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The political agency and social movements of Japanese individually-affiliated unions

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Abstract

In contrast to dominant enterprise unions, individually-affiliated unions in Japan such as community and general unions are eager to ameliorate precarious working conditions of non-regular workers and regular workers in small- and medium-size enterprises. While these unions have assisted workers in resolving labour disputes in similar ways despite their small power resources, they have been different in terms of effectiveness in affecting public policy and improving working conditions of those workers. This article addresses the question of why this difference exists from the perspective of unions' strategies, especially those related to 'political agency' and 'social movement unionism'. The article conducts case studies of three individually-affiliated unions for young, female and migrant workers respectively, and argues that political agency and social movement unionism have contributed to the different performance among those individually-affiliated unions.

Key words

Political agency, social movement unionism, precarious work, individually-affiliated unions, Japan

Introduction

Against a background of economic stagnation after the collapse of the bubble economy in the early 1990s and the intensified economic competition from neighbouring Asian countries, Japanese employers urged the government of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) to

implement a structural reform to revive the economy. In response, the LDP government has implemented labour market deregulation, mostly in non-regular employment such as temporary agency work but also in regular employment by deregulating working-time regulation (Author, 2012, 2014). These deregulatory measures have had negative impact on the working conditions of many workers, but especially those of non-regular workers and regular workers in small- and medium-size enterprises (SMEs).

The working conditions of non-regular workers and regular workers in SMEs are characterized precarious, and many of these workers are 'working poor', who receive salaries as low as the amount of government social assistance (around 2 million Japanese yen per year, which is around US $18,000 at the exchange rate of $1 = 110 Japanese yen). As reported by media and unions, non-regular workers and regular workers in workplaces that are not organized by unions have particularly suffered from poor working conditions such as illegal dismissal, employers' refusal to renew a contract, no payment of salary, forced deterioration of working conditions, harassment and so on. Although the Japanese labour market is characterized 'dualistic' and the working conditions of regular workers in large companies are better than those of non-regular workers in terms of job protection, pay, fringe benefits and so on, those regular workers have also experienced deteriorating working conditions as a result of excessively long working hours and job intensification, partly due to a greater use of 'management by objectives' and performance-based pay (Author, 2014; Imai, 2011). A recent case of suicide committed by an employee of Dentsū Corporation, the largest Japanese media and advertising company, is a notorious case. Matsuri Takahashi, a young female employee who graduated from Japan's most prestigious University of Tokyo, committed a suicide as a result of exhaustion and depression from excessively long working hours (Asahi Shimbun, 2016).

In contrast to dominant 'enterprise' unions, which are the basic unit of mainstream unions in Japan, 'individually-affiliated' unions such as community and general unions, which any individual workers can join irrespective of their company affiliation, are eager to ameliorate poor working conditions of non-regular workers and regular workers in SMEs who remain unorganized. While these individually-affiliated unions have assisted workers in resolving labour disputes in similar ways despite their small power resources, they have been different in terms of effectiveness in affecting public policy and improving the working conditions of those workers. This article addresses the question of why this difference exists from the perspective of unions' strategies, especially those related to 'political agency' and 'social movement unionism'. The article conducts case studies of three representative individually-affiliated unions for young, female and migrant workers respectively, and argues that political agency and social movement unionism have contributed to the different performance among those individually-affiliated unions.

In the context of significantly weakened power of labour unions vis-à-vis employers against a background of low economic growth and the spread of neoliberalism, labour scholars have examined factors that may be able to revitalize unions and identified 'social movement' as a way to revitalize the labour movement (Engeman, 2015; Serdar, 2012; Sullivan, 2010). According to these scholars, unions should reorient their political strategies to social movement (including unions' alliance with civil society organizations). In a similar vein, this article identifies social movement as a way to revitalize the labour movement but also emphasizes the importance of 'political agency' such as unions' political lobbying and policy proposals to the government.

This article conducts case studies of three Japanese individually-affiliated unions that organize young, female and migrant workers respectively: 'Shutoken Seinen (Tokyo Metropolitan Youth) Union', 'Women's Union Tokyo' and 'Zentōitsu (All-united) Workers

Union'. These unions are chosen for case studies as well-known individually-affiliated unions in Japan that represent the three major groups of precarious workers (young, female and migrant) in labor markets under neoliberalism. Compared to other individually-affiliated unions, they have been more successful in drawing attention from the mass media. This article focuses on workers who suffer from precarious working conditions, and young, female and migrant workers are among the most disadvantaged among all workers. Interviews were conducted with these unions between March 2013 and September 2017, and questions were asked about the size of their human and financial resources, their worker organizing and negotiations with employers to solve labour disputes, and their social movement unionism and political actions such as lobbying and policy proposals. Interviews were semi-structured and lasted for an hour or so, and a large number of documents on these unions' activities such as the minutes of annual general meetings and newsletters were obtained through interviews. The findings from a comparative analysis of the activities of these unions show the importance of effective engagement in social movement and exercise of political agency for individually-affiliated unions to influence public policy and ameliorate the precarious working conditions of an increasing number of workers in Japan.

This article is structured as follows. After reviewing the literature on labour revitalization and unions' social movements and political agency in the next section, the article shows insufficient response by mainstream unions, composed of enterprise unions, industrial federations and Japan's largest national centre Rengō (Japanese Trade Union Confederation), to the deteriorating working conditions. The article then conducts case studies of the three individually-affiliated unions and shows how effectively these unions may be able to influence public policy and ameliorate precarious working conditions, if to a small extent, depends on their effective engagement in social movement unionism and exercise of political

agency. The conclusion summarizes the main findings of this article and considers their limitations and implications for labour revitalization and work precarity.

Labour revitalization and unions' social movements and political agency

Labour revitalization has become a main concern for scholars of labour politics and industrial relations as a result of the labour decline caused by the spread of neoliberalism and employers' attempts to promote labour market flexibility and reduce labour costs (Author, 2014; Suzuki, 2004: 9). Governments in many industrialized countries have implemented labour market deregulation in response to employers' demands, and unions have lost their power vis-à-vis employers to a significant extent. In this context, scholars have examined factors that may contribute to union revitalization. From the perspective of union density as the primary power resource of unions, worker organizing is essential (Esping-Andersen, 1998; Huber and Stephens, 2001; Korpi, 1983). However, in many occasions, extensive organizing has become difficult as a result of the change in the industrial structure such as deindustrialization and the spread of the service sector (Holgate, 2015: 434). In addition, several scholars have criticized this perspective as 'union density bias' by pointing out, for example, a lack of strong movement identity among union members, especially when it is an employment condition to become a union member (Milner and Mathers, 2013: 134; Sullivan, 2010: 151). Scholars have also mentioned limited potential of business-oriented unionism based on service provision to union members and claimed union activities beyond the workplace through social movement unionism have the potential to revitalize the labour movement (Engeman, 2015; Frege and Kelly, 2003; Heery, 2005: 94; Holgate, 2015: 434-437; Ibsen and Tapia, 2017).

Social movement unionism is based on unions' social movement style campaign, including coalition formation with civil society organizations, aimed at achieving social justice, including decent working conditions. By forming a coalition, unions and civil society organizations may achieve mutual gains: unions may benefit from increased membership through worker organizing and greater financial resources, and civil society organizations may be able to depend on unions' capacity building and organizational resources (Symon and Crawshaw, 2009: 146). The rise of social movement unionism has been attributed to by the increase in migration and greater ethnic diversity, the feminization of work and a growing number of non-regular workers, who remain difficult for mainstream unions to organize (Heery et al., 2012: 148). Social movement unionism has been observed in several cases such as the demand for higher minimum wages by non-regular workers and the improvement of working conditions by migrant workers. In the US, for example, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) has formed a coalition with civil society organizations to engage in the 'Justice for Janitors' campaign in Los Angeles since the late 1980s by organizing low-wage migrant workers (Erickson et al., 2002; Milkman, 2013: 659). In the UK, Britain's largest union Unite and a civil society organization London Citizens UK have engaged in a living wage campaign called the 'Justice for Cleaners' based on social movement unionism since 2001 (Lopes and Hall, 2015; Tapia, 2013; Tapia and Turner, 2013). In France, the Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT), the largest national centre, has formed a coalition with civil society organizations and engaged in a campaign to help legalize *sans papier* undocumented workers (Taipa and Turner, 2013).

Although social movement unionism may have contributed to union revitalization to some extent, scholars have questioned its effectiveness by pointing out, for example, unions' difficulty to sustain the expanded membership from social movement unionism because of low retention rates of members (James and Karmowska, 2016; Milkman, 2013). It has also

been mentioned that coalition between unions and civil society organizations may be difficult to sustain (Heery, et al. 2012; Taipe, 2013: 668). In this context, while recognizing the potential of social movement unionism, some scholars argue that unions' political agency (in the form of political lobbying, policy proposal, mass protest and so on) still matters (Engeman, 2015: 446; Serdar, 2012: 404; Simms and Holgate, 2010). For example, the union called the International Association of Mechanists and Aerospace Workers (IAM) helped black-car drivers of Elite Limousine Plus in New York City, who were mostly South Asian immigrants and whose working conditions were very precarious, set up their own local union ('Local Lodge 340') to improve the drivers' wages and working conditions. IAM and Local Lodge 340 exercised political agency by lobbying the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) and won an NLRB decision that reclassified the drivers as employees, rather than independent contractors (Ness, 2005: 150-155). Another example is the living wage campaign called 'the Boston Jobs and Living Wage Campaign' led by the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) in coalition with unions such as the SEIU and worker centers such as Jobs with Justice. The coalition exercised political agency by utilizing a variety of tactics such as lobbying the mayor and city council members ('inside track') and organizing public rallies ('outside track') to win a living wage ordinance (Luce, 2004: 57-60). There are also cases where worker centers exercised political agency in coalition with unions by engaging in political advocacy and persuading political elites to take action to eliminate social injustice (Goldberg, 2014: 274-279; Milkman, 2014: 13-22).

According to these scholars, social movement unionism alone may not be enough for labour movement revitalization and unions also need to exercise political agency. These scholars emphasize the importance of political engagement in the context of employers' offensive for greater flexibility in neoliberal economy (Engeman, 2015: 446; Gumbrell-McCormick, 2011: 304-305; Luce, 2004: 25-27; Ness, 2005: 2-3; Sullivan, 2010: 149-151).

From the theoretical perspective of unions' power resources, both political agency and social movement unionism may be considered as strategies aimed at increasing their power to influence public policy. Although these strategies do not guarantee unions' success in influencing policy, they are complementary and are likely to be more effective when combined together. In addition, collective bargaining with employers has become less effective and the power disparity between workers and employers has become wider. As a result, unions need to exercise political agency and engage in social movement unionism at the same time. In other words, to compensate for the reduced amount of 'structural' power, unions need to increase 'associational' power by exercising political agency and engaging in social movement (Serdar, 2012: 404-405; Sullivan, 2010: 148). This article aims to contribute to the literature on labour revitalization by showing the importance of not only social movement unionism but also unions' political agency for improving working conditions in a comparative case study of three Japanese individually-affiliated unions.

Japanese unions have experienced the decline of power resources, similar to unions in many other industrialized countries, in the context of economic stagnation and intensified economic competition (Author, 2012, 2014). Labour and industrial relations scholars have discussed whether union revitalization may be possible and examined unions' organizing of regular workers in SMEs and non-regular workers, whose number has increased significantly as a result of labour market deregulation (Author, 2015; Nakamura, 2007). However, both academics and union practitioners have pointed out a lack of concern among 'enterprise' unions about the poor working conditions of an increasing number of workers such as illegal dismissal, non-payment of salary and long working hours. Enterprise unions are mainly concerned about maintaining companies' competitiveness through cooperation with management to protect the jobs of union members, who are mostly regular workers in large companies (Author, 2015; Fukui, 2005; Kawazoe, 2015; Kinoshita, 2007; Kotani, 2013). As a

result, national centres such as Rengō and some industrial federations have experienced difficulty to organize regular workers in SMEs and non-regular workers despite their efforts to represent the interests of these workers and restore unions' social relevance (Author, 2015; Hayakawa, 2006; Kumazawa, 2013).

In this context, scholars have discussed the possible role of non-mainstream, individually-affiliated unions in revitalizing the labour movement and ameliorating precarious working conditions (Fukui, 2005, 2012; Kumazawa, 2013; Royle and Urano, 2012; Suzuki, 2008, 2012; Urano and Stewart, 2007, 2009; Weathers, 2010). Individually-affiliated unions in Japan include 'general' unions (*gōdō rōso*), which are industrial and craft unions that mostly organize regular workers in SMEs and non-regular workers, and 'community' unions, which are community-based, individually-affiliated unions that organize the same types of workers as those organized by general unions (Kojima, 2017: 5). In the case of community unions, 'community' is defined as a group of people who belong to the same geographical area and share similar identities or interests (Holgate, 2015: 436). In contrast to dominant enterprise unions, general and community unions accept individual workers irrespective of their company affiliation. These unions are eager to realize social justice by rectifying unfair, often illegal, treatment and human rights violation of workers, in contrast to a majority of enterprise unions.

Individually-affiliated unions mostly represent the interests of workers who are in precarious positions. Unlike regular workers in large companies who are located within the institutions of collective bargaining (even though they are decentralized in Japan), workers under precarious conditions without such institutional recourse are often the leading agency of political movements and worker mobilization (Meyer, 2016). Scholars and practitioners have discussed Japanese individually-affiliated unions' organizing of young workers (Guyonnet, 2011; Kawazoe, 2015), female workers (Broadbent, 2007, 2008; Kotani, 2013)

and migrant workers (Kremers, 2014; Royle and Urano, 2012; Torii, 2010; Urano and Stewart, 2007). However, although scholars and practitioners have examined individually-affiliated unions' activities such as their engagement in individual labour disputes and their potential to contribute to union revitalization, there has not been extensive analysis on their political agency and social movements in relation to labour revitalization and the improvement of working conditions (with a few exceptions such as Kremers 2014). In addition, compared to a large number of academic works on the organizing of migrant workers outside Japan, there seems to be only a small number of academic works in English on the organizing of other marginalized workers such as young and female workers (such as Broadbent 2007, 2008) and their political agency and social movements. This article aims to fill these gaps by conducting case studies of three representative individually-affiliated unions in Japan for young, female and migrant workers respectively and analysing their political agency and social movements based on the most recent data. The next section briefly discusses labour decline and deteriorating working conditions in Japan and the insufficient response by mainstream unions, followed by a section on the case studies of those three individually-affiliated unions.

Labour decline, deteriorating working conditions and the response by mainstream unions

Japanese workers, both regular and non-regular, have experienced deteriorating working conditions as a result of the reduced power resources of labour unions since the 1990s. Union density has been declining, and currently only less than 20 per cent of workers are unionized (see Figure 1). It is true that, despite low union density, unions in countries such as France have great capacity to mobilize workers and achieve high percentages of collective

bargaining coverage (Milner and Mathers, 2013; Sullivan, 2010: 148). In Japan, Shuntō (Spring Wage Offensive) - an indicator of union power - acted as a mechanism to spread a wage increase achieved by unions in large companies to unorganized workers in SMEs. However, Shuntō has lost its function to a significant extent as a result of the decentralization of wage bargaining (Nakamura, 2007: 8-10; Miura, 2012: 100-102). In addition, as a result of labour market deregulation since the 1990s, the number of non-regular workers has increased significantly, now almost 40 per cent of the workforce (see Figure 2). This has made it more difficult for unions to expand their power resources, as it is more difficult to organize non-regular workers, especially temp workers whose employers are not user companies but temp agencies. These unorganized non-regular workers have particularly suffered from poor working conditions.

Figures 1 and 2 here

In this situation, the largest national centre Rengō began its attempt to organize non-regular workers as well as regular workers in SMEs as a strategy to revitalize the labour movement (Hayakawa 2006: 73-83). For this purpose, Rengō established '*Soshiki Kakudai Sentā*' (Organizing Centre) in its headquarters and decided that 20 per cent of its budget would be allocated to organizing activities (Interview, Rengō, April 2014). Rengō also supported its local centres called *chiiki yunion* (Nakamura and Miura, 2005: 198-202). However, worker organizing increased only slowly. In response, Rengō established the *Pāto Kyōtō Kaigi* (United Front for Part-time Workers) in 2006 and the *Hiseiki Rōdō Sentā* (Non-regular Work Centre) in 2007 to increase the organizing of non-regular workers. Although the union density of part-time workers increased from 2.7 per cent in 2001 to 5.6 per cent in 2010, the percentage remained low. Despite being the largest national centre, Rengō's

financial resources are limited, as enterprise unions collect union fees directly from union members and only a small portion of these fees go to industrial federations and then Rengō (Suzuki, 2004). As a result, Rengō has not been able to persuade a majority of enterprise unions, which are more interested in representing the interests of regular workers in large companies and protecting their jobs, to organize non-regular workers (Kinoshita, 2007). In addition, it is doubtful if Rengō has really committed itself to the improvement of the working conditions of non-regular workers. For example, although the Japanese Community Union Federation (JCUF, *Zenkoku Union*) is a Rengō's member union federation with a large number of non-regular workers, Rengō has not provided any financial support to the JCUF despite its announcement to strengthen individually-affiliated unions under its umbrella to revitalize the labour movement.

It is true that the recent changes in the workforce composition have prompted some enterprise unions to engage in organizing non-regular workers (Mouer and Kawanishi 2005: 226). However, many enterprise unions have resisted organizing non-regular workers, as their members are more interested in receiving material benefits and services from unions instead of paying union fees for organizing non-regular workers (Suzuki, 2004: 16). In addition, enterprise unions tend to consider non-regular workers an employment buffer against economic recessions (Mouer and Kawanishi, 2005: 127). Union leaders in enterprise unions also share a business philosophy of economic competitiveness and productivity with management and are not enthusiastic about organizing non-regular workers (Rengō, 2012). As the executive positions of enterprise unions are often a pathway to corporate executives, union leaders tend to think industrial relations from a management viewpoint and do not deal with the issue of precarious working conditions of non-regular workers (Kumazawa, 2013: 155, 159).

Worker organizing has not progressed as much as Rengō and some industrial federations have desired. There are significant institutional barriers to worker organizing such as the dominance of enterprise unions in the labour movement. As seen above, enterprise unions, especially those in competitive sectors, are institutionally embedded in cooperative industrial relations with management and prefer continuing partnership with employers to organizing non-regular workers (Suzuki, 2004: 19). This has prevented Rengō and some industrial federations from promoting worker organizing to a significant extent. In this context, individually-affiliated unions have gained scholars' attention as actors that may have the potential to revitalize the labour movement and ameliorate the precarious working conditions of non-regular workers and regular workers in SMEs who remain unorganized.

Case studies of the political agency and social movements of individually-affiliated unions

Japanese individually-affiliated unions have identity as an agent to achieve social justice such as decent working conditions for all workers, which is different from the identity of mainstream enterprise unions as an economic actor to achieve material benefits for union members, who are mostly regular workers in large companies (Fukui, 2005, 2012; Kumazawa, 2013; Suzuki, 2008, 2012; Weathers, 2010). While general unions have existed since the now defunct Sōhyō (General Council of Trade Unions) was the largest and most influential national centre (disbanded in 1989), the first community union, Edogawa Union, was formed in 1984, and a national federation of community unions called the 'Community Union National Network' (CUNN) was formed in 1990 after the dissolution of Sōhyō and the establishment of Rengō in 1989 (Author, 2015). Currently more than 70 community unions and general unions with around 20,000 union members in total are affiliated with CUNN. In

2002, around 10 community unions formed the Japanese Community Union Federation (JCUF, *Zenkoku Union*) as part of CUNN and joined Rengō so that their voice would be reflected in government labour policy through Rengō's participation in policy-making in the advisory councils (*shingikai*) of the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (Author, 2015). The significance of JCUF in the Japanese labour movement may be its positive impact on Rengō's attitude towards non-regular workers and regular workers in SMEs (Author, 2015).

Japanese individually-affiliated unions represent the interests of non-regular workers and regular workers in SMEs who are not organized by enterprise unions and aim to resolve individual labour disputes (Fukui, 2012). By performing these roles, individually-affiliated unions have helped ameliorating the precarious working conditions of those workers to some extent (Author, 2015). While individually-affiliated unions have attempted to overcome the limits of enterprise unionism and redefine the objectives of the labour movement as the improvement of the working conditions of all workers, few of them have been active in forming coalition with civil society organizations (Suzuki, 2012: 70). If they do, it is often on an ad-hoc basis, partly because of the underdeveloped civil society in Japan (Fukui, 2005; Kojima, 2017; Suzuki, 2008: 493-494).

Japanese individually-affiliated unions represent a variety of workers but some of them have organized a certain type of marginalized workers. For example, Shutoken Seinen Union (Tokyo Metropolitan Youth Union) has organized young workers among others, Women's Union Tokyo has organized female workers, and Zentōitsu Workers Union (All-united Workers' Union) has organized migrant workers among others. A large number of these workers are non-regular workers and individually-affiliated unions have helped these workers under precarious working conditions to resolve their labour disputes because of non-existence of unions in their companies or indifferent attitude of enterprise unions (Author, 2015). Japanese individually-affiliated unions are similar in most respects, such as their willingness

to accept individual workers as union members irrespective of their company affiliation, their attempts to realize social justice despite small human and financial resources, and their usefulness for individual workers to resolve labour disputes. However, despite being typical individually-affiliated unions, the three unions mentioned above are different in the degree of engagement in social movement and exercise of political agency. The following case studies are aimed at showing how effectively individually-affiliated unions are able to influence public policy and ameliorate precarious working conditions, if to a small extent, depends on the degree of political agency and social movement unionism.

Shutoken Seinen Union

Shutoken Seinen Union (SSU, Tokyo Metropolitan Youth Union) is a community union that was established in 2000 and is affiliated with Zenrōren (National Confederation of Trade Unions), the second largest national centre in Japan. According to SSU's Annual Meeting Report 2015, there were around 360 members as of December 2015 (the number remained similar in the last 5 years), and SSU announced its intention to promote worker organizing and expand its membership to 500 members by increasing the number of full-time organizers from 2 to 3 (Shutoken Seinen Union, 2015). SSU established the *Shutoken Gakusei Union* (Tokyo Metropolitan University Students' Union) in September 2013 and *Shutoken Kōkōsei Union* (Tokyo Metropolitan High School Students' Union) in August 2015 to ameliorate the poor working conditions of university and high school students who are part-time workers. As union fees from members who are mostly under precarious working conditions are not enough, SSU has also intended to expand the membership of '*Shutoken Seinen Union o Sasaeru Kai*', a group of mainly labour scholars and lawyers who support SSU financially by paying an annual membership fee, from the current 1,200 members to 1,500 members to

strengthen its financial base (Interview, Secretary General, SSU, March 2016). With this financial support, SSU has engaged in labour counselling and achieved a high settlement rate of labour disputes (Interview, Secretary General, SSU, March 2016).

SSU has been engaged in social movement by strengthening a link with civil society organizations to urge the government to raise the minimum wages for the working poor. For example, SSU has participated in a campaign called 'Fight for 1,500 yen' organized by a civil society organization 'Aequitas' (meaning 'fair' in Latin) since October 2015 (Interview, Secretary General, SSU, August 2016. See also Asahi Shimbun, 2017). The campaign built upon the 'Fight for 15' in the US fast food industry, which sought $15 per hour pay rates for workers in fast food and other retail sectors in coalition between unions such as SEIU and civil society organizations such as New York Community for Change (Milkman, 2013: 660). Japanese minimum wages are low from an international perspective and are only around 800 yen (around $7 at the exchange rate of $1=110 yen) on average and only around 900 yen (around $8) even in Tokyo, where the minimum wage is the highest.

> The minimum wages in Japan are hardly high enough for young workers to survive, especially when they have dependents such as children to support. We participated in demonstrations organized by Aequitas to demand the minimum wage of 1,500 yen but we also had held several demonstrations to demand higher minimum wages even before Aequitas was formed. In fact, some main members of Aequitas are from our union (Interview, Secretary General, SSU, August 2016).

The 'Fight for 1,500 yen' campaign, which was based on social movement unionism, was successful in involving not only civil society organizations, labour unions, and concerned citizens including labour scholars and lawyers, but also the politicians of welfare-oriented

opposition parties such as the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), the largest opposition party at that time, the Japan Communist Party and the Social Democratic Party (Interview, Secretary General, SSU, August 2016).

In addition to the minimum wages, SSU has urged the government to improve social welfare service for the working poor and unemployed, including easier access to unemployment insurance, by forming a coalition with civil society organizations. For example, SSU joined a campaign organized by the *Han-Hinkon* (Anti-Poverty) Network at the end of 2008 to set up a *haken mura* (temp-worker village) and provided food and housing support to those temp workers who were dismissed and became homeless during the global financial crisis (Kawazoe, 2015: 3-4; Yuasa, 2009: 75-76).

> Our campaign in coalition with *Han-Hinkon* Network had relatively strong impact on the Japanese society in that the campaign was effective in publicizing the existence of precarious jobs and working poor through the coverage of mass media. This prompted the participation in the anti-poverty campaign not only by mainstream unions such as Rengō but also by the politicians of the DPJ and other opposition parties (Interview, Secretary General, SSU, April 2013).

Apart from the *haken-mura* campaign, SSU organized a campaign called the 'Call for Housing Democracy' in coalition with civil society organizations and requested the government to increase the provision of public-funded houses and housing benefits to the young working poor (Interview, Secretary General, SSU, March 2016).

SSU has also exercised political agency by lobbying politicians and bureaucrats. For example, SSU participated in '*in-nai shūkai*', political meetings with opposition members of the Diet (Parliament) in Diet buildings, to discuss labour laws and working conditions of

young workers and proposed their policies to Diet members. In addition, SSU made policy requests to relevant ministries such as the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare and the Labour Bureau of the Tokyo Metropolitan Government to improve the working conditions of young workers in terms of minimum wages, job protection, working hours, job training and so on (Interview, Secretary General, SSU, August 2016).

However, with a small number of exceptions such as calling a greater public attention to the existence of poor young workers, SSU's social movement unionism and political actions have hardly had significant impact on the government labour policy and the amelioration of precarious working conditions of young workers. Japan's minimum wages are still far from the SSU's target of 1,500 yen and the recent rises in wages are mostly a result of the declining population and labour force supply and the difficulty for employers to secure a sufficient number of workers (Nihon Keizai Shimbun, 2017). The government's housing benefits to poor workers also remain scarce. According to the former Secretary General of SSU, insufficient political engagement and social movement due to small power resources are part of the problem of little policy impact and remaining precarious working conditions.

> We have suffered from small financial resources partly because we do not receive any financial assistance from Zenrōren, with which we are affiliated. However, Zenrōren itself does not have much money, as union fees are collected by enterprise unions first, then part of fees goes to industrial federations, and then finally to Zenrōren. This practice should be changed so that the national centre can collect union fees directly. Zenrōren's Non-Regular Worker Centre does not have any organizers either and they hardly engage in social movement as Sōhyō did. In addition, Japan's social movements are centred on civil society organizations, and labour unions, including

> individually-affiliated unions, are not involved enough. Their political engagement has not been enough either (Interview, Secretary General, SSU, April 2014).

The dominance of enterprise unions is a historical legacy of Japanese labour movement that reflects strong political power of employers backed by pro-business LDP government. It has had negative impact on the working conditions of non-regular workers and regular workers in SMEs. In addition, individually-affiliated unions such as SSU have had difficulty in organizing a large number of these workers, as they usually recruit members on an individual basis through labour consultation rather than rely on conventional mass recruitment in a workplace. With small power resources, SSU has not been able to exercise sufficient political agency through social movement and failed to improve the working conditions of young workers significantly.

Women's Union Tokyo

Women's Union Tokyo (WUT, *Josei Yunion Tokyo*) is a community union that was established in 1995 to create a union for women for the reason that male-dominated unions did not heed women's particular concerns such as gender discrimination based on the sexual division of labour and women's precarious working conditions (Interview, Secretary General, WUT, September 2013). Unlike SSU and ZWU, WUT is not affiliated with any national centre. According to its 2013 Annual Convention document, WUT conducted 5464 cases of labour counselling on such issues as dismissal, unpaid salaries and sexual harassment and 823 cases of negotiations with employers to solve labour disputes from the time of its establishment until January 2013 (on average 364 and 46 cases per year respectively. Women's Union Tokyo, 2013a). However, the number of labour counselling started to

decline in 2008 and it was around 100 cases in 2013 and 2014. In the same manner, the number of negotiations with employers to solve labour disputes started to decline in 2010 and it was around 15 in 2013 and 2014 (Women's Union Tokyo, 2015).

Around a quarter of new members who joined WUT between February 2012 and January 2013 were engaged in labour disputes and WUT achieved a high settlement rate of disputes (Women's Union Tokyo, 2013a). However, this high settlement rate has not contributed to membership increase (Women's Union Tokyo, 2013b). WUT had around 250 members in January 2004 but suffered from a low retention rate of around 30 per cent from the time of its establishment until January 2004 (Women's Union Tokyo, 2013b). This already small number of union members further decreased recently and WUT had only around 120 members in September 2013, a decrease of more than 50 per cent (Interview, Secretary General, WUT, September 2013). This low retention rate is a result of a large number of members who left the union after the settlement of their own labour disputes. Paying a union fee also became more difficult for union members who engaged in low-paid precarious employment that was growing in Japan's stagnant economy, especially after the global financial crisis in 2008 (Women's Union Tokyo, 2013b).

> Apart from providing labour counselling and engaging in negotiations with employers to solve labour disputes, we have not been able to organize workers sufficiently or provide services such as assistance in housing when our members are unemployed or sick as a result of our small financial resources and a lack of coordination with civil society organizations. This has also negatively affected the retention rate of our members (Interview, Secretary General, WUT, September 2013).

As a result of a small amount of human resources, WUT's full-time staff members as well as volunteers have suffered from work overload in labour counselling and negotiations with employers to solve labour disputes. A small amount of human resources also meant insufficient financial resources due to a small amount of union fees (Women's Union Tokyo, 2013b). As a result, WUT was able to hire only one full-time staff member with compensation (instead of two staff members it used to hire before), and then had no full-time staff member (Women's Union Tokyo, 2015). This financial hardship has caused a vicious circle and WUT has not been able to organize women workers sufficiently despite the significant fall of membership (Interview, Executive Officer, WUT, March 2016. See also Broadbent, 2008, 165).

> We understand that coalition with civil society organizations may be useful for organizing women workers, and we have been in the network of civil society organizations for empowering women such as the Action Centre for Working Women and the Equal Treatment Action 21. However, the level of cooperation has been low due to our financial hardship (Interview, Executive Officer, WUT, March 2016).

As seen in the interview above, WUT has not been able to engage in social movement sufficiently, even with other women organizations. Women's movement in Japan has been fragmented and lacked coordinated effort among women's unions and other feminist organizations (Women's Union Tokyo, 2013b).

In addition to suffering from the low level of engagement in social movement, WUT has hardly exercised political agency. It is true that WUT has aimed to engage in political activities by, for example, participating in meetings with opposition Diet members and joining demonstrations in front of Diet buildings to oppose an amendment to the Temporary

Agency Work Law (Interview, Executive Officer, WUT, March 2016). However, WUT's engagement in political lobbying has been at extremely low level and WUT has lacked institutionalized access to policy-making venues for proposing its desired policies as a result of a lack of coordination with other women organizations and the relevant bureaus in the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (Women's Union Tokyo, 2013b). Japanese working women suffer 'dual burden' of work and family responsibilities to a greater extent than working women in other countries. This is partly because of weakness of laws such as the Equal Employment Opportunity Law and the Part-time Work Law that are supposed to protect working women from gender discrimination in the labour market. The recent government proposals such as 'equal pay for equal work' are also more about achieving economic growth by utilizing female workers to a greater extent rather than realizing gender equality per se. In this institutional context, WUT has hardly contributed to improving the working conditions of female workers by engaging in social movement and exercising political agency.

Zentōitsu Workers Union

Zentōitsu Workers Union (All-united Workers' Union, ZWU) is a general union that was established in 1970 and is affiliated with the smallest national centre Zenrōkyō (National Trade Union Council). Since the current Chief Executive Officer became a full-time organizer in 1989 and started reforming ZWU in 1992, ZWU has sought the ideals of diversity among workers and decent working conditions (Torii, 2010: 45-47). ZWU has around 1,000 Japanese members who pay union fees regularly, and around 3,000 non-Japanese members who do not necessarily pay union fees regularly. In addition to the Chief Executive Officer who acts as a full-time organizer with help from a few voluntary organizers,

there are two full-time staff members in ZWU's office (Interview, Chief Executive Officer, ZWU, March 2016). As in the cases of other individually-affiliated unions, ZWU has provided labour counselling to workers, many of whom are migrant workers, and has been engaged in a large number of negotiations with employers to solve their labour disputes. In addition, ZWU has provided migrant workers with such services as language interpretation and negotiation with immigration offices on, for example, necessary documentation and illegal overstay by some migrant workers.

ZWU established a foreign worker sub-section (*gaikokujin rōdōsha bunkai*) in 1992 to organize an increasing number of foreign workers, who were mostly from Asian countries such as Bangladesh, Pakistan and Iran (Torii, 2010: 48). Compared to the two other individually-affiliated unions mentioned above, ZWU's membership is large (around 4,000 members of ZWU vs. around 360 members of SSU and around 120 members of WUT). This is partly because of ZWU's active engagement in social movement targeted at migrant workers, although ZWU has more workplace-based locals than the two other unions. ZWU has formed an institutionalized coalition with a civil society organization called *Ijūren* (Solidarity Network with Migrants Japan, SMJ) by becoming a core member of SMJ (Interview, Chief Executive Officer, ZWU, March 2016). In fact, the Chief Executive Officer of ZWU and the Secretary General of SMJ are the same person, and ZWU has relied on SMJ for organizing migrant workers. SMJ was established in 1997 and is a nationwide umbrella organization of around 90 civil society organizations (including Christianity and women organizations) and 300 individual members, with the aims to protect migrant workers' human rights and their livelihoods by engaging in political advocacy, networking and publicity (Torii, 2010: 44).

> In order to promote social networking, SMJ has organized the 'National Forum' and the 'National Workshop' alternately every year, with support from ZWU. Around 1,000 people participated in the National Forum and around 100 people participated in the National Workshop each time. We have organized these meetings so that members of other civil society organizations, unions, and concerned citizens, lawyers and academics can discuss issues related to migrant workers and the ways to improve their working conditions (Interview, Chief Executive Officer, ZWU, March 2016).

In addition, SMJ has promoted international networking by organizing and participating in campaigns related to migrant labour with Asian and other international civil society organizations (Torii, 2010: 50-51).

ZWU has also been engaged in political activities through institutionalized coalition with SMJ. For example, they have organized mass political demonstrations to demand the government to improve migrants' working conditions. In addition, ZWU has pressured the government to adopt policies aimed at improving the working conditions of migrant workers in coalition with SMJ by lobbying the relevant government ministries such as the Ministry of Justice, which has the main jurisdiction in immigration control, and the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, which has the main jurisdiction in labour standards and worker protection.

> We hold meetings with ministries in charge of immigration and migrants' working conditions twice a year to discuss relevant policies, and some of our political lobbying was effective. For example, when we discussed the poor working conditions and human rights violation of foreign technical interns, some of our policy proposals were adopted in the relevant law (Interview, Chief Executive Officer, ZWU, March 2016).

SMJ set up a network for foreign technical interns (*gaikokujin ginou jisshūsei*) in 2001 to improve their working conditions. This SMJ's network had 14 organizations under its umbrella and 71 individual members in 2008 (Kremers, 2014: 732). Foreign technical interns are particularly vulnerable to exploitation by employers as a result of their status as 'interns', not 'workers', and insufficient protection by the Labour Standards Law and other relevant labour laws (Interview, Chief Executive Officer, ZWU, March 2016). However, as a result of a recent change in the regulations related to foreign technical interns with the enactment of the Foreign Technical Intern Law in 2016, employers are now subject to legal requirements such as their duty to pay technical interns the salaries equivalent to those for domestic workers. As a result, the use of foreign technical interns is under stricter control than before but this is part of policy demands for which SMJ and ZWU have lobbied the relevant ministries. However, there are still a number of issues to be addressed more properly in the Law such as low wages of interns, the number of interns to be accepted and the scope of intern work. In this respect, the Law is far from being satisfactory from ZWU's and SMJ's perspectives.

ZWU and SMJ have also lobbied politicians and held meetings with Diet members who are sympathetic to migrants and interested in issues related to their precarious working conditions. Through this process, they have been recognized as experts on immigration issues. For example, the Chief Executive Officer of ZWU, who was also the General Secretary of SMJ, and an SMJ member who was in charge of foreign technical internship were invited to the Diet (House of Representatives and House of Councillors respectively) to provide their opinions on migration.

> I was invited by the House of Representatives as the General Secretary of SMJ to provide an opinion on immigration when the House held discussion on an amendment to the Immigration Control Law in 2009. I think this demonstrates our policy impact to some extent. In addition, I received a TIP (Trafficking in Persons) Report Hero Award from the US State Secretary John Kerry. The Award recognized our hard work to help foreign technical interns who suffered from extremely poor working conditions, which sometimes involved human trafficking (Interview, Chief Executive Officer, ZWU, March 2016).

As seen above, ZWU has exercised political agency by engaging in social movement in coalition with SMJ. Through an institutionalized form of political lobbying and policy proposals aimed at relevant politicians and government ministries, ZWU has exercised influence, if to a small extent, on public policy related to migrant workers in a way to improve their working conditions.

Comparison of the three individually-affiliated unions

The three individually-affiliated unions examined above (SSU, WUT and ZWU) share similarities in that they have suffered from small human and financial resources compared to enterprise unions, difficulty in organizing a large number of workers and the low retention rates of union members. However, they have engaged in social movement and exercised political agency in different degrees and had different impact on public policy related to working conditions. In the case of ZWU, it has formed a coalition with SMJ and exercised political agency by lobbying politicians and maintaining institutionalized access to government bureaucracy to discuss relevant immigration and labour policies. As a result,

ZWU has been able to influence the relevant public policy in a way to improve the working conditions of migrant workers, if to a small extent.

It is true that the working conditions of migrant workers, especially technical interns, were very poor and the Japanese government needed to address this issue in the face of international and domestic criticisms. It is also true that the government had an incentive to improve the working conditions of migrant workers at least to some extent to increase the number of those workers and cope with labour shortage in Japan. However, despite being still insufficient, the 2016 Foreign Technical Intern Law stipulated some obligations for users of technical interns to abide by, such as their duty to pay technical interns the wages equivalent to those for domestic workers. These obligations were part of what ZWU had demanded in coalition with SMJ.

In contrast to ZWU, WUT has not been active in social movement and exercised little political agency. As a result, WUT has hardly had any impact on public policy aimed at improving the working conditions of women workers. Recent government proposals such as 'equal pay for equal work', which may benefit female workers who constitute a majority of non-regular workers, were made mainly with an aim to achieve economic growth through greater input of female labour force, rather than for the sake of improving the working conditions of female workers. Although a large number of male young workers and migrant workers suffer from precarious working conditions as women workers do, those male workers do not need to experience the dual burden of work and care responsibilities and gender discrimination in the labour market. This difficult situation for women workers is likely to have had a negative impact on WUT's capacity to organize female workers and influence public policy. However, with greater political agency through social movement unionism, WUT would have ameliorated women's poor working conditions to a greater extent. For example, WUT could have been more strategic in strengthening the network with

civil society organizations for empowering women such as the Action Centre for Working Women by allocating more resources for recruiting women workers who visit those organizations and mobilizing them in political engagements.

SSU is located in the middle position in this respect. On the one hand, SSU has engaged in social movement and exercised political agency to a greater extent than WUT. As mentioned above, SSU has participated in campaigns aimed at raising minimum wages, helping the working poor and increasing housing benefits to young workers in coalition with civil society organizations. SSU has also exercised political agency by participating in political meetings with Diet members of opposition parties more frequently than WUT and making policy proposals to the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare and the Tokyo Metropolitan Government's Labour Bureau. However, unlike ZWU, SSU has not been able to establish institutionalized access to policy-making venues for discussing public policy with national and Tokyo government officials and its policy impact has been more limited. Through comparison among the three individually-affiliated unions of SSU, WUT and ZWU, it may be possible to identify a positive link, if to a small extent, between unions' exercise of political agency through social movement unionism and their impact on public policy aimed at ameliorating precarious working conditions of non-regular workers and regular workers in SMEs.

Conclusion

This article has conducted case studies of three individually-affiliated unions in Japan for young, female and migrant workers to assess their impact on public policy and the working conditions of those in precarious positions. The article has claimed that the ways they have exercised political agency and engaged in social movement unionism resulted, if to a small

extent, in the different performance of these unions in terms of the effectiveness in influencing relevant public policy and improving working conditions. This finding contributes to the literature on union revitalization by pointing out the importance of unions' political agency and social movements for ameliorating precarious working conditions. With stronger political agency and social movement unionism aimed at addressing the concerns of workers who suffer from precarious working conditions, unions may be able to organize a larger number of non-regular workers and regular workers in SMEs and revitalize the labour movement with greater power resources and social recognition.

As for the limitations of this article, it is unlikely that the results based on a comparative analysis on three individually-affiliated unions in Japan have external validity or can be generalized to other countries that have different industrial relations in terms of the most representative types of unions (enterprise unions vs. industrial unions, for example), the level of centralization of collective bargaining and so on. However, as the three unions are quite similar to other individually-affiliated unions in Japan in terms of small power resources, active involvement in the resolution of labour disputes and so on, the results may be applicable to other individually-affiliated unions in Japan. In addition, the determinants and effects of union power may be heterogeneous across industries and firms, as seen between manufacturing and service sectors and between large firms and SMEs. However, the three unions in this article, or more broadly individually-affiliated unions in Japan, represent workers irrespective of their company or industrial affiliation, so the results of the article may also be applicable to other individually-affiliated unions in Japan. Finally, the causal link between ZWU's political agency through social movement and its policy impact may not be clear or significant, as there were some other factors that affected policies relevant to migrant workers such as international criticisms of their poor working conditions against the Japanese

government. However, a small number of relevant legal changes reflected ZWU's policy requests at least.

The findings of this article imply that unions' greater exercise of political agency through social movement unionism may contribute to better working conditions and labour movement revitalization, if to a small extent. In contrast to SSU and WUT, which did not exercise sufficient political agency and could not successfully influence public policy related to minimum wages, temporary agency work and so on, ZWU was relatively more successful in influencing public policy related to migrant workers. However, even with stronger political agency and social movement unionism, the power resources of individually-affiliated unions are likely to remain small as long as their organizing method depends on the recruitment of individual workers through labour consultation rather than collective worker recruitment based on a workplace unit. This suggests the importance of greater political agency and social movement by 'mainstream' unions, most dominant of which are enterprise unions in the Japanese case. However, mainstream unions are mostly concerned with job protection of regular workers in large companies. Unless mainstream unions change this attitude by giving up their vested interests, there is little scope or hope for unions to ameliorate precarious working conditions. In this era of neoliberal globalization (despite its declining influence with the recent rise of right-wing populism), 'solidarity' among workers is essential for unions to revitalize the labour movement and improve the working conditions of all workers.

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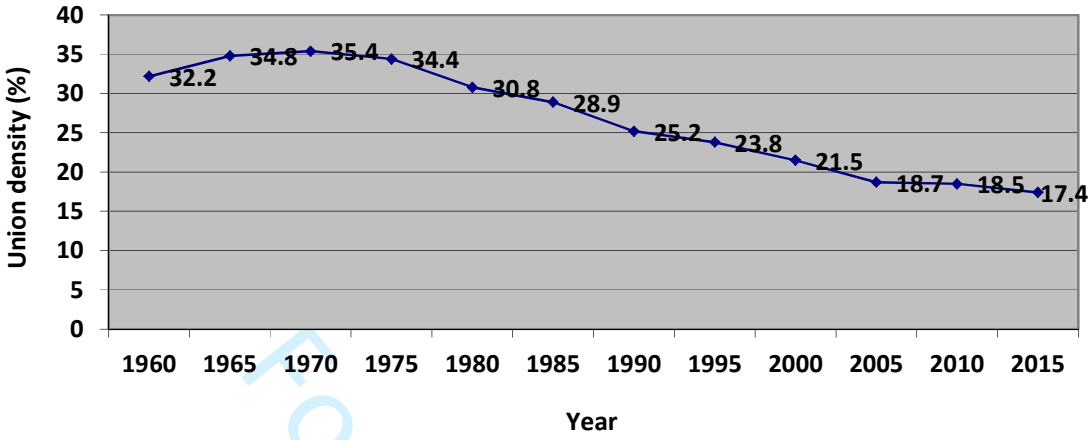
Figure 1

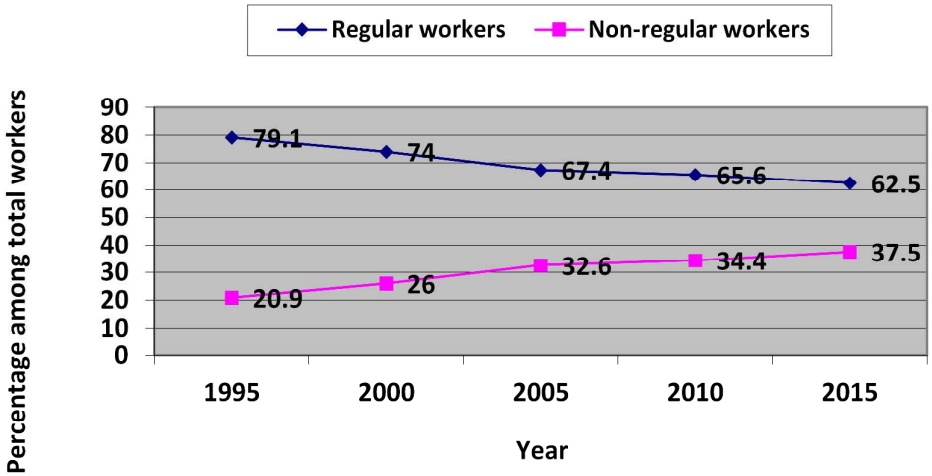
Union density in Japan



Source: *Basic Survey on Labour Unions*, 2016, Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare.

Figure 2

Percentage of regular and non-regular workers in Japan



Source: *Labour Force Survey*, 2016. Statistics Bureau.