

The Last Vigor of the Japanese Postwar Reformist Workers Movement and its Impasse in the 1970s — the beginning of the downfall of Sohyo Trade-Union movement

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The following text was originally written as the final chapter of my 1982 article, "[The Japanese Working Class Movement from the 1950s to the Middle of 1970s](#)" [1] I have made some stylistic changes to the original text, and added the bracketed paragraph at the end of the section 7. — May 2011.

Y. S.

1. From the middle of 1960s, the annual wage increase was decided basically by the two major elements at the spring wage increase campaign; the industrial negotiations between the big manufacturing businesses and the industrial groupings of big intra-enterprise unions(the key negotiation was the steel industry one) on the one hand, and the balance of forces between the government and the public-sector big national unions(the railway workers union, postal workers union and telecommunication workers union) on the other.

Big businesses' intra-enterprise unions did not have any meaningful autonomy from the managements, thereby placing the latter in a dominant position in the annual wage increase deal. As for the balance of forces in the public sector, the unions were rather in a passive situation in the 1960s. Thus, in the latter half of 1960s, the big bourgeoisie and the LDP government were in a hegemonic position at the annual wage increase bargain.

However, the situation changed significantly from the late 1960s to the early 1970s.

The vast reserve of labor force which had been embraced in the rural society was exhausted by the expansionist economic growth at the urban centers in the late 1960s (see the table below).

Table 1: Workforce and wages

1954-1956

	1954/55	1960	1965/66
Total workforce (million)	41.94	45.11	47.87

	1954/55	1960	1965/66
Agricultural and forestry workforce(million)	14.78	12.73	10.46
Total wage earners (million)	17.33	23.70	28.76
Number of employed/manufacturing industries (millions)	5.07	7.86	9.93
Official unemployment rate	2.5%	1.7%	1.2%
Real wage/all industries (base year 1975)	33.9	41.3	50.6
Real wage/manufacturing industries (base year 1975)	32.9	41.0	49.4

1969-1981

	1969/70	1972/73	1975	1980/81
Total workforce (million)	51.53	53.26	53.23	56.50
Agricultural and forestry workforce(million)	8.42	6.57	6.18	5.32
Total wage earners (million)	33.06	36.15	36.46	39.71
Number of employed/manufacturing industries (millions)	11.10	11.73	11.05	11.10
Official unemployment rate	1.1%	1.3%	1.9%	2.0%
Real wage/all industries (base year 1975)	73.1	95.3	100.0	107.6

	1969/70	1972/73	1975	1980/81
Real wage/manufacturing industries (base year 1975)	75.3	98.9	100.0	109.3

* *Okinawa islands were not included before 1975.*

Thus, the real wage increased 52.4% from 1965 to 1970 at the manufacturing industries(50.8% increase during 1955-65), in spite of the fact that the big bourgeoisie and LDP government were in a favorable position in relation to the trade union movement. On the other hand, an inflationary situation developed, especially in the early 1970s(annual deflator of the private final consumer expenditure: 4.8%/1967, 5.7%/68, 4.75%/69, 7.6%/70, 6.5%/71 and 5.4%/72).

2. Under those conditions, first of all, the youth radicalization exploded violently among students and young workers in 1968 and 1969. The campus/street youth explosion was defeated by the riot police in 1970. But the explosion had a deep impact on the whole society, and the youth radicalization continued to develop among young workers of the public sector and the small/medium-size factories.

The most advance expression was the national railway and postal young workers movement in 1971 and 1972. Those young workers had wide-scale direct clashes with the management apparatuses at the workplaces, the latter being in a new move to tighten their control over the workers. The result was a total defeat of the managements in the national railway and postal system. Elder workers, who had been feeling pressures from the inflationary situation under the prolonged stagnation of trade union movement in the late 1960s, gave their sympathetic support to the young workers, and finally the union bureaucrats took side with the young workers.

Thereby, the Sohyo trade union movement entered an offensive situation in the economic struggle in relation to the LDP government in 1972-73 and at the 1974 annual spring wage increase campaign, which happened to coincide with the explosive inflation under the direct impact of the oil price increase in 1973. The initiative turned from the big bourgeoisie and LDP government to the Sohyo public-sector trade union movement, and the latter had distinct influences among the workers of big manufacturing factories and also on the farmers in their national campaign to increase the governmental purchase price of rice.

Such was the situation of the Sohyo trade union movement, when the oil price increase hit the last spurt of the expansionist economic growth from 1973 to 1974. Under the exploding inflation, the 1974 spring wage increase campaign secured more than 30% wage increase, although the net result became only 5.8% increase all through the year.

3. From the bourgeois point of view, the situation was really chaotic politically and in terms of the economy from 1973 to 1974, and there was a real chance for the working class to turn to a full offensive against the LDP government and the bosses. However, the Sohyo public-sector reformist leaderships tightened their control in order not to let the mass militancy of workers slip out of their bureaucratic/reformist control, at the time of 1974 spring wage increase campaign, and those reformist leaderships turned to moderate the workers movement definitely later in the fall.

The result was the 1975 spring wage increase campaign, where the nominal wage increase was 15.1%, less than half of the previous year's wage increase, the net increase being only 2.9% in 1975. This result was essentially due to the definite moderation of the Sohyo Mindo reformist leadership.

As for the mass of Sohyo workers, they had the militancy and readiness to fight. This was proved later in the fall.

In November 1975, there was a very successful and complete 5-days general strike by the public sector workers (about 900,000 workers of the national railway, postal system, telecommunication and tobacco corporation), with the support of part-time strikes of governmental-sector employees, demanding their right to strike. The union leaderships issued their strike calls, and the rank-and-file gave their complete response without any problem or any strike-sabotage attempts. The response of the workers was total. However, confronted with a seemingly strong response from the LDP mainstream forces in the government, the Sohyo Mindo reformist leadership did not push through the demand, and it gave up the confrontation, thus ending the whole strike.

4. This public-sector general strike eventually became the final test of will between the major Sohyo reformist trade union forces and the LDP government and bourgeoisie. With the former's giving-in, the reformist Sohyo trade union movement entered a new period of impasse and successive retreats in face of the LDP government and bourgeoisie.

At the 1976 annual wage increase campaign, the nominal gain was 7.5%, again less than half of the previous year's wage increase, the whole-year net result being 1.6% decrease in 1976.

The new rise of massive militancy among the Sohyo workers, which had developed under the initiative of young workers from the end of 1960s to the early 1970s, came to an end under the Sohyo Mindo reformist leadership, and the rank-and-file did not have any alternative nation-wide leadership current. The CP was hostile even toward the strike waves of 1973-74, due to its deeply parliamentary orientation of municipality/community activities as its central axis.

At the time, the LDP prime minister was T. Miki, who replaced K. Tanaka in 1974 due to the latter's financial ill-doings, and Miki's faction was a small and "non-main-stream" one in the LDP. Early 1976, the Lockheed bribery scandal happened to be exposed, and premier Miki allowed the arrest of his predecessor Tanaka. Thus, the LDP and its government were thrown into a chaotic political crisis. The LDP was divided internally, and its government had no uniform function.

In spite of the chaotic crisis of the LDP and its government, the working class movement could not intervene in the situation at all in 1976. The total incapacity of the whole reformist structure of Japanese workers movement, embodied as a reformist complex of SP/Sohyo-Mindo bloc and CP, was definitely revealed through its impotence under the deep political crisis of the ruling bourgeois party LDP and its government. The Sohyo workers were forced to feel their powerlessness strongly, and they began to develop tendencies of dispersion from their traditional reformist structure of SP-Sohyo-CP.

5. The moderation of the Sohyo Mindo leadership confronted with the dramatic collapse of the expansionist economic growth in 1973-74, and its giving-in in face of the LDP government on the right of strike must be explained from three angles.

In 1974-75 and thereafter, there was a classic economic crisis of excess production capacity, and, as a result, dismissals of workers - firstly non-permanent workers and bankruptcies of smaller enterprises and secondly older layer of permanent/life-long-employed workers - prevailed in the private manufacturing sector. However, there was no serious threat of unemployment in the public and governmental sector in the mid-1970s. As a matter of fact, Sohyo union membership increased from 2.757 million in 1973 to 3.189 million in 1980. Number of the governmental employees increased 1.80 in 1973 to 1.99 million in 1978. That is, there was no immediate unemployment threat for the Sohyo reformist leadership to moderate its stance or capitulate politically. Only in the

1980s the question of dismissals become a reality especially for the national railway workers.

The Sohyo Mindo leadership had always been a reformist leadership strictly within the framework of capitalist national balance of the Japanese economy since the end of 1940s. The Mindo reformist trade union forces cooperated with the US military occupation command and the Japanese bourgeoisie around the 1949 great economic rationalization. The Sohyo was established as a mass reformist trade union movement, based on the initial recovery of Japanese capitalism as a national economy.

When the militant spontaneity of workers clashed with the bourgeoisie and LDP government in 1957-60, the Sohyo Mindo reformist forces betrayed the struggles of the workers and capitulated. They retreated in the passivity and continued to do so all through the 1960s, being content to be supplied with benefits of the the expansionist economic growth.

Only when broader Sohyo workers began to move under the initiative of young workers in the early 1970s, the Sohyo Mindo forces accepted to take the leadership of the movement in their specific reformist manner, and they betrayed the movement again, when it was confronted with the crisis of Japanese capitalist economy in 1974-75.

As a conclusion, it must be said that the Sohyo Mindo forces were essentially “intra-enterprise” reformist at the level of capitalist national economy. Their major and central bases were the public and governmental sectors, being “free” from the competitive interests of individual enterprises in the private sector, but the material basis of their reformism had been the Japanese capitalist national economy as a whole.

6. Secondly, the reformist Sohyo Mindo forces faced the question of government and parliamentary bourgeois democracy objectively in 1974-75.

There were violent clashes between national railway strikers and parts of the daily commuters, who were agitated by the bourgeois anti-strike campaign, at the 1973 spring wage increase strikes. The LDP government had been thrown into its political crisis since the oil price increase in 1973.

The central strike force of the Sohyo trade union movement was the public sector workers, and the direct supervisor was the government. The public sector workers had been deprived of the right of strike since 1948. The movement of Sohyo public sector workers had been already centralized at the national level in relation to the government in 1973-74.

In April 1975, Phnom Penh and Saigon were liberated finally.

In this whole context, if the Sohyo mobilized their workers even under the wage increase demand in confrontation with the LDP government’s wage-restrain policy at the 1975 spring wage increase campaign, the struggle might have become really political, and the parliamentary bourgeois democratic system itself might have been thrown into a critical situation.

In reality, immediately after the clashes between the national railway workers and the crowds of commuters, the union leadership reacted quickly, moderating the workers actions and moving to establish its bureaucratic control over the strikers. At the time of 1974 spring wage increase campaign, the Sohyo Mindo forces exercised their bureaucratic control over the strikers, not to “provoke/destabilize” the parliamentary bourgeois democratic system, from the very beginning. The CP leadership, too, responded very sharply against militant strike-related actions and even against the strikes themselves in 1973-74.

Thus, when the Sohyo Mindo forces faced the test of will with LDP main-stream forces on the issue

of right to strike in November 1975, they had no choice but to give in and retreat in face of the government. Precisely and especially at this political level, an alternative leadership current was lacking inside the Sohyo trade union movement, and this was the failure of the far-left/left-centrist movement among the young workers from the late 1960s to the early 1970s.

7. Thirdly, there was a weakness in regard to the historical accumulation of trade union organization as an autonomous class organization among working masses themselves.

Apart from the lack of continuity of organized mass workers movement between the 1920s-30s and the postwar period, this point was related with other discontinuity of the organized workers movement in the whole postwar period.

First of all, there was the 1949-50 crushing defeat of the militant workers movement, represented by the CP-led Sanbetsu-Kaigi, which burst out immediately after the defeat of Japanese imperialism. The militant Communist forces were virtually annihilated in the organized workers movement through the great rationalization of 1949 and the 1950 "Red Purges". Thus, there was no continuity of organized militant current inside the workers movement from the late 1940 to the 1950s.

Mass workers militancy had developed again under the framework of Sohyo trade union movement since 1953-54, and a left-reformist/left-centrist current developed inside the Sohyo unions, in opposition to the SP-affiliated reformist Mindo forces, in the latter half of 1950s. The current represented the mass workers militancy, but it was extremely heterogeneous and was not organized well across the industries.

The targets of the late 1950s bourgeois attacks were this mass workers militancy and the left-reformist/left-centrist current. In 1957, 58, 59 and 60, the latter was hit severely and weakened, being betrayed by the Sohyo Mindo reformists. The current was virtually eliminated among the workers of large manufacturing enterprises in the early 1960s. In the public sector, a significant part of the current joined the CP in the early 1960s, and the Japanese CP stood for the Chinese CP against the USSR CP at the time. However, in reality, this was an end of the current's active and militant role inside the Sohyo trade union movement.

Thus, there was the second discontinuity of militant current inside the organized workers movement from 1950s to the 1960s, and, as mentioned before, the Japanese far-left movement, splitted from the CP at the end of 1950s, was isolated from the Sohyo trade union movement in the early 1960s.

In this context, when young workers began to develop their oppositional potential in 1963-64, again the process of opposition formation was very much empirical, lacking a continuity with the period of 1950s. From the mid-1960s to the late 1960s, the far-left/left-centrist groups played some significant role to develop a new oppositionist current inside the Sohyo trade union movement.

However, when those groups faced a great potential to build up a nationwide left oppositionist current in the Sohyo trade union movement from the late 1960s to the early 1970s, they could not capitalize the potential and they themselves entered the self-destructive political degeneration, thereby leaving the radicalized young workers of Sohyo unions under the leadership of reformist "Socialist Society" or "Kakumaru".

Here was the third discontinuity of militant current inside the organized workers movement. Thus, when the Sohyo trade union movement faced the moderating policy of its reformist Mindo leadership in 1974-75, it had no alternative leftwing leadership which would be able to fight against the reformist capitulation.

8. Faced with the dramatic collapse of the expansionist economic growth in 1973-74 and the

subsequent economic depression in 1974-75, the Sohyo trade union movement under the Mindo forces and the municipality/community movement under the CP capitulated completely to the bourgeoisie and the LDP government in 1975.

After 1975, the annual wage increase declined definitely(see the table); the so-called “Streamline Management” rationalization to lay off and decrease work-hands got full momentum in the private manufacturing industries; the social welfare expenditures through the local governments were restrained severely and the masses’ direct share of burden was increased; public utilities’ charges and the consumer price of rice were increased; and annual rice-price increase of governmental purchase from the farmers was also restrained, in parallel with the radical decline of the workers’ annual wage increase.

Table 2: Annual wage increase (real, %)

1970-1975

	1970	71	72	73	74	75
All industries	8.7	8.1	11.1	8.7	2.2	2.7
Manufacturing industries	9.1	7.6	10.6	10.4	1.4	-0.3

1976-1981

	76	77	78	79	80	81
All industries	2.9	0.5	2.5	2.3	-1.6	0.4
Manufacturing industries	2.7	0.5	2.0	3.5	-0.4	0.7

The immediate capitalist economic difficulties, international and domestic, as the result of the collapse of last-spurt expansionist economic efforts, were basically overcome at the social and economic expenses of the working class, farmers and lower-layer petit-bourgeois masses. The “Streamline Management” intensive rationalization was carried out rather successfully in the manufacturing industries, combined with the national-economy-level sacrifices of the workers and farmers. It was realized through the actual change of the balance of class forces. Thereby, Japanese manufacturers increased its exports to the inflationary US market successfully, and the deficit of current international account was overcome rather quickly.

The bourgeoisie and LDP government were in crisis from 1973-74 to 1976. However, the Sohyo workers movement capitulated totally to the bourgeoisie and the parliamentary democratic state under the LDP government. The totality of capitulation of the Japanese organized workers movement was so glaring and so exceptional among the imperialist countries that US and Western European bourgeoisie developed their fresh interest in the Japanese management-labor relations.

[The total capitulation of the postwar Sohyo reformist trade union movement to the bourgeoisie and the parliamentary democratic state under the LDP government was the beginning of the downfall of the Sohyo Trade-Union movement, and Sohyo (General Council of Trade Unions of Japan - GCTUJ) as a national federation of reformist trade unions was to disappear and be replaced by Rengo (Japanese Trade Union Confederation - JTUC) as a right-wing federation, dominated by pro-management intra-enterprise unions, in the late 1980s.]

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Footnotes

[1] ESSF (article 2909).