NGO groups in the 1990s trace their inspiration back to the activities of the student, anti-war and women’s movements of the 1960s and 1970s.

#### **8.4 The Meeting**

The flyer I received for the demonstration had an e-mail address for the *Workers Action* group. I contacted the group, introduced myself and research project and inquired whether anyone in the movement would be interested in speaking with me about the demonstration and the general activities of the movement. I received a speedy and friendly reply from one of the organizers, Kawahara<sup>21</sup>, who invited me to their next meeting.

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<sup>21</sup> This is a pseudonym.

The meeting was held in a room rented in a community centre located in the eastern end of Tokyo. I arrived a little early in order to introduce myself and I met Kawahara and some of the other organizers who had set up a booth at the entrance to the room. The organizers were very friendly and happy that I was interested in their activities. I paid a small fee to enter, to help cover the costs of the room rental and a package of materials I was given which included the agenda for the meeting. As it is customary to exchange business cards (*meishi*) (名刺) when first meeting in Japan, the organizers noticed from my card that I was affiliated with Tokyo's Sophia University. As was explained in Chapter Two, when people meet for the first time in Japan the frame or institution to which they belong is the most important thing, rather than their attribute, which, in my case, was being a researcher. Because I was from Sophia University one of the organizers suggested I sit with one of their members, Sakano Yohei who was a student from Sophia University, and a prominent member of the *Zengakuren*. I was taken by one of the organizers over to where Sakano was sitting with a group of other students, also members of the *Zengakuren* from different universities.

Most of the students were very friendly but a few of them seemed to eye me with suspicion and said very little or nothing at all. However, most of them were very open and inviting and Sakano was happy to chat. Another member of the *Zengakuren*, Kuraoka Masumi<sup>22</sup>, was also very interested in talking to me about my perspective on international labour conditions. They assumed that I was an activist and some of the members wanted to know about the student movement outside of Japan.

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<sup>22</sup> Kuraoka eventually became the vice-president of the *Zengakuren*.

As we got to know each other better, I told them that I had been at their recent demonstration in Shibuya and saw some of the students getting arrested. At this point Sakano told me that one of the last times he was arrested at a demonstration the judge ordered that he get a psychiatric evaluation. The psychiatrist he was ordered to see concluded that he was a “juvenile delinquent.” At this, the other students burst into laughter. Being arrested seemed to give him credibility, or cultural capital, in the eyes of the other members. Sakano’s story also indicated the general disdain the members attributed to how authority figures depicted their political activities.

## **8.5 Protest at the University**

Kuraoka let me know that the members of the *Zengakuren* at Hosei University were planning a demonstration against the university for what they felt was ongoing intimidation and suppression because the university had banned their group from using school facilities for their activities. A common dimension of university life in Japan is participation in student-led clubs, or “circles” as the students call them. Students organize circles about anything they want: music, sport, design, art or any other area of interest. This type of activity is usually encouraged by the university and considered a normal and healthy dimension of college life. However, the *Zengakuren* at Hosei University were locked in an oppositional struggle with the administration. The University was seemingly attempting to discourage and control their activities.

I would later learn from some of the members of the *Zengakuren* that the protest I was attending that day was part of an ongoing fight with the university that had been going on since 2001, a fight centered on the use of space on campus. Hosei University

once had a Student Hall where over one hundred independent student clubs were located. The Student Hall served as a center point of student life for all students, including the political activities of the *Zengakuren*. During the 1960s the Student Centre served as one of the key locations for student activists opposed to the Vietnam War.<sup>23</sup> As some of the members of the *Zengakuren* explained to me, things began to change at the university in 2001 when the administration introduced a series of reforms that included the building of more modern facilities with a sharp increase in tuition fees to pay for the “improvements.”

The students claimed that during this time university authorities began tightening their grip over student activities. When the Iraq war began in 2003 the Student Centre was still serving as a hub of activist struggles against the war. Coincidentally, a fire broke out in the Student Centre in 2004, and this gave the university, the *Zengakuren* claim, the pretext to tear down the facility. Over the next two years the University continued to escalate their control over student activities by limiting the kinds of flyers that could be handed out on campus and by eventually trying to ban notice boards completely. The members of the *Zengakuren* see the University’s actions as an attempt to suppress free speech on campus. It was the attempt to ban the notice boards that initiated the first of a series of protests by the *Zengakuren* on March 14, 2006.

The first protest saw twenty-nine of the students arrested. The university also suspended and expelled a number of the students involved in the demonstration. These actions only inflamed the situation. The *Zengakuren* claim the university hired “thugs” to hang around campus to threaten, intimidate and assault them if they attempted to engage

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<sup>23</sup> In fact Hosei University has a long and complex history of not only political activism, but has also occupied a central position in the development of left-wing political philosophy that can be traced back to the prewar scholarship of Miki Kiyoshi and Tosaka Jun who both lost their professorships for their left-wing political views (Goto-Jones 2006:8).

in any kind of political activity on campus. They told me that the university had installed over one hundred and fifty security cameras to monitor the campus. The protest that I was attending was part of this wave of activism by the students.

I arrived at one of the train stations near the university during the lunch hour. As I walked towards the university's front entrance, I could hear the faint sound of someone shouting through a megaphone off in the distance. I simply followed the intense noise to the front gate of the university. When I arrived, there were about a dozen student protesters standing in front of the gate. Some of them were holding banners. One of the students was shouting through a megaphone. Other members were handing out flyers imploring all students to join them in their demonstration.

The protesters were outside the university entrance but a row of security guards stood in formation immediately in front of the gate to prevent them from entering the campus. The security guards kept the gate almost fully closed, open only wide enough to allow one person through at a time. As I approached the protestors I saw a cluster of undercover police officers, some wearing business suits, some in street clothes, watching the protesters from a distance of about fifty meters. Some of the officers (all men) used a combination of sunglasses, hats and masks<sup>24</sup> to disguise themselves while others did not try to disguise themselves at all. These officers were obvious, standing far enough away from the activities to not appear as if they were participants but close enough to observe the activities of the protesters. They had a variety of recording devices including cameras with long telephoto lenses, video cameras and notepads. Most of them also wore

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<sup>24</sup> The type of masks I am referring to are the white gauze medical masks that are commonly sold in pharmacies and typically worn by members of the public to protect themselves from germs. Ohnuki-Tierny (2002) discusses the use of these masks in relationship to how Japanese conceive of and protect themselves from illness. It is common to see people going about their daily business wearing these masks when they have a cold or are feeling under the weather. In this case the masks were an effective disguise.



earpieces. In addition to the undercover police officers, there were also several uniformed officers on the scene in addition to a police bus full of riot police. In total I counted 18 protesters, 31 plain-clothes officers, 9 security guards, 3 university officials and around 20 riot police, better than a 3 to 1 advantage for the authorities.

I made my way past the police presence monitoring the situation to the front of the protest where activists were handing out flyers. I took a handout from a person I recognized from the previous meeting. I nodded at him as I took the flyer and he seemed to recognize me. Since I did not want to be in the middle of the demonstration I made my way over to the side to look over the flyer and observe what was happening. Another protester came over to me with a big grin on his face to invite me to join the protest. I smiled and thanked him. Just as I did, Kuraoka came running over to me, pleased that I had come.

I decided not to enter the campus because there was such heavy security at the gate and I did not have any official business at the university. Under normal circumstances I doubt anyone would have stopped me but since the tension was high at that moment I refrained from trying to enter. Also, I could not be in close proximity to the demonstrators without being seen as a participant, so I needed to keep my distance.<sup>25</sup> The only place left for me was in the area with all the undercover officers. This felt a bit awkward but the location had a great view of the demonstration because it was a slightly elevated walkway overlooking the university gate.

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<sup>25</sup> If I joined the demonstration I would run the risk of arrest. I wanted to avoid this possible outcome since being arrested would likely end my ability to continue with my research project, could result in a revocation of my visa and seriously impact my ability to return to Japan for any further research. My decision to not join the demonstration likely hurt my relationship with some of the members of the *Zengakuren* who would have preferred to see me as an active participant in their demonstrations.

Clifford Geertz (1973) claimed that he was “invisible” to a group of locals as the drama of a Balinese cockfight unfolded before him. Despite my own feelings of being far more conspicuous than I probably was as the social drama of this protest unfolded before me, I was certainly not invisible. Rather, I would describe my presence as largely inconsequential to both the police and the members of the *Zengakuren*. The general disinterest in my presence at the protest worked to my advantage because I was left alone to engage in participant-observation (with an emphasis on observation).

The protesters were urging other university students to join the demonstration. Since the demonstration was taking place during the lunch hour it did manage to draw a sizable crowd of students and university officials into the main courtyard of the campus to observe the protest. However, from my observations none of the onlookers appeared to have actually joined the protest.

After twenty minutes of shouting in the direction of the university, several of the protestors attempted to enter the campus. The security guards also attempted to stop them. What ensued was a melee of shoving and pushing between the demonstrators and security guards. A few of the demonstrators broke through the barrier and proceeded to run around the campus courtyard dramatically throwing handfuls of their demonstration flyers into the air. Once they broke through the barrier they were chased by several of the security guards who would inevitably catch them, struggle to control them and then throw them off campus. Sometimes it was easy for the security guards to catch and remove the protestors but at other times they would lose control of one of the protestors and have to begin the process all over again of chasing them around campus. Sakano, who I had previously met at one of the meetings, proved to be particularly effective at breaking

through the barrier and difficult to catch once inside. At one point the security guards managed to catch him and get him back through the gate but within a few minutes he had managed to scale the fence to regain access to the campus, much to the consternation of the security guards.



**Figure 22: Members of the *Zengakuren* struggling with security guards at the main gate of Hosei University (Photo by Robin O'Day)**

I also observed a curious thing while several of the demonstrators were pushing and attempting to get through the gate. During the thick of all the shoving Kuraoka slipped past all of the security guards. This seemed to surprise her because she stopped on the other side of the gate and seemed to be unsure of what to do next. To my surprise she turned around and went back through the gate to re-join the pack of protesters

tussling with the security guards to get into campus. For Kuraoka, it appeared the confrontation at the gate was the entire point of what she was doing at that moment.

All of the action between the protestors and the security guards at the university gate seemed to provide a lively bit of entertainment for the students that were hanging around in the courtyard enjoying their lunch break. It seemed to me that for the demonstrators, showing their power and ability to push back against authority was an important aspect of the demonstration. I tried to catch the reactions of some of the students observing the protest. What I saw seemed to range from baffled disinterest to surprise and amusement. As the demonstrators tried to push their way into campus some of the students cheered them on as if it was some kind of sport or game. However, it was not always clear to me if some of the students were laughing *with* the demonstrators or laughing *at* them. There was certainly a disconnection between the protestors and other students.

In an attempt to read the mood of the crowd, I listened to a few of the passing conversations of the students watching the protests. In one exchange between a group of young male students, one of them asked his friends if anyone knew who these protestors were. One of his friends replied that they were students but one of the others sharply disagreed with him. Another student looking perplexed loudly expressed his dismay that the police were not arresting the protestors. This student seemed stunned that the police and university administration were tolerating such open confrontation.

I also observed another interesting interaction between the students and the security guards. At one point during the pushing at the gate one of the security guards, who was in the midst of struggling with one of the protesters, started laughing! It was

obvious this particular security guard was not as emotionally invested in the situation as the protestors or some of the grim-faced administrators or police.

The uncontrollable laughter of the security guard unwittingly undermined what seemed like an intensely serious moment. On the surface the demonstration seemed like a straightforward confrontation between the students and the University, and by extension, the police who had been called in to control the situation. However, the reaction of the security guard and many of the students watching the demonstration suggested mixed feelings towards the confrontations between the *Zengakuren* and the University.

During the course of my fieldwork I also came to know several professors at Hosei University. I asked several of them how they understand and feel about the *Zengakuren* protests at the University. Several of the professors expressed a sympathetic attitude towards the protestors to me privately. One professor explained that he felt most of the professors in some ways supported the students but they were caught between them and the university administration. Another professor explained that she really dreaded being ordered by the university administration to stand at the gate with other professors and the security guards during these protests to prevent the protestors from entering the campus.<sup>26</sup>

I later learned that the *Zengakuren* used the word “scramble” (*sukuramuburu*) (スクランブル) to describe this type of altercation with authorities. During this particular demonstration the scramble lasted for about 15 minutes. It seemed to me that the

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<sup>26</sup> One foreign anthropology instructor teaching at Hosei University at the time told me that she just found the *Zengakuren*'s antics annoying and disruptive. I found her reaction to be a curious comment coming from a disciplinary colleague. I wondered if perhaps political and conflictual events were not “culturally” relevant in her mind since her interests were geared towards Japanese popular culture.

adrenaline could only carry the protestors so far given the high level of physical exertion. After about 15 minutes the intensity of the pushing decreased and the protestors looked tired. Sakano's belt had been torn and was hanging from his pants. Many of the protestor's clothes were stretched and dishevelled but the protestor's still had some fight left in them. Sakano grabbed the megaphone and began shouting into it with as much vigour as he had shown pushing his way through the front gate as the rest of the protestors assembled to begin their march through the streets. Despite all of their efforts at encouraging other students to join them, it seemed to me that nobody did. This was my impression during this particular demonstration.<sup>27</sup>

The eighteen original members of the demonstration unfurled additional flags and banners and started moving through the streets around the campus. The police completely surrounded the demonstrators as they moved through the streets, but they did not try to stop the march. It appeared to me that the police had the protestors outnumbered three to one. I walked along slightly behind the protest as it wound its way through the backstreets surrounding the university for approximately half an hour before returning to the front gates of the university. By the time the protest returned all of the students had vanished. The university campus was completely deserted except for the security staff at the gate. After shouting a few more slogans in the direction of the university, the demonstration ended rather anticlimactically.

The students simply turned off their megaphone, disassembled the flagpoles, and carefully folded up their banners and tucked them into their bags. What made this

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<sup>27</sup> During the course of my fieldwork, these protests at the university did attract some new students to join the *Zengakuren*. Some of these students reported being warned by the administration that they were putting their student status in jeopardy by joining the *Zengakuren*.

moment unusual was the casual and relaxed nature of the students in contrast to the police who remained on guard and watching them in silence. It was the silence I experienced most strongly after the students stopped the demonstration. The group of student protestors appeared dwarfed by the large police presence and I stood there wondering who was going to make the first move. It seemed to me that something needed to happen at this moment given the intensity of the demonstration. However nothing happened. In fact, the students actually started joking around with each other. One of the students even produced a camera and started showing off some of the photos taken during the demonstration much to the delight of the members. All the while the police stood there immobile watching them.

Kuraoka then broke away from the other students and sauntered up to me in a rather relaxed state despite my proximity to some of the “undercover” police. She asked if I wanted to go and have coffee. At this point the police took notice of me but none of them stopped us as we walked away. I asked her if it was safe for her to walk around the area with so many police around. She dismissed my concerns and did not seem particularly bothered. As we talked over coffee, she gave me some additional literature to read and we talked about the demonstration. I then asked her whether she was concerned about her own future challenging her university so directly and risking arrest. To this she responded, with what appeared to be genuine honesty that it did not really matter since they were going to start a revolution that would overthrow the whole system.

At that moment she appeared to truly believe in the movement with an almost evangelical zeal.<sup>28</sup>

We ended our conversation because she had arranged to meet another member of the *Zengakuren*. The two of them were planning to catch an overnight bus to Kobe. She explained to me that the next day was the anniversary of the Amagasaki commuter train accident. There was a major protest they planned to attend. She explained to me that the protests against the Amagasaki accident, like the protests against Hosei University and those held in Shibuya against the Iraq war, the exploitation of *freeter* labour, and a host of other issues the *Zengakuren* challenge are all connected because of capitalist exploitation. I wished her luck and we planned to meet again after she returned to Tokyo.

No students were arrested at the protest I described above. However, during subsequent demonstrations I attended, arrests were made. On May 29<sup>th</sup> the students organized another protest at the university. At this protest, which followed a similar pattern as the previous protest, members of the *Zengakuren* and some other activists from *Workers Action* attempted to occupy one of the university buildings. The result was the arrest of all 38 demonstrators, including Kuraoka.

## 8.6 The Unions Descend on the University

The arrest of the 38 students and activists only inflamed the situation. The other members of the *Workers Action* group organized a massive demonstration of 1500

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<sup>28</sup> Japanese verbal communication contains within it the concept of *honne* and *tatemae*. *Tatemae* refers to the surface or how things are presented. *Honne* refers to the “real” or hidden meaning behind what is said or presented. The ideal situation in communicating in Japanese is to be able to read a person’s *honne*, or true feelings, through the *tatemae*. Although I may have misread Kuraoka’s *honne*, it seemed to me that she genuinely believed in the political rhetoric of the *Zengakuren* that a revolution was imminent.



unionists, activists and *Zengakuren* members from other universities to descend en masse on Hosei University to protest against the university's treatment of the students, a demonstration I also attended (See Figure 23).



**Figure 23: *Workers Action* Demonstration at Hosei University (Photo by Robin O'Day)**

Behind *Workers Action* was a long list of labour unions, activists and non-governmental organizations. One of the most prominent groups was *Chiba Doro* (千葉動労), “The National Railway Motive Power Union of Chiba.” Like the *Zengakuren*, *Chiba Doro* also has a long history of radical labour activism.

The Japan National Railways (JNR) was a major government-owned enterprise that was privatized in the late 1980s. Government ownership of the railway began in 1873. By 1986, JNR had become a massive company with more than 315,000 workers running 19,411 trains daily. The company's history has been one of intense labour strife.

The early post-war years were fraught with conflict between militant unions, management and the more accommodating unions within the enterprise. Although concerted effort to eradicate the most militant segments of the union movement were largely successful from the 1950s to 1970s, militant leftist unionism remained entrenched at the JNR (Wetzel and Ohtsu 1992:248).

The Japanese government's decision to prepare the JNR for sale included a plan that would reduce the workforce, restructure the company into several regional companies and weaken the unions in order to make the company attractive to investors. During the process of privatization, the unions were in a difficult situation. Japan Railways (JR) would replace Japan National Railways (JNR). JR's management had the freedom to hire whomever they wanted from JNR's former workforce. It became evident that a workers' union affiliation would have a direct impact on re-employment. This forced unions to re-evaluate their strategies and significantly weakened their bargaining positions.

*Doro* was one of the main militant labour unions in the Japan National Railway. In order to survive the privatization it made concessions and cooperated with the new company. While the union survived the privatization, it suffered a weakening of its power and lost some of its key members in the process. Since privatization, however *Doro* has resurrected its militant style.

On the most basic level, the collaborative relationship between *Chiba-Doro* and the *Zengakuren* in the *Workers Action* movement was a shared political opposition to capitalism. Militant labour unions, the *Zengakuren*, and the Communist and Social Democratic Parties have often collaborated in actions since the ANPO demonstrations of

the 1960s. At the demonstrations I attended, social issues ranging from *freeters*' working conditions, market liberalization policies, the presence of U.S. bases in Japan, Japan's involvement in the Iraq War, dismissal of workers from the railways and the crack down on the *Zengakuren*'s activities on Hosei University's campus were all collapsed together as symptomatic of the economic system. The demonstrations were an opportunity to dramatize their fight.

## 8.7 Performance of Violence

I provided "thick description" (Geertz 1973) of the protests at Yoyogi Park and at Hosei University as examples of some of the events organized by the *Workers Action* group. These two protests illustrate how *Workers Action* interprets the unstable employment environment faced by youth within a broader and pre-existing left-wing political discourse that has deep roots stretching back to at least the immediate years following World War II, if not earlier. I went to many more protests at the university and in Yoyogi Park sponsored by the *Zengakuren* and the broader *Workers Action* group.

Although the specific events of each protest differed from one another, I came to recognize some patterns in the protests that help me understand the way the *Zengakuren* and the *Workers Action* group are attempting to shape the discourse around class and its implications for youth. One of the defining qualities of how *Workers Action* was expressing its opposition to the instability of youth was the use of anger and violence. Yoshitaka Mōri (2005) drew attention to the generational tension surrounding anger and militancy when discussing the differences between protest repertoires between 1960s activists, and the current wave of youth activism in Japan led by the *freetier* generation.

The members of the *Zengakuren*, all university aged youth, seemed committed to an angry discourse and a confrontational orientation in their protests more analogous to the protest-style seen in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

The threat of violence and the celebration of violence certainly attracted some to the group but it often turned others off the movement and its message. While attending an anti-war film festival hosted by some activists involved in *Labor Net Japan* I met some other young activists that had attended the *Workers Action* protest in Yoyogi Park that was described above. As we were talking they told me that when the *Zengakuren* took the stage and started advocating violence they decided it was time to leave the demonstration.

The use of violence by the *Zengakuren* alienates them or perhaps separates them from other forms of youth activism. For instance, on one of the posters for a Sound Demonstration organized in part by the *Tokyo Freeter Union*, they explicitly wrote on the flyer that those interested in provoking violence were unwelcome at the demonstration. I would encounter members of the *Tokyo Freeter Union*, *Union Yes! Campaign* and the *Freeter Union Fukuoka* at each other's events, but the *Zengakuren* did not attend. At one demonstration I met a student from Hosei University and I asked him if he knew why the members of the *Zengakuren* were not in attendance at the demonstration. He replied to me that he thought they were just busy that day. He downplayed the differences but the separation was noticeable to me.

The threat of violence and the celebration of violence were often used rhetorically in the speeches I listened to by the *Zengakuren* but the anger and violence I observed at these events also had a performative quality, "staged" in a sense, for consumption by an

audience. The actual violence I witnessed took place at symbolically significant locations, such as Shibuya Crossing, the University Gate at Hosei University or the entrance to a University Building. When violence did occur it was often photographed, circulated and celebrated. A photograph of the arrest of the students in Shibuya Crossing was itself circulated among members. The arrests were also splashed across the front page of the *Zeishin* newspaper. The confrontation at one demonstration often became the reason for organizing the next demonstration. The flyer for the next demonstration would often include a dramatic photograph of the previous violence.

Moreover, the *Zengakuren* and *Workers Action* also circulated these photographs, which dramatically capture the struggles, amongst those involved in the movement. The photographs (See Figures 24 and 25) were taken at the Hosei University protest and then sent out to members of the movement. They also post their photographs and videos on the Internet, edited to highlight the most dramatic moments of the demonstrations.





Figure 24: Police blocking access to Hosei University during *Workers Action* protest (Source: *Workers Action*). Reproduced with permission.



Figure 25: Police and *Workers Action* members clash at the entrance of Hosei University) (Source: *Workers Action*). Reproduced with permission.

The *Zengakuren* and *Workers Action* did use violence as a tactic in their demonstrations and they sought to appeal to youth frustrated at working irregular jobs by appealing to their feelings of anger and powerlessness. The violence used in the demonstrations seemed to provide a dramatic outlet for their feelings. Victor Turner (1969) argued that one dimension of rituals is that they invert power relations where the weak become strong and the strong become weak. If the protests by *Workers Action* are viewed as a kind of ritualized violence, their appeal may lie in the felt weakness by those attracted to it. Although the demonstrations are celebrated as demonstrations of power, those involved are, in a sense weak. The student movement and the union movement are weaker today than they have been in the past. The *Zengakuren* and *Chiba-Doro* are under threat and attack. *Freeters* and other irregular workers are the weakest members in the new employment system. Therefore the performance of violence by *Workers Action* may remain as an attractive outlet for some who feel marginalized.

## 8.8 Conclusion

In contrast to the previous union movements, the *Workers Action* movement frames *freeteer* labour within a pre-existing anti-capitalist political discourse that has animated left-wing student and labour politics for most of the post-World War II period. Looking backwards to the radicalism of the student movement in the 1960s and 1970s and the confrontational style of militant labour unions throughout the post-war period, the *Workers Action* group seeks to harness the current feelings of frustration, alienation and anger of the *freeteer* generation by channelling it towards violent confrontation with the state and capitalist interests. In their street protests and demonstrations they “perform”

violence, capture it through recordings and circulate it amongst their members as evidence of their power. Yet, ironically significant institutional and state pressures to control and eradicate these groups have weakened their “power”. However, given the potential of youth and the inequality inherent in the economic system, both the *Zengakuren* and the *Chiba-Doro* see the possibility of rejuvenating their movements.



## Chapter 9: Conclusion: *Freeters* and the Re-Articulation of Class in Post-Industrial Japan

### 9.1 Conclusion

The central argument of my dissertation is that the loss of place for young irregular workers is contributing to the re-articulation of protest and class politics in post-industrial Japan. I base my argument on my ethnographic fieldwork with the *Tokyo Freeter Union*, *Freeter Union Fukuoka*, *Union Yes! Campaign* and the *Worker's Action* group whose leaders are all attempting to cultivate class-consciousness amongst *freeters* and other young irregular workers who feel alienated by the limiting circumstances of the employment system and who are seeking to confront and change what they see as exploitative practices.

I situate this study within the perspective in the anthropology of Japan that advocates looking beyond mainstream institutions to understand the diversity of experiences in contemporary Japanese society (Allison 1994, Bernstein 1983, Broadbent 2003, Creighton 1995a, 2003, Gill 2001, Hotaka-Roth 2001, Kelsky 2001, Kondo 1990, Ogasawara 2001, Sato 1991, Sellek 1997, Siddle 1997, Roberson 1998, Roberts 1994, Robertson 1998, Ryang 2005, Taira 1997, Weiner 1997, Vaisisth 1997, Yoder 2004). This study also seeks to productively contribute to the critique that the anthropology of Japan has recently paid less attention to the role of social class despite an increased sensitivity towards difference and diversity in Japan (Ishida and Slater 2010). By choosing union movements that are attempting to organize irregular workers in Japan as the topic of my ethnographic study, I also align my research with the argument that

anthropology can productively contribute to a greater appreciation of the cultural dimensions and lived experiences of both organized labour and social movements (Carbonela and Kasmir 2008, Kasmir 2009, Brodtkin 2007, Edelman 2001, Escobar 1992, Gibb 2001, Nash 2005)

In this dissertation I suggest that the politicization of irregular work among the youth activists in the *Tokyo Freeter Union*, *Freeter Union Fukuoka*, *Union Yes! Campaign* and the *Workers Action* movement can be understood in relation to Brinton's (2011) argument that the bursting of the financial and real estate bubble in the early 1990s, the ensuing Heisei recession and the employment restructuring that followed have significantly complicated the ability of young people, especially non-elite young men, to transition successfully from school into the workplace. The social, cultural and economic significance of these events are that they have robbed these youth of the ability to move into a relevant social location, or "*ba*" (Nakane 1970), around which they can build their adult lives. This experience is even more jarring for Japanese youth because it significantly contrasts with the experiences of previous generations that came of age between the 1960s and 1980s and whose life course was more stable.

The Japanese postwar family system based on a nuclear family with a strong male income earner ideology became dominant through secure employment (for males) that enabled the support of a middle-class family (Brinton 2011, Vogel 1963). The path leading to this national ideal followed a fairly rigid but straightforward and prescribed path of leaving school, entering full-time work, getting married and having children within a narrow time frame (Brinton 2011, Okano 1993). This sequence also mirrored the transition from youth into the adult world of work (Brinton 2011, Okano 1993, Plath

1983, Singleton 1998). What was paramount for those coming of age during the post-World War II period was transitioning from the secure *ba* of school as a youth into the secure *ba* of work as a means of achieving economic success, building individual identity and creating a sense of belonging as an adult (Brinton 2011).

As the Japanese economic recession in the 1990s deepened, many Japanese youth, particularly the non-elite, increasingly had few options beyond working at one of the increasing number of temporary, contract or part-time jobs (Abegglen 2006, Brinton 2011, Genda 2001, 2005a, 2005b, Hommerich 2007, Honda 2005, Inui 2005, Kosugi 2003, 2004, 2008, Mouer and Kawanishi 2005). With fewer stable full-time jobs available it became more difficult to follow the orderly life course of previous generations. At the same time, the orderly life course of Japan's postwar period was not without its critics who saw the rigidity of this system as too constricting. With the trend of young people working irregular jobs some saw a refreshing youthful exuberance and a healthy experimentation with alternative lifestyles (Smith 2006). Yet others castigated the generation of *freeters* as a lazy and uncommitted generation that had lost the work ethic of previous generations that had been responsible for rebuilding the nation after World War II (Yamada 1999).

Although the social discourse was divided about why so many Japanese youth were working irregular jobs, evidence from academic researchers began to suggest that "choice" was not the primary factor behind the increase of young irregular workers (Genda 2001, 2005). For those coming of age after the Heisei recession in the early 1990s it was far more difficult to obtain full-time employment than previous generations had experienced. Labour market restructuring along neoliberal lines emphasizing

“flexible” employment relationships where companies could shrink or expand their workforce according to global demand disproportionately affected the working lives of young people, especially the non-elite, by providing them with few options other than irregular employment.

From an economic perspective it appears that Japan is transitioning into a “mature” post-industrial economy characterized by a labour market split between “core” full-time positions and “non-core” temporary, contract and part-time positions. Socially and culturally this economic shift is significant because it disrupts established normative patterns of achieving a “successful” middle-class life which was based on the ability of men to secure stable full-time employment (Brinton 2011). It appears as if Japanese society is currently in a state of disequilibrium because individuals once transitioned through their life course connected to small and stable sets of social locations (“*ba*”) but now this is becoming increasingly unrealistic (Brinton 2011). Responses towards the economic and employment changes in Japan have been mixed, but within union movements, in particular, it has sparked recognition of inequality and attempts by union leaders to re-articulate a sense of class politics.

By engaging the roles of conflict and class as vehicles for understanding how members of these union movements conceptualize their own positions within post-industrial Japan locates my research somewhat outside the majority of post-World War II studies on Japanese society. Looking at how conflict and class operate within the union movements positions this study in opposition to a significant body of research that emphasized the harmonious quality of social relations in post-World War II Japan (Steinhoff 2008b). It also locates it somewhat outside more recent research which has

taken the role of conflict seriously in the areas of identity, gender and ethnicity but which has largely eschewed how class informs these same qualities (Ishida and Slater 2010).

There is an important question surrounding how much class-consciousness Japanese workers actually demonstrate in their daily lives. In much of the post-World War II period Japanese workers gained an international reputation for demonstrating high levels of loyalty, a strong work ethic and a cooperative orientation, but were seen to be nearly devoid of class-consciousness (Turner 1995). According to some anthropologists, this common perception of Japanese workers was bolstered by the functionalist paradigm at the root of much social science research in the postwar period that emphasized harmony and cooperation as part of the cultural underpinnings of Japan's workplace organization (Kraus, Rohlen and Steinhoff 1984, Steinhoff 2008b). However, this perspective can only be maintained through a largely ahistorical viewpoint (Gordon 1993). Despite high levels of unionization immediately following the war, the sharp rise in standards of living in conjunction with political pressure to reinforce social unity and sacrifice for the advancement of the nation, helped push class-consciousness to the peripheries of reflective experience and to the margins of mainstream society (Ishida and Slater 2010). Within Japanese workplaces strong hierarchies of power, status and authority have led to many uncritical assumptions about the absence of class-consciousness among Japanese workers and their apparent passivity (Turner 1995).

Researchers who argue for a better appreciation for the role that class plays in Japan argue that class must be understood through the particular social and cultural dimensions of Japanese society that influence how class is manifested (Ishida and Slater 2010, Turner 1995, Steven 1998). Japanese workers in the postwar period have regularly

engaged in collective action or attempted to influence their institutional structures. As members of both companies and labour unions, Japanese workers often have allegiances to both institutions (Ishida 1984, Smith 1988). When critiques by workers are expressed, they are generally through the idiom of demanding “better treatment.” This does not upset existing social hierarchies but communicates workers’ self-interest (Ishida 1984, Smith 1988). Another argument is that class is masked by the ideology of the traditional family, which is used as a metaphor for the workplace (Steven 1988). The way people are ranked by age, sex and education obfuscates how people are channelled into different classes and stratifications within the working class because those in power in the Japanese aristocracy, middle-class and labour aristocracy tend to be middle-aged men who have graduated from the same elite educational institutions (Steven 1988).

Nevertheless, using class as a means of analysis in contemporary Japan should be done with some caution. It would be a mistake to uncritically assume that class operates in Japan as it does in other post-industrial societies without appreciating the specific history of the nation. I would therefore reject the argument that social class is either absent or insignificant in Japan in favour of a more historically informed perspective that better explains how class consciousness and class rhetoric has seemingly emerged and disappeared at different points in Japan’s history.

In addition to appreciating the role that class-consciousness has played in postwar Japan, the union movements must also be understood in relation to the particular historical developments of unionization and labour movements in Japan. The image of the loyal, hard working and cooperative Japanese worker was bolstered by an image of Japanese labour unions cooperating with the goals of management (Kawanishi 1992,

Mouer and Kawanishi 2005). In fact the three pillars of the Japanese industrial system were widely considered to be lifetime employment, seniority wages plus promotion and enterprise unionism. Again, this image greatly oversimplifies postwar industrial relations in Japan with a bias towards accentuating cooperation and ignoring conflict (Mouer and Kawanishi 2005).

Power struggles between organized labour and management have significantly shaped the nature of working conditions in post-World War II Japan (Gordon 1992, Mouer and Kawanishi 2005). Moore (1983) claims that immediately after the war, the labour movement led by strong industrial unions nearly succeeded in transforming Japan into a socialist state. For the next forty years a myriad of conditions eroded the power and influence of the labour movement including a long history of ideological fragmentation on the political left and within the labour movement itself, suppression of perceived threats of an emerging communism in Asia by a coalition of American and Japanese powers, significant state intervention emphasizing cooperation and sacrifice for the advancement of the nation and the steady improvement of the quality of life and working conditions for average citizens (Kawanishi 1992). As the quality of life improved through this period most Japanese came to believe that through hard work anyone could join the ranks of the middle-class. With the steady improvement of peoples' material lives, interest in the political activities of unions waned and union membership became taken for granted and seemingly less necessary for the average worker.

The economic and employment stability achieved in the postwar period was significantly disrupted with the economic downturn in the 1990s and changes have occurred in the nature and structure of employment, particularly for young people

entering the workforce. The economy has transitioned away from manufacturing towards high tech and service industries (Mouer and Kawanishi 2005). These new industries demonstrate a preference for using greater numbers of part-time, contract and non-regular workers to fill these new positions. The enterprise union system has failed to represent the interests of these workers and has instead concentrated their efforts at maintaining the rights and privileges of the regular full-time employees who have made up their traditional membership base. One response has been the emergence of new forms of unionization to deal with the concerns of those excluded from the enterprise union system.

The union movements with which I did fieldwork are part of these new forms of unionization and are often referred to as community unions (Suzuki 2008). What distinguishes these unions from enterprise unions is that they organize their members geographically rather than within the same firm, are open to non-regular workers who are often excluded from joining their firm's enterprise union if one exists and who frequently seek social justice by partnering with various social movements (Stewart 2006, Suzuki 2008, Weathers 2010). Because these unions overlap their labour concerns with attempts to improve the lives of their members, they often blur the boundary separating the labour movement from civil society activism.

Because these union movements are involved in struggles for social justice the different forms of activism in which they engage are also shaped by Japan's "invisible civil society" (Steinhoff 2008a). Civil society in Japan has been described as invisible because it often operates underground and away from much of mainstream society until it suddenly "bursts" out into visible public demonstrations before retreating underground. This pattern of organized activism has been shaped by the history of activism in postwar



Japan, for example activists from the protest cycle of the 1960s learned that the consequences of challenging the state directly could be severe. The response has been the development of a protest culture operating through a network of committed individuals with little institutional infrastructure.

In Chapter 5, *Dancing in the Streets: Domesticating Precarity in the Tokyo Freeter Union*, I explored the process of how the leaders of the group are transforming the categories of meaning associated with *freeter* into a political identity that can be mobilized in opposition to a growing sense of economic inequality faced largely by youth. Through an investigation of the union movement's involvement in adopting the concept of "precarity" and the Euro-Mayday protest-style in their street protests (Amamiya 2008, Neilson and Rossiter 2008, Matoni and Doerr 2007, Mōri 2005), I indicate some of the ways the union leadership is adopting and refashioning these elements to re-frame *freeter* identity as political. Specifically I examine the political potential of an emerging underclass composed of the precarious, contingent and "flexible" workforce undergirding advanced industrial economies. This is a politics of a marginal group that due to low wages and job insecurity are being excluded economically and socially from the wider society. The *Tokyo Freeter Union* leadership is adapting the politics of precarity to fit the Japanese context. I argue that the leaders of the *Tokyo Freeter Union* are adopting and adapting the global politics of precarity and effectively linking them with the economic and social marginalization experienced by Japanese *freeters*. In the process what is emerging is a re-articulation of a form of class politics within the movement.

Beyond the political rhetoric of the *Tokyo Freeter Union* the union leaders seek to provide their members a place to re-imagine the reasons for their failure to obtain full-

time employment because many of them attribute it to their own personal shortcomings. The *Tokyo Freeter Union* conceives of itself as more than a traditional labour union simply interested in working conditions. As a labour organization that blurs the boundary between a union and a civil society organization they describe themselves as a “survival union.” They see themselves as a place where workers can come to get support if they feel uncomfortable, isolated, alienated or unsupported at work.

Nevertheless attempts to re-frame *freeter* identity as political by the union leaders involves a complex process of negotiation by the union membership. The politics of precarity is not passively received by all *freeters* within the movement. Although some *freeters* strongly identify as precariats, others are less comfortable accepting a strong political dimension of *freeter* identity. Therefore attempts to instil class-consciousness within the membership by the leadership suggest a more complex negotiation of the politics of being a *freeter* than the strong rhetoric emanating from the movement would suggest.

Moreover, when the gasoline stand workers organized a union with the assistance of the *Tokyo Freeter Union*, the members seemed to experience an awakening of their class-consciousness. However, when their union failed to attract new members, the members of the gasoline stand union quit the very jobs they fought so hard to preserve. This would suggest that even when union leaders are able to instil class-consciousness in member's of Japan's precariat workforce, such consciousness raising alone is not always sufficient to sustain a union movement.

In Chapter 6, *Creating An Alternative Place in the Freeter Union Fukuoka*, I examined how the union itself provides an alternative space to provide support to young

irregular workers. The *Freeter Union Fukuoka* was formed by a group of activists opposed to the Iraq war who also felt they needed to create a space where those opposed to the working culture in Japan could gather. Their intention was to create a group that could take on the role of a traditional labour union in fighting to protect the working rights of irregular workers but also provide support and care for the psychological and emotional wounds suffered by youth trying to find a place in a society where the “reserves of care” seemed to have dried up.

Although they have a general oppositional orientation to neoliberal capitalism, the *Freeter Union Fukuoka* leaders nevertheless feel alienated by the politics of Japan’s “old left” that see the solution to contemporary labour problems as laying in further attempts to create a welfare state. As such, they look past left-leaning political parties, which in their opinion fetishize Japan’s postwar constitution and democracy, towards finding inspiration in Japan’s prewar anarchists. Finding their own way of articulating class in Japan, the leaders of the union question whether whatever freedoms the Japanese people won after World War II from the totalitarianism of the Imperial system have simply been replaced by a new form of market totalitarianism that constrain them in new ways. They have modelled their union after the principles of anarcho-syndicalists to create a non-hierarchical organization. Their aim is to build and instil class-consciousness in their members to create strong individuals capable of standing on their own in opposition to the excesses of the market. Their vision is that their union operates as one of many “hubs” in a global network of anarchist inspired groups that are engaged in an emergent global politics.

It is not simply political rhetoric that defines the *Freeter Union Fukuoka*. They provide protection to their members by holding employers to legal employment standards. If their members are mistreated they will fight for compensation. Similarly to the *Tokyo Freeter Union* they also offer their members a space for membership and belonging. Calling themselves a “labour and survival union”, they are creating a space for their members to share their struggles and engage in dialogue about the direction of Japanese society and their place within it.

The leadership within the *Freeter Union Fukuoka* were committed to slowly building up the member’s sense of class-consciousness by encouraging them to take on positions of leadership within the union and in trying to flatten out the power structure of the movement. The leadership’s efforts were inspired by the anarchist principle that individuals should cultivate strong political consciousness. However the leaders admitted that it was not always possible for all members to embody the strong political ideals of the movement. For some members simply finding the strength to leave their homes to join the activities of the union was a significant step in their lives.

In Chapter 7, *Union is Hope: The Role of Youth, Networks and Digital Media in Organizing Japan’s Irregular Workers*, I explored a campaign organized by labour activists to encourage young irregular workers, like *freeters*, to join labour unions. I focused specifically on how the group uses its network of activists to target youth through digital technology. In an attempt to draw *freeters* into the labour movement, the campaign aims to emphasize what they see as absent in the working lives of young irregular workers: namely affective ties and the possibility of hope amidst the drudgery and dead-end quality of these jobs. By emphasizing the negative qualities of being a

*freeter* through focusing on issues of instability, long-working hours, harassment, unequal treatment and other abuses the campaign offers a solution through the process of unionization.

This campaign was targeting youth in order to communicate to them how labour unions could help improve their lives. Young activists collaborated with other more seasoned *Labor Net Japan* veterans who were capable of offering them advice and instruction. The campaign used the voices of youth to share their stories of struggle and tell of the help they received after joining unions in an attempt to appeal to other youth unfamiliar with what unions could do for them. The campaign used digital technology, through *Union Tube*, to spread their message because they felt mainstream media outlets had too much power in structuring the social discourse and marginalizing alternative voices.

The *Union Yes! Campaign* highlighted the movement's success in using *Union Tube* as a means for putting pressure on employers that take advantage of *freeters* and other irregular workers' relative weakness in the employment system. Some members of the movement were able to sufficiently embarrass their employers by publically posting their grievances on *Union Tube*. However, not all employers responded to the bad publicity, potentially signalling the limitation of public shaming as an effective tactic of *freeter* activism.

In Chapter 8, "The Performance of Violence: Radical Students, Militant Unions and the Legacy of the 1960s' Protest Cycle," I explored how the *Workers Action* movement, composed of student radicals and militant unions, frame anger and violence as the means for channelling young irregular workers' frustration. Attributing a host of

perceived social ills in contemporary Japanese society to neoliberal capitalism – including the privatization of public institutions like the railroads and post offices; Japanese political support of American imperialism variously conceived through support of U.S. bases in Japan and sending Japanese self defence forces to Iraq to provide logistical support; the rise of tuition fees; the crackdown on political activities on university campuses; and the rise of irregular employment – the movement advocates staunch opposition and vigorous confrontation. The ultimate aim is a socialist revolution, which is the same struggle and Marxist master narrative running through *Zengakuren* ideology from before World War II.

Through descriptions of several demonstrations, I draw attention to how the *Workers Action* movement “performs violence” in that they engage in demonstrations that typically escalates into physical confrontations with authorities. However, when violence occurs it is usually done at symbolically significant locations to upset the authorities’ control over those spaces, even momentarily. These “victories” of defying “authoritarian rule” are often captured by photos and film and then reproduced and circulated as evidence of “success” and justification for further demonstrations in response to the attempted repression.

The *Workers Action* movement presents itself as a “new” movement, but the group is composed of militant unions and student groups with very specific political legacies. These legacies are potentially alienating to the generation of *freeters*. The movement’s emphasis on tapping into youth anger and using violence as a tactic creates a particular form of activism that attracts some youth to the movement. However, the level of radicalism advocated by the movement’s leadership also repels others. Some young

activists explained to me that they were initially attracted to a demonstration against the Iraq war and precarious labour conditions organized by *Workers Action*. However, when one of the speaker's at the demonstration began encouraging the use of violence, these same activists decide it was time for them to leave the demonstration. Moreover, the use of violence by the *Zengakuren* at Hosei University certainly attracted the attention of other students, school administrators and police. Despite the attention received because of their violent and confrontational style of demonstration, few new students actually seemed to join the movement. This suggests that the use of violence as a political tactic to attract youth to activism and labour unions in relation to economic inequalities may not be particularly effective.

Taken together, the four union movements, variously constructed, represent a variety of political responses by Japanese youth to increasing inequality within Japan's restructured labour market. In particular I emphasize how the loss of place for young Japanese is attracting some young *freeters* to political movements that are expressing a political rhetoric that appears to re-articulate a form of class politics. I highlight how the leadership within the movements are attempting to instil a new form of class-consciousness amongst the movement members that in some cases are shaped by the historical legacy of class in Japan, but are also drawing on an emergent global politics of inequality. However, I also draw attention to the fact that instilling class-consciousness in *freeters* is a complex process of negotiation that sometimes succeeds, but is also negotiated and contested by *freeters* themselves.

## 9.2 Directions for Further Research

As recently as July 2011, an informal exchange among scholars on the H-Japan Internet discussion forum debated the level of political activism present in contemporary Japanese society.<sup>29</sup> The subsequent exchange of views among anthropologists, political scientists, sociologists and area studies experts revealed a wide division of opinions on the matter. The discussion centred on a *New York Times* article by Ken Belson (2011) about Japanese citizens who were doing their own radiation testing and confronting government officials with their own contradictory findings compared to the official government data. Although the article was judged to be largely informative, the initial concern was that Belson wrote, “Such activism would barely merit comment in the United States, but it is exceptional in a country where people generally trust their leaders to watch out for them” (Belson 2011: A1). The initial poster, an historian, felt that this stereotype of Japanese activism was mistaken, at least historically, and asked whether any sociologist or political scientist engaged in the study of contemporary activism would write a rebuttal to the *New York Times*. The subsequent exchange among the academics on the forum was interesting because it displayed a wide variety of opinions about the current state of public protest and activism in Japan. Several of the subsequent messages

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<sup>29</sup> I have deliberately not identified the contributors by name, who mostly hold professorships, since academic forums and list-serves are informal places for discussion and provide a space to exchange views and opinions without the general rigor demanded of more formal spaces of debate. The exchange is archived on the Website under the title “The Supposedly Docile Japanese Public,” with the thread beginning in July 2011 (<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=lx&list=H-Japan&user=&pw=&month=1108>). Nonetheless, this list-serve is used by influential academics who significantly shape the contemporary scholarly discourses about Japan. Although statements posted on this list-serve are sometimes provocative, reactionary or written without the same level of care or reflection shown in their professional writings, the statements are still insightful as they provide an unfiltered glimpse into some of the academics’ personal perspectives on a subject. In this case the exchange revealed very different perspectives about the state of political activism in Japan.



lamented the repeated uses of cultural stereotypes being circulated in the media that have described Japanese responses to the earthquake, tsunami and nuclear accident. While there was a general consensus amongst contributors that cultural stereotypes were being overused in the media in depicting Japanese responses to the disaster, most of the contributors began to frame activism in Japan as being in the historical past rather than the present by drawing attention to protest in the Edo Era (1603-1867), the ANPO demonstrations in the 1960s and 1970s and the environmental activism in the 1970s and 1980s around pollution and Minamata disease.

Another area studies specialist defended Belson's article as a reasonably fair assessment of contemporary activism in Japan. He wrote, somewhat provocatively, that beyond protests against the Narita Airport expansion in the 1970s and public protest against blood transfusions tainted by HIV in the 1980s and 1990s, there had been little protest of significance when he said:

Other than that, there really hasn't been much over the past four decades. Not even the fiscal evisceration of the Japanese Postwar Dream with its bursting of the Bubble Economy, two decades of post-Bubble economic doldrums and policy mismanagement...have proved capable enough to put large numbers of that public in the street in protest...

Some other academics echoed the sentiment of this statement, yet others challenged this interpretation. Some of the challenges argued that measuring a Japanese level of protest by some imagined standard seen in other countries smacked of ethnocentrism. This approach, one contributor wrote, failed to consider the local cultural context and suggested that open expressions of protests may take on different forms. Other contributors also began to describe examples of civil society activism they had

seen or participated in, thereby challenging the initial argument that contemporary Japanese exhibit a low level of political engagement.

The reason I highlight this argument is that it crystallizes an attitude I have encountered among some Japan specialists that there is no contemporary activism in Japan of any significant consequence, especially among youth. My ethnographic research into four different union movements, in my mind, reveals concrete evidence of Japanese youth being involved in political movements. It may not be on the scale of the ANPO movements but it does indicate important tensions within contemporary Japanese society. My concern has not been to predict the political impact of the movements or measure an arbitrary level of political engagement of Japanese youth in accord with some imagined standard. Rather, my concern has been to attempt to understand and explain why young irregular workers in Japan are finding it necessary to organize themselves into labour unions, take to the streets to voice their anger at their working conditions and attempt to protect each other from what they feel can be an overwhelmingly isolating and marginalizing existence while working jobs with little stability or long-term prospects as we enter the second decade of the new millennium.

Mary Brinton (2011) observed that instead of taking to the streets en masse to protest, young Japanese have tended to respond by turning inward, finding fault in themselves and retreating from society. Although this has been one cultural response, my research shows that activists also recognize this response as a problem for activism to take root and are working at channelling that energy outwards in open protest.

### 9.3 Expansion of the Union Movements

One challenge in doing ethnographic research into these union movements is the pace at which things have changed on the ground as I have been “writing-up” this dissertation. Through the process of my research I have come to recognize that the ethnographic method sometimes makes it difficult to capture the fluidity of movements. The speed and complexity of the changes also necessitated that I could not include in the dissertation everything I encountered in the field. I found I needed to be selective with the material I had collected and eventually retreat from the field, review my notes, interviews and other materials gathered, and reflect on the experience and attempt to make sense out of the encounters that did not necessarily fit with what I thought I would discover in the field. I also needed to step back from the field and attempt to locate the movements within the relevant academic debates, some of which I outlined in my initial research proposal and some that I did not. Moreover, ethnographers must “write-up” their research (in this case in the form of a dissertation). Removed from the reality of the movements that continue to operate in the immediacy of the present moment, I have found the personal process I have had to go through both fruitful and challenging.

After leaving the field to write-up my research I have tried to remain in contact with the groups as best as I could given that I am no longer physically present in Japan. This has consisted of continued correspondence with some of the research participants and by remaining on e-mail list-serves and Internet forums with the groups who use these mediums for internal communication. While I have been away from the field all of the different union movements have continued to develop in a variety of ways. I will mention a few of the recent developments as potential avenues for further research.

Regarding the *Tokyo Freeter Union (Furiitaa Zenpan Rōdō Kumiai)*, one potentially significant development has been their involvement in setting up what they are calling a “Cabaret Union” for predominantly young women working in the night time entertainment industry. The creation of a distinct union for women working in what Allison (1994) has referred to as “Night Work”, has likely been influenced in part by the gendered tensions that existed within the union. Moreover, drawing a political and economic connection between work done by *freeters* and work done by women in the adult oriented entertainment industries has a potentially far-reaching consequence for re-framing the debate around the commercialized sex industry in Japan. *The Freeter Union Fukuoka* has expanded its on-line presence. They have created their own YouTube channel where they are uploading videos of their political activities.

Some of the members of the Union Yes! Movement have expanded *Union Tube* and created *Labor Net TV*. *Labor Net TV* is an Internet based news broadcasting station targeting issues facing the labour movement in Japan. This strategy is consistent with their general view that the mainstream media ignores the labour movement and exercises a disproportionate ability to shape public discourse. Again, the Internet allows *Labor Net TV* an avenue to circumvent the established media channels.

*Workers’ Action* has continued its protest activities. The confrontation with Hosei University has escalated but with the nuclear accident, *Workers Action* has focused on a new enemy: Tokyo Electric Power (TEPCO). They have staged large protests at TEPCO’s head offices and I receive almost weekly updates on their activities. Their confrontation with TEPCO has led to more mass arrests. The implications of the March

11, 2011 earthquake, tsunami and nuclear accident in Japan have had a profoundly transforming effect on activism in Japan at a level unseen since the 1960s and 1970s.

#### **9.4 Japan's "Triple Disaster" and Activism Implications**

In the last year some of the largest political protests since the 1960s and 1970s have emerged in response to what is being called Japan's "3/11" disaster. The earthquake, tsunami and nuclear accident claimed an estimated 16,000 lives (with at least 3000 still missing), initially displaced hundreds of thousands of people and caused the spread of radiation contamination. In addition to the sheer scale of the disaster, the crisis has also been exacerbated by repeated political failures.

Criticism of the handling of the crisis has grown steadily as the Japanese public has become sceptical of the government's ability to collect and accurately release factual information, efficiently deliver relief supplies to affected residents and to provide full disclosure of the dangers associated with the current radiation leak. These failures have also given rise to a critique from the Japanese citizenry on issues of ecological sustainability, corporate and state responsibility and the disproportionate risk borne by certain regions and classes to provide energy to Tokyo as the economic and political center of the nation.

While these concerns have always existed among a small group of marginalized anti-nuclear activists (Cleveland 2011), what is surprising about the emerging political discourse in the wake of the disaster is that it is now shared more by ordinary citizens including Fukushima farmers, mothers concerned about the health of their children, senior citizens, leaders from industry and government, labour unions and activists (Slater

2011). The disaster has also triggered a resurgence of civil society where people have come together through informal networks to help in the recovery efforts (Aldrich and Shimizu 2011; Aldrich 2011). There have also been a series of public demands for political accountability (Shibuya 2011; Slodkowski 2011). Citizens' groups are lobbying the government to reallocate research funds away from the nuclear industry into more innovative smaller scale natural energy sources. The form of protest and debate is also shifting to smaller forums including salon-like venues, informal talk spaces, cafes and bars, free universities and online communities where participants are engaged in redefining the discourse around the official response to the disaster and the future use of nuclear energy (Hayashi 2011). The street politics of using music, dance, costumes and banners to attract youth to issues around labour are also being incorporated in the nuclear protests (Mōri 2011).

On June 11, 2011, three months after the earthquake, I joined a demonstration with as many as 20,000 people (including many of the youth labour activists I interviewed for this dissertation) who gathered in central Tokyo to both criticize the government's handling of the disaster and demand reforms to the state's nuclear policies. While the protest drew a diverse crowd of Japanese citizens for a variety of reasons, many of the youth labour activists interpreted the nuclear crisis as part of the capitalist logic of neoliberalism where profit and productivity trumps safety. As evidence they point to the contract workers hired from the poorest day labouring neighbourhoods to do the most dangerous jobs in cleaning up the nuclear accident (Jobin 2011).

Many of the same groups of young people with whom I did fieldwork research are now at the center of organizing relief work and protests in an attempt to add their voices

to the growing criticism of how the state has handled the crisis. The implications for further research suggest I can build on my established networks within Japan's civil society to critically examine the competing discourses and actions of citizens' movements in defining the politics around Japan's triple disaster. My access to activists places me in a position to gain a perspective on the processes behind the groundswell of grassroots political activism in post-disaster Japan and trace some of its roots to the activism happening before the triple disaster.

Such research would connect this dissertation with another trend in anthropology where researchers have begun to study disaster as part of their research endeavours because of their connection with affected communities (Hoffman 2010). Some examples include medical anthropologists who investigate how disasters impact health, psychological anthropologists who explore issues of trauma and displacement, ecological anthropologists who study the impact on communities dependent on natural resources and feminist anthropologists who study the gendered dimensions of physical exploitation and discrimination in receiving aid. This research with a political ecological perspective could emphasize how the consequences of disasters are not solely a product of geophysical extremes but also are the function of ongoing social orders as they overlay physical environments (Hoffman and Oliver-Smith 1999). Potential research could follow a series of studies dealing with disaster and political ecology issues including hegemony, neoliberalism and environmental advocacy (Faber 2005; Kingsolver 2011; Mayer 2009; Newell 2005).

Studying the political dimensions of Japan's disaster would also situate this additional study within what anthropologist Anna Tsing (2005) identifies as the "friction"

of diverse and conflicting social interactions in global zones of engagement. As such, additional research could contribute to a growing body of anthropological scholarship on social movements (Edelman 1992; Escobar 1992; Gibb 2001; Nash 2005) by providing insights into how the social and economic consequences of post-disaster Japan intersect with issues of culture and identity in emerging protest politics.



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*Zenshin Shimbun* (前進新聞)

2008. 3/16 全国 全世界一斉行動の大高揚ひき継ぎ 3/30 三里塚に全国総結集を (3/16 *zenkoku zensekai isseikōdō no daikōyōhikitsugi 3/30 sanritzuka ni zenkokusōkeisshūwo*) (Lets come together nationally to Sanritzuka on March 30<sup>th</sup> to continue the excitement that we had on March 16<sup>th</sup> at the national and world demonstration). March 24:1