

# *Japanese Workers in Protest*

AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF  
CONSCIOUSNESS AND  
EXPERIENCE

*Christena L. Turner*

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and Experience

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS

*Berkeley / Los Angeles / London*

University of California Press  
Berkeley and Los Angeles, California  
University of California Press, Ltd.  
London, England

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First Paperback Printing 1999

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Turner, Christena L., 1949-

Japanese workers in protest : an ethnography of consciousness and  
experience / Christena L. Turner.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-520-21961-9 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Trade-unions—Japan. 2. Working class—Japan. 3. Labor  
movement—Japan. 4. Class consciousness—Japan. 5. Industrial  
relations—Japan. 6. Japan—Social conditions—1945- I. Title.

HD6832.T87 1995

331.88'0952—dc20

94-20207

Printed in the United States of America

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of  
American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence  
of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984. ∞

## Japanese Workers in Protest

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*To the memory of my parents,  
Nellie B. and Charles E. Turner*

## Acknowledgments

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The people of Unikon Camera and Universal Shoes accepted me into their daily work routine and regular political and social activities at a time when their organizational and personal resources were already strained by the labor disputes they were fighting and by the demands of worker-controlled production. I am deeply indebted to the people in these unions for an unusual research opportunity, for their patience and good humor, and for their insightful and enthusiastic participation in my work.

There were a number of people involved in setting up this project. Harumi Befu has guided it from the very beginning with wisdom and enthusiasm, and he began the chain of introductions and efforts on my behalf which led me into these two workplaces. That chain includes Kawanishi Hirosuke, Totsuka Hideo, and Hara Hiroko. In addition to the original introduction, Totsuka Hideo has offered important insights into the Japanese labor movement as well into these two companies, and he has become a valued friend and *sensei* as well.

There are a number of people who have made invaluable contributions to this project. Thomas Rohlen inspired this work from its earliest stages. Several sections of this book were revised, rewritten, and greatly improved by the extensive readings and responses of Jeffrey Haydu, Andrew Gordon, and an anonymous reviewer for the University of California Press. John Griffin, Ellis Krauss, and Martha Lampland read and made important comments on drafts of various chapters. Eiko Tada acted as an invaluable research assistant and critical reader throughout

the final preparation of the manuscript. The limitations of the text are far fewer because of their efforts.

Throughout this project, many have offered critical comments, insights, and conversation which have helped form this manuscript. For such help I want to thank Kay and Masumi Abe, Suzanne Cahill, Jane Collier, Steve Cornell, John Dower, David Groth, Mark Handler, Judit Hersko, Kenmochi Hitoshi, Andrea Klimt, Martha Lampland, Catherine Lewis, Richard Madsen, Masao Miyoshi, Kyoko and Hiroko Murofushi, Naoko Obata, T. Pines, Sasaki Aiko, Eiko Tada, Seiichiro Takagi, Sandra Wong, and Sylvia Yanagisako. I am also indebted to the critical thought of an extraordinary gathering of people at the University of California Humanities Institute at the University of California, Irvine for ten weeks in the spring of 1990, including Harry Harootunian, Masao Miyoshi, Oe Kenzaburo, Miriam Silverberg, and Rob Wilson. Finally, I regret that in order to protect the anonymity of the unions and their members I cannot offer my personal gratitude to several individuals at Unikon and Universal who helped me not only to understand their own experience but to formulate the general interpretations of this book as well.

I am grateful for financial support from Fulbright-Hayes, Japan Foundation, the Center for Research in International Studies at Stanford University, the Academic Senate of the University of California, San Diego, the Japanese Studies Institute of the University of California, Berkeley, and the University of California Humanities Research Institute at the University of California, Irvine. In any project of this nature, language is of central importance, and for the training I received both at Stanford and at the Inter-University Center I am forever grateful.

My gratitude is extended to Sheila Levine and Laura Driussi at the University of California Press for their encouragement and skill in helping me prepare this book. I also want to thank Mark Pentecost for careful editing of the entire manuscript, Seiichiro Takagi and Yoko Commiff for copyediting the Japanese language portions, and Kathy Mooney for thorough proofreading and an inspired index.

Finally, I thank John Griffin for day-to-day encouragement and confidence in me and in this project; Chuck Turner for conversation and counsel throughout; Eric Turner for the delight, wit, and wisdom he contributes to my work and to my daily life; and my other family and friends for their personal encouragement and support. My parents were very much present in the earliest stages of this work, providing knowl-

edge and inspiration. Long before graduate school I learned from my dad that people who work with their hands have fascinating and important things to say about the world and from my mom that to understand people's actions one must pay attention to the nuances and complex stories which represent their worlds. It is to their memories that I dedicate this book.



## A Note on Names

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Throughout this book Japanese names are written in Japanese order, surname first. In recounting conversations I heard or in which I was involved, I have maintained the Japanese form of address *san*, rather than translating it into Mr., Miss, Mrs., or Ms. The usage of *san* has very different connotations and nuances, being neither as formal as the possible English translations nor as optional. I also maintained the customary uses of given names or surnames as they occurred in the workplaces, leading to a greater usage of given names for women than for men.

When I began this fieldwork I promised anonymity to the people with whom I worked. Similarly, I promised to change the names of the unions and companies in which I worked. The two company and union names, Unikon and Universal, are both my inventions. I chose them to sound like English-language names because the real names are taken from English and transliterated into Japanese to sound English.

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## CHAPTER I

# Introduction

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On July 17, 1980, Unikon Camera Company workers and their families gathered in a festively decorated hall on the perimeter of the oldest and most beautiful park in Tokyo. Gold screens set across one end of the room reflected soft lighting and gave rich color to speakers and performers on the polished wooden stage. Large tables spread with white linen tablecloths, adorned with flowers, and piled with food were scattered throughout the room. The midsummer heat was suggestively challenged by a six-foot high camera sculpted in ice and placed on the center table, allowing it to tower over the crowd, both celebrating and amusing the workers gathered around it. Nearby was its companion piece, the ice phoenix, only slightly smaller, with wings spread as if to take flight from the beer and deep-fried chicken set underneath. I was one of over six hundred people gathered to celebrate the Unikon union victory in a labor dispute of nearly three years' duration. The red, white, and black victory banner spread over the stage read "We did it! Unikon will reopen!" in large black characters and "Unikon is like the phoenix" in red. Gathered for this event were Socialist Party and Communist Party Diet members, labor union officials of national, regional, and local federations, officers of supporting unions, labor lawyers, and a couple of Japanese researchers interested, as I was, in making sense of this struggle.

Their dispute had ended the previous month with a public announcement of victory. The newspaper *Asahi Shinbun* reported, "Warm spring visited Unikon Camera which went bankrupt three years ago amid the recession. A reconciliation agreement has been signed on the twenty-seventh of June, and the union president will, in August of this year,

become the new company president of the reopened Unikon Camera.”<sup>1</sup> *Asahi Shinbun* went on to report that “Young union members who endured this time with only 60 percent of their salaries are jubilant!” Their three-year struggle was recalled, their victory applauded, and their jubilation ritually performed at the July party. Large wooden tubs of sake were broken open with wooden mallets, splashing the auspicious wine in all directions and inspiring applause and laughter. Every guest received a fresh wooden cup from which to sip the delicious cold sake. When emptied these became small tokens of this long struggle, on which people inscribed signatures and affectionate messages for one another.

By the end of the evening my little sake cup was covered inside and out, top and bottom with eighteen signatures and greetings. “When you get back to America, start a revolution and a mass movement!” signed one young Unikon man. “Let’s meet next time in Los Angeles,” wrote one of the national Sōhyō Federation officers who had worked closely with Unikon. “When you are in the neighborhood, please drop by,” invited the Unikon union president, soon to be the new Unikon company president. “Now it’s our turn to work together with you!” signed the president of Universal Union, the union controlling the company where I was just beginning to work now that the Unikon struggle was finished.

Around the cup, the calligraphy moves in individual styles, capturing memories of the struggle, of my relationships with individuals from so many different locations within it, and of my time studying their lives. At the time it was a precious souvenir of a community I had become familiar and comfortable with and of individuals who had become my friends, coworkers, and teachers. Now, as I write about their experiences and my own, it has taken on new meanings. I look at it now and count the number of women, men, Unikon leaders, Unikon rank and file, national federation officers, and supporting union officers. I see the organization that extended beyond the individual unions and made possible a victory of this nature. I see the advantages of my position within that organization and remember how much I was able to do, how easily I was able to move vertically through layers of hierarchy and then outward, following networks of affiliated organizations. On the other hand, I see the limitations of my situation even more clearly now than at the time, when I often had to choose where and with whom to spend

1. Regarding the anonymity of the unions in this study and the consequent absence of detail in some of the references see below, p. 24. Those seeking further information may contact the author.

my time, thus limiting, grounding, and locating my work, my perspective, and my understanding of these complex struggles.

The two-hour-long party was a buffet reception punctuated by eight speeches, three dance performances, several songs, and innumerable toasts. A lion dance began the party, festively costumed men filling the spotlighted stage with bold movement and bright colors. Children gathered in front to watch the lion, a red, black, and gold masked dancer, fling his long white mane in large circles of dynamic leaps and jumps. Three musicians sang and played flutes, drums, and clappers, setting the stage for a party proclaiming strength, determination, perseverance, and victory. Loud applause followed the rousing dance and brought a Unikon union leader to the stage to begin introducing a series of speakers.

Words flowed around the guests, giving a formal and public meaning both to this event and to the last three years. A labor lawyer who had represented Unikon called theirs a “struggle for democracy” (*minshu-shugi no tataikai*). He complimented Unikon for fighting against the “antilabor policies” of the conservative Liberal Democratic Party government. The Socialist and Communist Diet members echoed these sentiments. Labor’s power to challenge management was weakening so rapidly at that time that between 1974 and 1978 disputes had decreased by one-third (Totsuka 1980). The oil shock of 1973 quadrupled the price of crude oil and marked the beginning of a period of slowed growth that has made it increasingly difficult for labor to bargain. The Unikon dispute began in 1977 after the second oil shock. The *Asahi Shinbun* had reported in 1980 that the Unikon victory might be one of the last of a decade of relatively vigorous union struggles. Theirs was a flamboyant struggle, nationally famous for being bold and imaginative in style and clever in strategy. Its successful conclusion was viewed as a boost for the morale of many in the labor movement.

Among the six hundred attending the Unikon celebration were husbands, wives, and children of the workers. Families had come on trips and attended other parties as well. Protracted union management of the work process had changed the daily lives of families in ways that strikes and more conventional dispute actions of the past had not. Workers had been receiving only 60 percent of their prebankruptcy wages, working longer hours, living under the threat of job loss, and coping with the confusing pressures of deciding periodically whether there was enough hope of success to stay with Unikon under these conditions or whether they should quit and try to find other work in more stable companies. Families had experienced conflicts over money and over how long it was

reasonable to continue participating in the struggle. All family members were making daily sacrifices in living standards and peace of mind. An official from the Tokyo branch of the All-Japan Metalworkers Federation made his way to the stage, took the microphone, and praised the Unikon families for persevering through three years of a "struggle with no model, with no precedent in Japan." The message of praise for families in victory echoed the slogans on banners under which Unikon workers had marched in protest, messages proclaiming theirs a struggle for families, accusing capitalists of trying to destroy their families. The omnipresence of this oft-spoken and deeply felt meaning of their struggle was matched by the emphasis on its unique and unprecedented nature.

While it was true that there had been no similar cases for nearly thirty years, it was not true that there was no precedent for this kind of struggle in Japan. This claim to newness seemed nevertheless always to accompany the excitement in the labor movement, on the Left, and in academic circles about worker control of production as a strategy for fighting against bankruptcy and loss of jobs, an excitement that far overshadowed any desire to see historical precedent in the worker-control movements of the immediate postwar period. The first instance of worker control in Japan was at the newspaper *Yomiuri Shinbun* in October 1945 (Moore 1983). Ironically, in 1977, when Unikon went bankrupt and the union occupied the factory against legal orders to disband, began worker control of production, and brought legal suit against the owners, *Yomiuri Shinbun's* rival newspaper, the *Asahi*, sought links overseas but called it unprecedented in Japanese experience. *Asahi* coined the term "eastern Lipp," reporting that the French watchmaker, Lipp, had successfully reopened after their union waged a struggle for worker control and that this Japanese case would be the "eastern" version.<sup>2</sup>

Totsuka Hideo characterized the Unikon struggle in a similar but subtler way. "In it I see a new quality of antibankruptcy disputes of small and medium-sized companies. . . . This new type of labor movement may spread to or influence other labor movements" (1980: 3). Perhaps, Totsuka went on to speculate, there is a kernel of change lodged in these struggles which can begin to "crack the traditional stable labor-management relationship and shake the framework of capitalism." With postwar bankruptcies at an all-time high in the late seventies and eighties, workers were increasingly threatened not simply with stagnating wages but with loss of jobs. Labor disputes have decreased overall from 1974

2. Lipp went bankrupt in 1968 as a result of increasing rationalization of the production process. After a short period of worker-controlled production the company closed.

until the present, as slowed growth, periodic recession, and the highest rates of bankruptcy in postwar Japanese history gradually changed the nature of economic life for Japanese workers. In this environment the antibankruptcy struggles staked out new tactics and new demands. The fact that they occurred exclusively in small and medium-sized companies emphasizes the greater vulnerability of workers in this sector to slowed growth or recession.

The official from the Tokyo branch of the All-Japan Metalworkers Federation, the trade union federation to which Unikon belonged, was just finishing his speech. "The Unikon victory," he concluded, "will inspire other workers facing bankruptcies in the low-growth times ahead." As I stood and participated in this party, the Unikon experience of protest and protracted struggle was being transformed from a living struggle, with three years of history—formed as often out of contestation as out of consensus—into an inspiring model of unity, determination, and success. I had already begun to study a second worker-control struggle, at Universal Shoes, and it was easy for me to see the impact the Unikon victory was having on them. The leaders from Universal's union who were present at the party were feeling encouraged and inspired by this victory. Their bankruptcy struggle and worker control of production had started several months before Unikon's and they were still very far from settlement. Spirits had sagged at times as they wondered how long they would have to work at this dispute and what the nature of their reward might be. In the end it was to take Universal nearly seven more years to settle. This summer of 1980 was, however, a gratifying and hopeful time for them.

Other sides of the Unikon story appeared in informal conversations, comments, and interactions as we stood chatting between speeches and toasts. One young man walked over to me, offered me some beer, and stood beside me looking toward the stage. "It's all going so smoothly. Everything looks so beautiful. You'd never know how messy things have been, would you?" "No, you wouldn't," I answered. An older woman joined us as I asked why they thought everyone had come to this party, even those who had been angry, frustrated, and hurt by recent conflicts within the union. "All's well that ends well," she quoted in Japanese, adding as a reminder that it was originally from Shakespeare. For those close enough to see the process of the struggle and ultimate settlement, the Unikon model was not an unambiguously positive one. Whether or not theirs was unusually contested is not easy to say because little has been written about the internal dynamics of Japanese union action.



Rank-and-file conversations at Unikon and later at Universal compared the conflicts, debates, and issues they faced to those faced in several other ongoing and recently concluded disputes. Totsuka (1978) writes that there are two types of workers in antibankruptcy disputes, those who want swift financial compensation and those who want company reconstruction. This split existed in both Unikon and Universal, and there were others.<sup>3</sup> Many of the lines of fissure within these unions followed categorical distinctions among workers that are common throughout Japanese industry, differences between part-time, temporary, postretirement, and regular workers, between male and female workers, or between older and younger workers. Inoue Masao, a labor economist who worked on the Unikon dispute, sees these divisions in the work force as obstacles to equal participation in the management of an enterprise and consequently as threats to unity.<sup>4</sup> These and other categories were experienced in daily workplace practice and reinforced and reinterpreted in formal speeches, union publications, and public pronouncements.

A national All-Japan Metalworkers Federation official followed by an official from the General Council of Japanese Trade Unions, or Sōhyō,<sup>5</sup> brought cheers and applause with their compliments to Unikon's women. "Their vitality and strength were of critical importance to this victory," began the All-Japan Metalworkers official. This was, he continued, his voice rising, "a women's struggle [*fujin no tatakai*]." The Sōhyō official repeated that praise, adding that the workers of the Unikon union, nearly half of whom were women, were "workers who have made history [*rekishi o ugokasu rōdōsha*]." With this, all the Unikon workers and their families were asked to the stage.

As children scrambled onto the stage, adults tried with little determination and less success to encourage them to stand straight and look forward. Women dominated. Wives came with their worker husbands to the stage, but husbands did not accompany their worker wives forward. It was generally true that when men came to union events in support of

3. Apter and Sawa (1984) and Groth (1986) discuss this same division in other social movements in Japan.

4. Inoue (1991) attributes conflict within the Unikon union during self-management largely to differences in feelings of responsibility between men and women and between union members of different employment status. I address his analysis in chapter 4.

5. This was the most radical of the national federations of labor during most of the postwar period. It was replaced in the late eighties by Rengō, the Japanese Trade Union Confederation, which absorbed all major national federations into a single national-level organization. This is discussed in chapter 8 in relation to the companies I studied, and general treatments are available in Mochizuki 1993, Taira 1988, and Tsujinaka 1993.