THE JAPANESE LABOUR SYSTEM

— A CRITICAL ANALYSIS —

by

David M. Berry

Head of Department
Human Resources Management
Faculty of Management
Port Elizabeth Technikon

SOUTH AFRICA

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Department of Research Cooperation
Economic Research Institute
Economic Planning Agency
Tokyo, Japan
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1. **INTRODUCTION**

The productive potential of an economy is determined by the quality of its natural resources, its capital stock, and the existing technological base. Domestic natural resources available to Japanese industries are relatively scarce; over ninety percent of energy requirements and eighty percent of raw materials must be imported. The question needs to be asked: How does a country whose economy was devastated by World War II and which lacks greatly in natural resources, experience annual growth rates which are much higher than most other developed countries?

Based on my findings and investigations from two visits to Japan in the last six months, and looking at the situation mainly through the eyes of an academic in the field of human resources management, the main conclusion that I can draw is that the lack of natural resources in Japan is offset by unique labour relations practices and an extremely committed, energetic, high quality labour force. There is definite evidence that considerable resources have been devoted to improving the productive potential of the population. Investments in education and on-the-job training have continued to improve the stock of human capital per worker. This is reflected in the rising level of educational attainment of workers and increased job tenure along with greater organisation investment in their workers.

Increases in educational attainment of workers have accompanied the rapid economic growth in Japan. Greater investment in human capital is both a cause and consequence of economic development; demand for a higher skilled work force induces greater educational attainment while an increase in human capital further stimulates economic growth.

This report represents the findings of my research into the functioning of the Japanese labour system. I have also attempted to try to find answers to the following questions: “Are the attitudes of Japanese workers towards their jobs changing? ” and “Will the current labour system survive?”

2. **FUNCTIONING OF LABOUR UNIONS IN JAPAN**

Before discussing the functioning of labour unions, it is necessary to firstly consider the principles of Japanese labour unions.
2.1 **PRINCIPLES OF JAPANESE LABOUR UNIONS**

Japanese labour unions operate under the following five principles:

* The first is democracy, which requires that all activities must be conducted in a democratic manner.

* The second is pacifism.

* The third principle is respect for human rights which encompasses such fundamental human rights as the right to assemble and the freedom of speech.

* The fourth is the fair distribution of benefits wrought from improvements in productivity. In other words, benefits from an improvement in productivity should not be appropriated in the form of capital only, for example as capital investment. Instead, benefits should be fairly distributed to the consumers and the workers.

* The final principle is the union solidarity, an idea based upon the concept of “all for one and one for all.”

2.2 **ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE OF JAPANESE LABOUR UNIONS**

The organisational structure of Japanese labour unions is characterised by the following five features:

**SEPARATE CORPORATE UNIONS**

2.2.1 In Japan, most companies have their own worker's organisations. To express this feature more clearly, the terms “labour union” rather than “trade union” or “craft union” is used, and in fact, the concept of a trade or a craft has never existed in Japan. The constructive role played by the enterprise unions
in establishing and strengthening such work practices as life-time employment
and the seniority system within Japan’s closed labour market is the prime
reason that this structure has stood firm through to today, albeit mainly in the
large companies.

2.2.2 UNION-SHOP AGREEMENT
All Japanese lower-level workers of large scale companies are usually required
to participate in the company’s labour union. The union shop agreement that
provides for such obligatory participation is one of the characteristics of
Japanese cooperations.
It should be noted however, that public servants are under the open-shop-
system, where participation in a labour union is left to the discretion of the
individual.

2.2.3 INDUSTRY FEDERATION
The third characteristic of the organisation of Japanese labour unions
is the existence of industry federations of corporate labour unions. Corporate
labour unions come together to form industry federations.

Funds for these federations come from fees and other payments from affiliated
enterprise unions. The industrial federations are quite weak and are able to
exert only very marginal influence over the actions of individual unions.
Industry federation officials are elected from among the officials of affiliated
unions, and almost all are in company employment.

In forming the executive body, an industrial federation will seek a balance
among the unions of companies which hold sway over the market in its
particular industry.
2.2.4 **NATIONAL CONFEDERATIONS**

Japan currently has between 120 and 130 industry federations. As this number is relatively large, national centres offer broad ranging guidance to administer these industry federations. Rengo is Japan’s largest confederation and comprises of about 76 unions, such as industrial union federations, government enterprise unions covering workers in the postal service and other public enterprises, and unions covering members in the national and local public service. Its membership represents approximately 61 percent of Japan’s total union membership. Another major confederation and rival to Rengo is Zenroren (National Confederation of Unions) comprising of 28 unions with a labour total membership of 6.8 percent of all union members. Both Rengo and Zenroren were formed in November 1989.

2.2.5 **INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATION**

The National Confederations are affiliated to international organisations; for example, Rengo is affiliated to four international trade secretaries.

2.3 **LABOUR-MANAGEMENT RELATIONS IN JAPAN**

This section will amplify on the functioning of the structures discussed in section 2.2. Labour-management relations in Japan are characterised by the following three features:

* First, the relationship between labour and management is based upon a collective-bargaining system taking place at the company level. Japan has a wage negotiation system called the “Spring Labour Offensive” (shunto) which is held annually between March and May. The “Spring Offensive” has taken deep root in Japan’s socio-economic life as a uniquely Japanese wage determination mechanism. The first spring labour offensive was held in 1995, and began on a full scale the following year. It is a strategy devised with the idea of strengthening the negotiating power of unions and seeking an equalisation of
overall wage increase levels through simultaneous company-level wage negotiations on a national and industry-wide scale under the guidance and coordination of Industrial union federations and also National union confederations.

These days more than 80 percent of unionised workers take part in wage negotiations during a set period in spring, but the fundamental mechanism is one in which first, wage negotiations take place in the major companies in the key metal-using industries such as the iron and steel, motor, electric machinery and shipbuilding and engineering industries, whose wide reach gives them a leading role in the Japanese economy. The compromise wage increase level worked out at these negotiations influence wage negotiations at major companies in the other private-sector industries while the average wage increase level resulting from these negotiations then influence wage decisions at small and medium size companies, and also at national enterprises, which in principle are based on wage decisions in the private sector. These wage trends then have an influence on wage recommendations by the National Personnel Authority for public servants in clerical and administrative positions and on decisions affecting minimum wage levels. In that sense, the spring labour offensive as a wage determination mechanism forms the foundation of the income distribution and price fixing mechanism within the Japanese economy.

* The second feature is that collective bargaining is also held at the industry level, in addition to that carried out at the company level. As a matter of course, it is the company level negotiations which play the main role. Still, several unions and their management within the same industry may sometimes hold joint negotiations. Not only working environment, but also industrial policies are discussed in the negotiations which take place at this level. For example, should the textile industry in Japan experience a decline, the situation might be addressed at industry-level negotiations between labour and management, and the establishment of policy adjustments discussed.
* The third feature is the negotiations which take place at the national level. For example, the national centre, Rengo, submits most of its policies, including those concerning social welfare and employment, to the government. When a demand for an increase in retirement pensions is submitted by labour, the centre presents this demand to the government.

Labour unions also suggest policies to political parties, so that such policies will be discussed in the Diet (Parliament). Individual companies alone cannot solve such serious problems as an industrial decline, and therefore, problems of this scale need to be handled by industry federations or the national centre.

3. **THE EMPLOYEE AND HIS JOB**

3.1 **LIFETIME EMPLOYMENT PRACTICE**

Most workers in Japan, particularly those in larger companies work at the same company for almost all of their working lives. During this period they receive education and training and are rotated through various kinds of jobs within the company. As a general rule they complete their career in the same enterprise. Their employment is in principle guaranteed until normal retirement age.

Life-time employment is a practice not enforced by law or a contract. This practice is widely applied and accepted by labour and management. Workers may, however, voluntarily leave the enterprise.

3.2 **JOB DESCRIPTIONS**

The situation regarding the definition of an individual’s job tends to be more fluid in Japan than in many other countries. In other words the boundaries confining workers to particular tasks tend to be less defined in Japan.
Although job descriptions may exist for workers, it is unlikely that the job will be performed as set out in the description. In this sense the job description merely functions as a guideline. In reality the contents of an employee’s job will change as the situation demands.

3.3 **SENIORITY-BASED WAGE SYSTEM**

The seniority-based wage system is the system whereby wages determined at the time of the recruitment by the organisation will continue to increase with an annual automatic increment given for each year of service. This seniority wage system is one of the main elements of Japanese employment policies together with the lifetime employment practice and the enterprise trade union. Wages are increased along with years of service with these wages peaking between ages 50 and 54.

3.4 **BONUSES**

Bonuses are generally paid twice a year in the summer and at year end; some companies make a third payment. In those companies with labour unions, bonus payment levels are set through collective bargaining. The actual amounts paid to workers, however, are determined partly by their basic salary and partly by their performance during the preceding six months. On average, annual bonus payments amount to four or five months of basic salary, though multiples up to eight are not unusual. Bonuses contain an element of profit sharing, and the level of payments fluctuates in accordance with the organisation’s performance.

4. **ORGANISATIONAL EMPLOYMENT ADJUSTMENTS**

It is most interesting to establish what mechanisms are used by Japanese organisations to cope with labour problems posed by structural change or economic recession.
When manufacturers are forced to cut back on production, they are generally reluctant to lay off excess workers because of the lifetime employment system. (See Section 3.1). Instead, most companies will first restrict overtime and reduce or cut out hiring. They may also dismiss temporary, seasonal or part-time workers or simply let these workers’ contract expire. If the situation calls for further measures, employers will next consider reassigning workers to other sections or transferring them to affiliated companies after consulting with labour representatives. Wage increases and bonus payments may also be held back, and if necessary, wage cuts may be implemented. Unions, for which job protection is the top priority, will generally cooperate with these moves, provided they are justified by business conditions. (Refer appendix 1 which discusses a very recent cooperation between labour and management). Only as a last resort will companies seek voluntary retirees or dismiss selected workers outright.

Subsidies from the employment insurance system are being readied to assist companies in coping with the process of adjustment. One of the objectives of the system will be to reduce layoffs to the greatest extent possible. The subsidies will be given to those companies affected by changes in the economic climate and the structure of industry, which have resulted in a general downturn in business activity. The insurance system will make up part of the salary of employees who are out of work due to temporary plant closures, undergoing training, or temporary transferred. Companies also endeavour to absorb surplus employees by diversifying their activities. An example of this is the approach used by Nippon Steel which was hit by a structural recession in 1986/87. The company created jobs for surplus workers by branching out into such areas of activity as computer, electronics, education, leisure services and biotechnology. Some of the workers were also temporarily loaned to industries where production levels were high.

The bursting of the speculative bubbles in the economy, which began in 1990 with the crash in stock market and real estate prices, has compelled many companies to brace themselves for another recessionary phase. The current slump is different from those in past years in that it has engulfed the financial industry, including banks and
security firms, and the real estate market. Securities houses have been hit particularly hard, and they have been forced to cut worker salaries, close down branches, hold back on the number of new recruits, and transfer workers to sales divisions. However, they have not yet resorted to such drastic measures as laying off workers and soliciting voluntary retirees, as some manufacturers have done. From the discussion it can therefore be seen that Japanese organisations have done all they could in terms of the lifetime employment system, to avoid dismissing their employees: this has contributed significantly to keeping the country's unemployment rate as low as possible.

5. **ARE WORKERS' ATTITUDES CHANGING?**

From my two visits to Japan I can state with confidence that Japanese workers can be regarded as being diligent, highly motivated and having a strong sense of loyalty and identification toward their organisations. Their role in the growth of individual corporations has made a major contribution to Japan's overall economic development. Many theories have been put forward to account for the attitudes of the Japanese worker. One factor that has clearly helped to foster these attitudes has been the human resource policies of Japanese organisations. For example, the lifetime employment system and seniority based wage scales that took hold during the high-growth era helped to foster diligence and high worker morale. Loyalty to and close identification with the company were encouraged through paternalistic management policies that assured job security and by a wage system under which the highest rewards went to those with the most years of service. As a result, the proportion of workers who regard work as their main interest in life is higher in Japan than in many other countries, while the percentage of workers who change jobs is markedly lower.

The mainstay of the Japanese labour force during the postwar economic reconstruction period and the subsequent period of high economic growth consisted of people born before and during World War II. Now, however, these people are
being replaced by workers born after the war, and there are indications that the change of generations is also leading to changes in traditional attitudes toward work. Those born before 1945 had to endure the hardships of war and of the postwar period, growing up in a country that was economically under-developed, in which hard work was a necessary part of daily life. But the members of the postwar generation, particularly those born during or after the high-growth era, have grown up amid material affluence and are also considerably better educated than their elders.

These socio-economic changes have naturally affected workers’ attitudes. The long-term trend that has developed is a decline in the percentage of people who regard work as making their everyday lives worthwhile. There is a growing tendency to emphasise family, or sports and other interest over work. Almost sixty percent of workers would now choose to have more free-time rather than a higher income. The sense of identity with the company is also weakening. The number of workers who switch employers either, voluntarily or involuntarily has been gradually growing over the past two decades, although there have been fluctuations induced by the business cycle. The percentage of workers who express a desire to switch jobs, moreover, has been steadily rising, jumping from 3.9 percent in 1975 to 8.0 percent in 1991.

Another indication of changing attitudes is the rise in the number of people who will agree to meet with head hunters and corporate scouts to discuss the possibility of switching jobs. According to people in this business, formerly only one out of ten people they called would agree to a meeting. However, today only one in ten refuses.

Changes in corporate personnel policies have also placed a major role. The shortage of senior posts due to the ageing of the work force has been a source of disappointment for many who find themselves denied that which their predecessors enjoyed. Other factors include the harsh treatment meted out to older workers, some of whom are “disposed of” through transfers to subsidiaries and affiliated firms. There are rumblings among workers in their thirties and forties who feel ill at ease with these developments, fearing that they too, after years of loyal service to their
organisations, may also one day meet such fates. In addition, major corporations, which in the past relied almost exclusively on a labour pool of new graduates, are now being forced to recruit an increasing number of experienced outsiders to keep up with technological advances and the trend toward globalization. As long ago as 1986, one of Japan’s major banks employed one hundred mid-career employees to shore up their international, securities, and corporate finance operations and to develop and maintain computer systems; since then, other major companies have been following suit. This development has also contributed to the changing of worker’s attitudes.

6. **WILL THE CURRENT LABOUR SYSTEM SURVIVE?**

Having considered the functioning of labour unions as well as labour-management relations, strategies used by organisations for employment adjustments and the changing attitudes of Japanese workers, the question that I have asked myself is: “Will the existing unique Japanese labour system survive?”

The labour market is tending to become much more open with the appearance of various new categories of workers and increasing labour turnover. As previously stated, there are signs that the strong sense among workers of belonging to one’s company has started to weaken. The changing awareness of worker’s regarding their work and their lives cannot be overlooked. The sense of belonging to or being an integral part of the company is decreasing particularly among the middle-level and younger workers. The changes in worker awareness can also be seen in the declining interest in unions.

The progress of change appears to be affecting the lifetime employment and seniority-based systems in various ways and given that these conventional employment practices have been institutionalized under the behavioural logic of the enterprise unions, it could in fact, weaken the foundations upon which enterprise unions have grown.
The rapidly changing business environment together with the rise in the number of elderly persons and the changing values of the workforce is prompting a reappraisal of Japanese style management and seniority-based advancement and remuneration, which constitute the basis of corporate personnel administration systems today.

There are however limits to change and there is little likelihood that this trend will bring about a change from the present vertical structure based on enterprise unions, which has been maintained over the past fifty years, to an industry-based horizontal structure. Japanese organisations have tended to foster a family spirit among their employees although in certain respects only among fulltime employees. The measures adopted by companies to maintain the stable internal labour-management relations are rooted in this family spirit and extend across a broad area, including well-equipped company welfare facilities.

7. **CONCLUSION**

Despite the various changes occurring in the business environment due to a number of internal and external factors, the vertical structure of enterprise unions is still and will remain for a long time, a key aspect of Japanese labour relations.

Organisations will however have to take the changes in traditional attitudes of individuals to work into consideration. The enlightened approach by organisations in exposing their staff to training and education abroad will impact more and more on the values of employees. A proactive approach is necessary for addressing various social and institutional issues such as shorter working hours and longer vacations and in improving the quality of life in general.

Individuals should be strongly encouraged to take longer vacations. This could result in an even greater development of people as it becomes necessary for supervisors and managers to develop understudies who can step in and fill their positions when they are absent from work for greater periods of time than at present, due to longer vacations.
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