

Work / Unions

Interview: Japan's Labor Movement Is Taking Up the Demands of Part-Time and Temporary Workers

Wednesday 17 May 2023, by [AOKI Kotaro](#), [IWAMOTO Nana](#), [LI Promise](#), [YAMADA Taro](#) (Date first published: 9 May 2023).

In Japan, part-time and temporary workers account for nearly 40% of the workforce but have historically been ignored by the country's trade unions. This spring, 16 unions came together to demand a collective wage increase for nonregular workers.

The Spring Offensive, an annual campaign in which trade unions across Japan come together to raise joint demands, has been a fixture of the country's organized labor movement for decades. But its influence has been waning recently, as the voices of increasingly numerous "nonregular" workers — those on part-time and temporary contracts — have historically been excluded.

But this year, the Spring Offensive focused on nonregular workers, who now account for nearly 40 percent of the Japanese workforce but have largely been ignored by Japan's established trade unions. This year's Spring Offensive gathered sixteen different unions across the nation to call for a collective wage increase for nonregular workers.

A daylong series of rallies on March 10 saw organizers marching to different workplaces to show solidarity with each other's bargaining campaigns, from foreign language schools to a local restaurant chain. This mobilization marks the first organized nationwide coordination of nonregular workers in Japan. At least one of these companies, ABC Mart, a popular shoe-store chain, responded with a 6 percent wage increase for more than 4,600 nonregular workers it employs.

Jacobin contributor Promise Li talked to a range of participants from Tokyo to Kyoto in this year's Spring Offensive to learn more about the campaign: Kotaro Aoki, a trade unionist in Tokyo and key organizer of this year's Spring Offensive; Nana Iwamoto, a student labor activist in Tokyo volunteering at labor NGO POSSE; and Taro Yamada, a rank-and-file worker who recently went on strike at a dispatch company contracted to Amazon in Kyoto.

PROMISE LI

Can you all describe your role in labor organizing and how each of you first came into the work?

KOTARO AOKI

I'm the general secretary of the General Support Union in Japan. I was born in 1989 and raised in times when the real wage for Japanese workers has never increased — in the last thirty or so years. Actually, it has been decreasing for the last thirty years.

I became active in the labor movement around 2008 after witnessing how the financial crisis hit the Japanese labor economy hard, and many nonregular and dispatch workers were laid off. Since many of them were living in company housing, their housing contracts were also terminated. Many employers evicted their dispatch workers. In December 2008, a group of unions and other labor organizations organized a large rally to support these laid-off dispatch workers. These workers held an occupation at a park in front of the Ministry of Labor, and it was heavily featured in the media. That's when I decided that I want to be a part of the labor movement.

In 2011, I was in one of the cities that was hit by the earthquake and tsunami, and I moved there for four to five years assisting residents who were affected by the natural disasters and ended up living in temporary housing. When I was there, I realized that many were living in temporary housing not just for a few days or weeks, but for many years after the tsunami. Many of these precarious residents also faced issues in their workplaces as well. So a group of friends and I formed the General Support Union to begin organizing these workers.

NANA IWAMOTO

I am a student volunteer for an organization working on labor issues named POSSE. I'm currently pursuing my master's degree, and one of the issues I am organizing around and studying is the working conditions of student workers. And I will be leaving with student loan debt — which is another growing major issue among students in Japan.

Many migrant workers in Japan work for around \$2 an hour, and live in, basically, detention centers, with minimal access to adequate medical care.

I've been involved in activism for the last three years, and being born and raised in Tokyo, it's not uncommon to encounter migrant workers everywhere, from convenience stores to supermarkets. I am of Korean descent and know of other students and workers who have roots in other Asian countries who work in terrible conditions. Many work for around \$2 an hour, and live in, basically, detention centers, with minimal access to adequate medical care, and there are many reports of high rates of suicide among these workers.

Being exposed to these conditions made me understand that I should be helping to fight against labor and racial discrimination, and led me to be involved in the organization I am in now. Unfortunately, support for migrants is not that ubiquitous in Japan right now. I realized that supporting migrants from the standpoint of the labor movement is crucial in the larger fight against racism and discrimination toward migrants when I first witnessed POSSE helping a Filipina migrant worker who had her passport taken away by her employer.

The pandemic made it even more difficult for migrant workers in Japan to return to their native countries, while exacerbating labor issues that already existed. I've heard of some who were fired on the spot without being paid

TARO YAMADA

I was born in 1999 and finished college just last year. I am now working as a dispatch worker at a

warehouse contracted to Amazon.

There wasn't really a specific moment when I decided to do labor organizing, but there are three important things that helped inspire me. The first is that for my generation in Japan, there are fewer and fewer prospects for jobs. Even if we work hard, we know we might not be doing enough to make a sustainable living.

The second reason was being exposed to and learning about the history of the labor movement in Japan, both before World War I and in the postwar years. Recently, I've been reading about a number of strikes organized by railroad workers in the 1960s and '70s. That's what helped me believe that workers standing up and raising their voices is what is needed to sustain and improve working conditions.

Lastly, I was moved to action after learning more about the conditions of migrant workers around me. I remember seeing reports of Vietnamese migrant workers in manufacturing factories, like those making snacks and food to be sold at convenience stores, demanding better working conditions. Being in a production line, I definitely see firsthand how the experiences of migrant workers are not great.

PROMISE LI

What is the Spring Offensive, and why is it significant that nonregular workers in Japan are participating in it this year? What are some of its core demands?

KOTARO AOKI

The Spring Offensive is an annual campaign every March that has been organized by trade unions for many decades, since around the end of World War II. Japanese labor unions are mostly organized at the company level, so there is minimal sectoral- or industrial-level bargaining being conducted. The Spring Offensive is one of the few opportunities for different unions to come together in the spring to raise joint demands while many workers are in the bargaining process.

Oftentimes, different unions will come together demanding a wage increase at the same time. This does not bypass the limitations of our labor system, such that most unions are more or less isolated, with bargaining powers mainly within each company, but it helps compensate for this weakness in that we are building cross-union public pressure to demand a collective pay increase for workers in different workplaces.

But there are some core weaknesses of the mainstream trade unions and the traditional Spring Offensives. One is that there are huge gaps between workers in major companies and workers in companies with few employees. Also, the pay increases demanded in the Spring Offensive are usually in terms of percentages, to unify different campaigns. This means that the imbalance between different kinds of workers is not addressed, as a percentage demand would not be as powerful for, say, a restaurant worker who wants to be paid a certain minimum amount.

An even larger issue is that most established unions in Japan are largely focused on representing the interests only of permanent workers. Historically in Japan, permanent workers have been limited to male college graduates. Temporary workers, including migrant and nonregular ones, have never really been the organizing target of major established unions, and the gap between permanent and temporary workers is only further widening. So our goal in the Spring Offensive this year was to center the demands and participation of nonregular workers.

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This time, we are specifically demanding a 10 percent wage increase for nonregular workers. By not closing the gap between permanent and nonregular workers, companies are protecting the conditions of permanent workers at the expense of nonregular workers, essentially discriminating against the latter by putting them in harsh and exploitative labor conditions. This is what we are trying to change.

PROMISE LI

A majority of women in the Japanese workforce are nonregular workers. Can you talk about the changing role of women in Japanese labor and in the labor movement?

KOTARO AOKI<p>In the early '90s, around half of women in Japan were in the labor market, but now 75 percent of women are in the labor market. And their roles in the workforce have been changing, from working in supplementary tasks to more diverse roles.

However, the wages of women workers are still basically at minimum wage, which is only about 1073 yen [around \$8] per hour in Tokyo and about 800 yen [around \$6] in some other prefectures. In the past, women were seen as depending on their husbands and parents to make a living, but now, many women are earning income on their own and depending on their own wages to make a living. Many of them are being systematically discriminated against in the labor market, many not earning a livable wage — and also being discriminated against in the larger union movement, as many of the established trade unions have not focused on organizing nonregular women workers.

The pandemic made these conditions worse, as many could not earn enough, and so there are many women workers affected by the pandemic who are involved and who we are trying to organize in the Spring Offensive.

PROMISE LI

What are the greatest challenges for workers' organizing in Japan right now, and what has helped motivate workers to get involved in the movement? What are some challenges to building solidarity between different groups of nonregular workers, and between non regular and regular workers?

KOTARO AOKI

Since the '70s and '80s, there has not been a strong class consciousness among workers in Japan. Many workers identify mainly as employees of a corporation, and since union activities are so narrowly centered on connecting workers simply within their own workplace, it has been hard for workers to see common interests as a common working class selling their labor power across sectors and industries.

Things have not gone very well for the Japanese labor movement since its heyday in the '70s. The

number of strikes has been on the decline since 1975, and even in the '70s, it was mainly public sector workers who were on strike. A big reason for this is that labor unions are isolated and predominantly organized within their own enterprises, and not across industries. When a company decides to not improve the workers' conditions, then there are not a lot of means to fight back, especially in a time when economic growth is limited.

Even though labor unions are primarily organized within each enterprise or company, there were a number of scattered workers' groups and unions not tied to specific companies that formed independently in the 1980s, which was also when the population of nonregular workers began to rise. These nonregular workers have basically not been organized en masse and are forced to work in a labor market where there is no protection provided by any major labor unions, and with minimal welfare protection from the government. These unions have by and large not reckoned with the fact that the labor movement should be moving in a different direction.

Since the '80s, the increasing pool of nonregular workers was not only primarily women, but also student and migrant workers, as well as those who had previously retired but are forced to go back into the labor market. And they have been mostly ignored by the labor movement in the past few decades. There are some NGOs specifically assisting women and migrant workers, but few of them frame the problem as a collective issue for the whole working class.

Our Spring Offensive tried to combine the problems of these different groups — single mothers, disabled people, migrants, and other workers facing various kinds of discrimination — as a general issue of the working class. Women workers are working in call centers and restaurants to earn their living, while many have to take care of children and families at home. The wages they receive are not livable at all, so they are demanding a 10 percent pay increase, just like the Vietnamese migrant workers, student workers, and foreign language school workers (many from the West teaching English to students in schools in Japan) who are also part of the offensive.

Since tuition in Japan is increasing every year, more and more students are having to work just to attend college. Many work in restaurants and supermarkets, and one of our organizers has been bargaining in his job at a sushi restaurant chain. We also have workers who are disabled and are routinely discriminated against in their companies. What we believe in is not treating these groups' issues as separate, but as a part of a larger workers' struggle.

NANA IWAMOTO

What's difficult, but also what's moving nonregular workers to action, is that workers themselves are seeing that there are not a lot of ways out for them. It's feeling impossible to improve their conditions, and they don't see a lot of organizations or people standing up for them and what they have to face in the workplace and labor market. The Spring Offensive this year enabled a diversity of nonregular workers to voice their concerns — which some are eager to do. Their public presence and organizing have in turn allowed some other unorganized workers to know that there is a larger movement of which they can be a part, and that they can also echo the call for a 10 percent wage increase in their own workplaces.

We're seeing workers from different walks of life come together. The worker that Kotaro mentioned from the sushi chain restaurant who joined us is just nineteen. A worker in their seventies wanted to join the offensive as well, demanding a wage increase in their own workplace. The consciousness of young workers is changing. Many are realizing that the economic conditions are worsening, and that tuition, rent, and student debt are all rising. Many more of their parents are nonregular workers now too, so these youth are receiving less and less support from their parents. And many student workers are starting to notice these imbalances, seeing Vietnamese single mothers making less than a

minimum wage in the restaurants or supermarkets where they work, or other colleagues still working in their seventies because their pensions are not enough.

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Many young people are also motivated by the desire for a better, just world beyond the workplace. I've been personally learning from social movements beyond Japan, like the Fridays for Future and other climate justice movements, higher education workers' strikes, and the Fight for Fifteen campaign in the United States. Learning about the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 was a big reason why I first got interested and involved in antidiscrimination organizing among migrant workers through POSSE. The rise of social movements around the globe has had an effect on why many student workers are getting involved in the labor movement.

PROMISE LI

Taro, you just participated in a strike at a dispatch warehouse in Kyoto that's contracted to Amazon. Can you talk about your organizing work there? What were some of the issues there, and how did you become involved in the strike?

TARO YAMADA

The labor issues my coworkers and I face in the warehouse are probably similar to what's happening in other workplaces contracted to Amazon around the globe. We can barely get any breaks when we are working and are strictly monitored by the company's computer system. Our warehouse is the second warehouse in Kansai where Amazon Robotics equipment has been introduced.

We are in charge of packing products into containers on the shelf. Though the items to be stored range widely from small things like lipsticks to large objects like computer monitors, we only have eight seconds between scanning and shelving each item. Many workers complain about back-pain issues. Of course, the company says that workers' safety is its priority, but this doesn't seem to be true. Other colleagues, like those who have to help stack folding carts, tend to have more back issues. We are occasionally allowed to gather for some back exercises together for two minutes, but there are not many safety guidelines or much education beyond that.

You get the results of the morning after the lunch break, and if you do not reach your quota, then a manager will monitor you more closely all afternoon. But it is unclear in our contracts what the standards and thresholds are, or what would warrant our termination. According to other workers, the base quota has been increasing more and more.

So with all these issues, I agree with other organizers participating in the Spring Offensive that we need a 10 percent wage increase. I'm currently making 1150 yen per hour, which is less than \$10. I want to be able to make a decent living and have some say about the wages that I'm earning — even as a nonregular worker.

We can barely get any breaks when we are working and are strictly monitored by the company's computer system.

In Japan, one or more workers can organize a union or strike. I first came in contact with the General Support Union after seeing its press conference about some nonregular workers on strike at a popular shoe chain in Japan called ABC Mart. It was one of my first times hearing about nonregular workers organizing and realizing that nonregular workers can have power too, not just permanent workers whose jobs are stable and who are represented by established unions.

I learned that the union has a workers' hotline and contacted it. We went through the basics of union and strike organizing. Amazon doesn't directly pay me, since I work for a dispatch company that is subcontracted to Amazon. We asked Amazon to come to the bargaining table, and it obviously refused, so we are now bargaining with the dispatch company directly. But the company refused to agree to the wage increase, so I went on strike for a couple of days in March. The following month, some workers received a 4 percent wage increase, which is not a lot, but it is still important to see that even Amazon subcontractors can be forced to compromise for nonregular workers.

PROMISE LI

Many activists and researchers in the West are familiar with the militant Japanese labor movement of the 1970s and '80s. What is the state of the labor movement today, and does it have any allies within the political parties?

KOTARO AOKI

As I mentioned, most mainstream labor unions are organized only within individual companies and seldom have an interest in organizing nationally. There are three major national union federations in Japan, and many allow workers to join on an individual basis. We do have some workers from these established unions joining us for the Spring Offensive with whom we try to organize individually. Generally speaking, most mainstream unions do not put enough effort into organizing nonregular workers and tend to focus on their long-standing bases of permanent workers.

As far as political parties go, we basically have no real left-wing parties in Japan. Of course, there are some individual legislators who show sympathy for the trade-union movement, but no single party represents the interests of both regular and non regular workers. Either way, I'm not sure if tying the nonregular workers' movement to a particular political party is the way to go in Japan right now. Of course, we do not expect, but do hope, that more established labor unions and political parties recognize what's happening to nonregular workers in Japan and do something about it.

PROMISE LI

How can labor movement allies beyond Japan best support your struggles?

KOTARO AOKI

Many of the conditions nonregular workers face are similar around the world, especially in Amazon's warehouses. This is not just a fight within Japan, but a larger fight against employers around the

globe. It is a struggle carried out often by migrant workers, and to keep supporting these workers in particular, we need international support, especially from labor unions from these migrant workers' native countries. Migrant workers in Japan come from all across Asia, many from countries like Vietnam, China, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. Japan is also not the only country they work in, and many travel to places like Taiwan and South Korea before they return home. So coordination between unions across Asia is especially important.

Here is one concrete example of how international solidarity is important to our organizing. Our union encountered a group of Cambodian workers who came to Japan to work in a food manufacturing company, and they were laid off and deported by the company only six months into their contract. These workers found a labor union back home in Cambodia to support them, and we collaborated with that Cambodian union to collectively bargain with the Japanese company that fired them over Zoom, and we were able to win compensation for unfairly terminating the labor contract early. Building these types of international connections can be crucial in defending workers' rights here.

NANA IWAMOTO

As far as international cooperation goes, I just heard that warehouse workers in Britain won an £11 wage increase. These types of victories, especially against a company as big as Amazon, can definitely be empowering for Amazon workers in Japan. This news makes tangible the point that their struggles are connected to other ones globally, and that it is possible to win against one of the biggest employers in the world. So hearing about and connecting to workers organizing in the United States, Europe, Southeast Asia, and other regions helps us better organize workers in Japan.

Japanese labor law enables even a single worker in a company to start a union in the workplace and demand bargaining rights that the company cannot refuse. I think one way we can use this to our advantage is to build solidarity with other workers employed by the same company or brand in other parts of the world, and address demands and grievances in each other's workplaces across the supply chain. For example, if Uniqlo workers in Bangladesh are facing certain issues, we can organize unionized Uniqlo workers in Japan to put pressure on the company too. That is just one way in which we can take advantage of the differences between labor laws in different countries to support each other's struggles.

INTERVIEW BY PROMISE LI

P.S.

• Jacobin. 05.09.2023:
<https://jacobin.com/2023/05/japan-labor-movement-union-organizing-nonregular-workers-spring-offensive>

• TRANSLATION BY MAKOTO IWAHASHI

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