

Institutional Contexts and Characteristics of Social Movement Unionism in Japan

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Introduction

This paper examines possibility and limit of social movement unionism in Japan in the context of industrial relations institutions. The paper aims to make contributions to the literature on cross-national comparison of social movement unionism by examining cases in the country where institutional arrangements regulating industrial relations are different from those in the countries covered by previous studies of social movement unionism.¹

The focus of previous studies of social movement unionism tended to be placed on cases in the United States, where the labor movement made, at least symbolically, a dramatic turn from the lethargic business unionism to the revitalized social movement unionism. Although anti-union and neo-liberal policies of management and the state since the late 1970s drastically weakened the organizational and socio-economic influence of the U.S. labor movement, some unions, such as SEIU, started to counter the declining trend by aggressively organizing lower-paid service sector workers. SEIU's Justice for Janitor Campaign that started in the late 1980s was a typical case of such aggressive organizing campaigns. The efforts to reform the labor movement in a more activist direction reached the national level when New Voice group took the control of the leadership of AFL-CIO in 1995. Observers and labor scholars, in response to announcements and implementations of a series of innovative programs by AFL-CIO, such as Union Summer, Union Cities, and New Alliances, and to some successful cases of union organizing by SEIU and HERE in the second half of 1990s, expected that the national confederation and its affiliates would revitalize their organizational and mobilization power. Many case studies of union revitalization and social movement unionism have been published in monographs, edited volumes and journal articles since the mid-1990s (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, et al., eds., 1998; Turner, Katz and Hurd, eds., 2001; Voss and Sherman 2000; Clawson 2003; Milkman and Voss, eds., 2004; Fantasia and Voss 2004; Lopez 2004; Reynolds, ed., 2004; Milkman 2006). This literature on union revitalization also extended its scope: it covered not only cases in the U.S., but also those in other industrialized countries, such as UK, Canada, and Australia, where the labor movements had been weakened by neo-liberal economic and political systems (e.g., Fairbrother and Yates, eds., 2003; Cornfield and McCammon, eds., 2003; Kumer and Schenk, eds., 2006).

Although these previous studies have proposed various definitions of social movement unionism (SMU), I argue that, by synthesizing these definitions, four aspects (or strategies) of SMU can be identified: (1) labor unions pursue broad goals beyond the

protection of the interests of union members, for example, by seeking to redress economic injustice experienced by workers in disadvantageous labor market positions, (2) labor unions form alliances with social movement and community organizations, (3) labor unions transform their internal organizations so as to increase involvement of rank-and-file members in union activities, and (4) labor unions promote grass-roots cross-national union solidarity (Suzuki 2005).² Labor unions are not necessarily required to have all four aspects to become a part of social movement unionism. Previous studies suggest that the first and second aspects are more important requisites than the fourth aspect (i.e., not all SMU-oriented unions are practicing grass-roots cross-national union solidarity), while the importance of the third aspect was debated among labor scholars (see Voss and Sherman 2000; Milkman 2006; Moody 2007).

Previous studies on social movement unionism tend to treat industrial relations institutions as some sort of restrictions for SMU-oriented unions to overcome. For example, studies on cases in the U.S. regard industrial relations institutions, such as NLRB union certification elections, as something for SMU-oriented unions to circumvent by forming union-community alliances so as to put pressure on employers to voluntarily recognize unions (Voss and Sherman 2000; Martin 2008). Some recent studies on SMU in Germany and Japan, however, suggest the importance of institutions as contexts of social movement unionism. For example, Lowell Turner in his study of SMU in Germany (Turner 2009) posited that institutions not only placed constraints on the development of SMU, but also provided opportunities for its development. Since labor unions in Germany are embedded in industrial relations institutions much more than those in the U.S., labor unions tend to be slow in adopting SMU-oriented strategies, even when they are put on the defensive by anti-union policies of employers in the service sector. However, some innovative leaders of HBV (banking, insurance, and retail union, later merged into Ver.di) took advantage of codetermination rights enshrined in the German industrial relations institutions, and engaged in strategies based on labor-community coalitions to put pressure on management of Schlecker (the nation-wide drug store chain with strong anti-union attitudes) to allow their employees to establish works councils. My article on community unions in Japan (Suzuki 2008) examined activities and organizational characteristics of these unions. Community unions have a regional representation structure with members drawn from a number of firms, and generally cover those workers who fall outside the coverage of enterprise unions, such as part-time and other non-regular workers, workers in small firms and foreign workers. My article pointed out that the development of these region-based

unions was helped by a legal aspect of industrial relations institutions, i.e., liberal union recognition procedures of the Japanese labor law. Any group of workers, even if they work for different firms and are a minority as union members in their respective firms, can form a labor union and have the right to engage in collective bargaining with management of their respective firms (ibid.: 501-502). Although the labor law provides opportunities for SMU-oriented unions, other institutional aspects place constraints on the development of SMU. Especially, the predominant structure of industrial relations based on the “ultra cooperative” relations between enterprise unions and management in large private-sector firms (see Gordon 1998) create an environment unfavorable for the revitalization of labor unions based on SMU-based strategies (for details, see below).

This paper examines how industrial relations institutions influenced the development of social movement unionism in Japan, and shows that some aspects of institutions constrain the development of social movement unionism, while other aspects provide opportunities for the development. The analytical focus of the paper is community unions³ (whose organizational characteristics are described above). These region-based unions, representing workers at the “margin” of labor markets, are widely regarded as SMU-oriented unions. The first section of the paper considers the meaning of institutions as contexts of social movement unionism in Japan from a perspective of cross-national comparison. The second section examines the present state of social movement unionism in Japan. It shows that some community unions have the aspects of SMU as outlined above, and examines the contents of their activities based on a survey on 160 individually-affiliated unions conducted by the Ohara Institute for Social Research (the OISR) from the late 2009 to the early 2010.⁴ The third section speculates possibility and limit of the future development of social movement unionism in Japan by considering how broader institutional and socio-economic factors shape its development.

1. Institutional Contexts of Social Movement Unionism in Japan

Previous studies have taken three approaches to the relationship between industrial relations institutions and social movement unionism. The first, arguably commonly-held, approach is that, when labor unions become embedded in industrial relations institutions, they act less as social movement organizations, but more as conservative and bureaucratized organizations, whose interactions with management and the state are routine and rule-based. Social movement unionism attempts to “de-institutionalize” institutionalized labor-management relations by challenging the

dominance of bureaucratized unions through labor-community coalitions and rank-and-file mobilization (e.g., Martin 2008). The attempt to reform or revitalize labor-management relations or union organizations may take place periodically as the institutions that was once reformed or revitalized by the challenge of SMU again become less functional in representing a broad range of workers' interests (e.g., Turner 2003, 52-53; Turner 2009, 308).

The second approach pays attention to cross-national difference in institutional conditions for the development of social movement unionism. According to the second approach, social movement unionism develops in those countries where the institutional position of labor unions is weak, while such unionism is not likely to develop in those countries with strong institutional support for labor unions. In the former countries, typically the United States, labor unions have not been institutionally protected by employers' anti-union policies, and a rapid decline in the union density as a result created a deepening sense of crisis among union leaders. The fact that labor unions are not deeply embedded in institutional arrangements provides opportunities for the adoption of "innovative" union strategies such as rank-and-file mobilization and union-community alliances. In the latter countries, typically Germany, labor unions hold a relatively advantageous position as they are embedded in industrial relations institutions through industry- or region-wide collective bargaining and works councils at the enterprise level. Thus, despite the declining union density, a sense of crisis among leaders of German unions is weak, and they are not strongly oriented to adopting organizing strategies which move beyond the institutional boundary (Frege and Kelly 2003; Baccaro et al. 2003; Turner 2003). However, some studies of a recent development of German industrial relations indicate that national-level institutional differences in terms of promoting the development of SMU have become somewhat less significant. The above-mentioned study of Turner (2009) shows that, in the retail sector where the influence of unions is weak, labor unions have adopted SMU-oriented strategies by taking advantage of the existing institutional arrangements as "a viable basis on which to build" innovative union strategies (Turner 2009, 300-301).

The third approach to the relationship between industrial relations institutions and social movement unionism is that, even in those countries, such as the U.S., where the weak institutional position of labor unions has facilitated the development of SMU, the existing arrangements of industrial relations are so entrenched that SMU exercises only a minor influence in a labor movement and is not capable of transforming the labor movement and/or industrial relations institutions as a whole. The first two approaches regard institutions as potential facilitators of SMU based on the assumption that the

institutionalization of labor unions into conservative and bureaucratic organizations necessarily brings about counter-movements in the form of extra-institutional activities adopted by SMU. The third approach, on the other hand, pays attention to the constraints on the development of SMU imposed by the institutionalized, “mainstream” part of the labor movement. Even in the United State where the institutional position of organized labor is weak, a majority of unions including locals of SEIU and HERE, for example, seek union recognition through the institutionalized route, i.e., NLRB union certification elections (see Martin 2008). According to Rick Fantasia and Kim Voss, only six national unions out of the sixty-five unions affiliated with AFL-CIO as of 2004 were committed to SMU-oriented strategies, and “resistance is also strong within both local and national unions [including these six unions], where many leaders and members remain bound to a business union model and ‘servicing’ mentality that it creates” (Fantasia and Voss 2004, 133-134). The existence of a minority of SMU-oriented unions may create opportunities for active debates over organizing and organizational strategies within the labor movement, but the labor movement as a whole largely remains institutionalized within the exiting system of industrial relations.

How do these three approaches to the institution-SMU relationship apply to social movement unionism in Japan? Industrial relations institutions in Japan are similar to those in the U.S. in the sense that they share characteristics of the decentralized structure without any encompassing institutional arrangement regulating firm-level industrial relations. In a decentralized structure of industrial relations, the institutional position of labor unions is weak (Turner 1991). Contrary to the expectation of the second approach, however, the weak institutional position of organized labor does not seem to promote the development of social movement unionism in Japan as much as in the U.S.. This is because enterprise unions, the basic units of labor unions in Japan, are deeply embedded in the enterprise-level industrial relations based on cooperative and “mutually-trusting” union-management relations. Thus, the rapid decline in union density⁵ does not cause a strong sense of crisis among union leaders at the enterprise level, and the adoption of confrontational SMU-based strategies to organize new members (e.g., part-time workers working in the same workplace as union members who are full-time workers) is out of question for these leaders. In other words, the mainstream unions in Japan (i.e., enterprise unions in large private-sector firms) behave as institutionally-embedded unions despite the industrial relations institutions that put the position of labor unions at a disadvantage.

This does not mean that social movement unionism did not develop at all within

the Japanese labor movement. As expected by the first approach, a counter-force in the form of community unions developed against the conservative mainstream unions. Community unions organized those workers who fell outside the coverage of mainstream enterprise unions, such as non-regular workers, on the base of regions. Community unions contrast with the mainstream enterprise unions not only in their organizational forms, but also in their policy orientations. Community unions criticize not only management for practicing discriminatory treatments between regular and non-regular workers in wages and employment security, but also enterprise unions that give management tacit approval for discrimination against non-regular workers. Community unions also stress economic injustice and call for solidarity among workers based on a shared sense of injustice (Suzuki 2009a, 43-44). However, although community unions are critical of the dominant part of institutions, they take advantage of the “institutional openings,” i.e., the liberal union recognition procedures of the Japanese labor law, to formally represent individually-affiliated members vis-à-vis their respective employers.

As expected by the third approach, community unions remain a minor force in the Japanese labor movement as a whole. Their total membership (estimated to be from 30,000 to 100,000, depending on the definition of community unions)⁶ accounts for a tiny fraction of union membership as a whole (10 million). Community unions mainly organize non-regular workers with poor pays and working conditions and with precarious employment security. Although those workers at the “margin” of labor markets have increased rapidly since the mid-1990s, now accounting for about one third of the total workforce, community unions were not very successful in expanding their membership. The often-cited reason for the slow growth of membership is related to their own organizational problems, such as a high turnover of membership, their small organizational size, and their poor human and financial resources.⁷ Besides the organizational problems of community unions, another, less noticed, reason is resistance to SMU within the labor movement. Some mainstream unions do not recognize community unions as bona fide unions because the latter mainly focus on resolutions of individual workers’ disputes with employers and do not form collective relations with employers. For example, a vice president of UI Zensen (the largest private sector union that organize workers in various service industries) expressed his distrust of community unions. He stated that, while industrial relations should be based on mutual trust between unions and management, community unions’ activities were based on distrust. According to this union leader, community unions formed only temporary relations with employers, because they brought labor disputes into the

enterprise from the outside and bargain with employers only to win financial settlements for individual workers in labor disputes (Koido et al. 2005, 25-26). Some enterprise unions are motivated to organize part-time workers in their firms lest community unions will not disrupt enterprise-level industrial relations by organizing these workers from the outside (see Oh 2004, 43). For example, the enterprise union of “A Department Store,” one of the major affiliates of JSD (Japan Federation of Service and Distributive Workers Union) organized part-time workers in order to “safeguard” the union and the company from “outside organizations” (i.e., community unions) that would approach unorganized non-regular workers and extract financial settlements for individual labor disputes through negotiations with management (Interview with A Department Store Union, September 12, 2003).

Another instance of the resistance within the labor movement is indicated by the debate within Rengo (the largest national confederation) over its policy to strengthen functions of regional councils (*chikyo*), Rengo’s regional organizations. Rengo proposed this policy because its leadership came to have a sense of crisis about a decline in its membership and its weakening presence at the national as well as local levels. It should be noted that union leaders at the confederation level have a stronger sense of crisis about the current state of labor unions than those at the enterprise level because their positions as officials of the national-level union organization require them to take a broader perspective on the position of organized labor in society. Under this policy, regional councils were to be given an authority to organize community unions. Rengo’s national leadership announced this policy in 2004, and engaged in a series of discussions with leaders of its affiliate unions about this policy and future directions of the labor movement in general. One of the vocal opponents to the policy was UI Zensen, which has been active in organizing part-time and other non-regular workers into cooperative enterprise unions. The union expressed concern that the policy would promote autonomous activities of regional councils, and that regional councils might “get out of control” of Rengo leadership (e.g., some councils might become active in organizing non-regular workers by establishing SMU-oriented community unions). UI Zensen was concerned about possible competition between its enterprise unions and community unions established by regional councils over organizing of non-regular workers (Suzuki 2009b, 186-187).⁸ The development of social movement unionism thus met resistance from mainstream labor unions committed to cooperative enterprise unionism, which may be seen as a parallel to the resistance to SMU from the forces bound to business unionism within AFL-CIO.

In sum, industrial relations institutions in Japan provide both constraints on and

opportunities for the development of social movement unionism. The institutionally embedded positions of enterprise unions made the development of SMU within the mainstream part of the labor movement almost impossible, but created opportunities for its development among community unions at the institutional margins. Community unions took advantage of the liberal union recognition procedures of the Japanese labor law, “institutional openings” in the otherwise inhospitable institutional contexts of SMU in Japan. Community unions, however, were not able to take full advantage of institutional opportunities, not only because of their organizational problems, but also because of inter-union politics that pit a small minority of SMU-oriented unions against a large majority of cooperative enterprise unions.

2. The State of Social Movement Unionism in Japan

As mentioned in the introduction, labor unions can be seen as pursuing social movement unionism when they take some of the following four strategies: (1) labor unions seek broad goals beyond the protection of the interests of union members, (2) labor unions form alliances with social movement and community organizations, (3) labor unions transform their internal organizations so as to increase involvement of rank-and-file members in union activities, and (4) labor unions promote grass-roots cross-national union solidarity. To what extent do community unions in Japan take these four strategies? This section examines how the first three aspects of SMU apply to community unions (the fourth aspect will not be examined due to lack of sufficient information and to limited space of the paper) mainly based on results of the OISR survey on community unions. Before going into the main part of the section, the paper briefly outlines the current state of community unions.

Community unions were first organized in the first half of the 1980s by regional labor councils (*chikuro*), semi-autonomous regional federations of labor unions affiliated with Sohyo (the leftist national confederation that was dissolved in 1989 when it was absorbed into the newly established confederation, Rengo). Some of these councils were active in organizing unorganized workers in their respective regions, particularly part-time workers and workers in small firms. These councils established community unions in order to represent the workers they organized in collective bargaining with their respective employers. By 1989, the number of community unions increased to about 50. In 1990, 60 community unions representing 10,000 workers established a loose nation-wide network called the CUNN (Community Union Nation-wide Network). Currently, the CUNN has 74 affiliates and represents about 15,000 workers (for details,

see Suzuki 2008). Besides community unions affiliated with the CUNN (many of them are not affiliated with either of the two major national confederations, Rengo and Zenroren⁹), there are community unions established by regional organizations of the two national confederations. Rengo adopted a new organizing policy in 1996 and gave its prefecture-level organizations an authority to establish community unions. As of 2009, 45 prefecture-level organizations established community unions with the total membership of about 15,000 (Takasu 2010, 50, 53). Zenroren, the leftist confederation, adopted a policy promoting the establishment of community unions in 2002. As of 2009, there are 135 Zenroren-affiliated community unions with the membership of 10,000 (ibid.,57-58). Besides these three groups of community unions, there are community unions affiliated with Zenrokyo (a loose national-level federation of leftist unions), and individually-affiliated unions established by some industrial-level union federations. A total number of community unions in Japan is estimated to be about 300.

The line separating between the CUNN and Rengo was blurred somewhat when eight community unions affiliated with the CUNN formed a formal federation called Japan Community Union Federation (the JCUF [*Zenkoku Yunion*]) in June 2002 and joined Rengo in the following year. Some Rengo affiliates such as UI Zensen opposed or took cautious attitudes toward the JCUF's affiliation with Rengo. After one year's discussions and consensus-building among Rengo's affiliates and between Rengo and the JCUF, Rengo's central committee formally approved the JCUF's affiliation in June 2003.

(1) Seeking Broad Goals

While goals of mainstream enterprise unions are bound by enterprise-based industrial relations and tend to give priority to cooperative relationship with management and to economic competitiveness of their firms, goals of community unions are not bound by such an institutional framework. Since community unions organize and engage in collective bargaining with employers on behalf of those workers who have individual grievances with their employers, such as dismissals, harassment, arbitrary changes in working conditions and employment status (e.g. from regular to non-regular status), and wage discrimination based on employment status and/or gender, a sense of economic injustice shapes the discourse of their policy goals (Suzuki 2009a, 43). Community unions are particularly concerned with discriminatory treatments between regular and non-regular workers in the same workplace, and regard redressing them as

one of their core missions. For example, a passage of the policy statement adopted by the JCUF's founding convention states as follows:

The JCUF will fight against discrimination. Currently, we witness a glaring wage gap based on employment status. The wage gap has widened to such an extent that it became a sort of social discrimination, and we need to seek to establish socially equal treatments through legislation....We will actively engage in a movement to establish workers' rights in any forms of employment relations under which workers may work (the JCUF 2002).

Many activists of community unions may engage in daily activities without being fully conscious of such a broad goal as the cited above. Their daily activities are "mundane" and include such activities as offering counseling services on labor issues to workers, organizing some of those workers who seek counseling services into unions, and engaging in collective bargaining with their employers, which often result in some sort of compromises between unions and employers.¹⁰ Results of the OISR survey shows that almost all of the 160 responding unions (98.2 percent) provide counseling services on labor issues, and that 87.5 percent of them engage in collective bargaining. These daily "mundane" activities may be seen as constituting indispensable elements of the broader social movement to redress discriminatory treatments against non-regular workers.

In addition to the issue of discriminatory treatments based on employment status, some community unions are known for engaging activities in specific areas of social issues, such as organizing foreign workers and assisting their livelihood, organizing and empowering women workers, and addressing the problem of precariously employed young workers (Takasu 2010, 46-47, 61-62).

Results of the OISR survey also show that many (if not all) community unions are concerned with broader social issues (for details of the survey, please see footnote 4). The survey asked community unions to list activities they engage in besides labor-issue counseling. Table 1 shows that 53.8 percent of respondents list "involvement in problems of community and/or social problems in general" as one of their activities. The survey asked those 86 unions that engaged in activities concerning "problems of community and/or social problems in general" to list specific problems and activities they were involved (Table 2). The most frequently listed and second most frequently listed items are the issues related to the Constitution of Japan and peace (84.9 percent) and election campaigns (50.0 percent). The percentages of other items are much lower than these two items. This is because the movements to protect Japan's peace constitution¹¹ and election campaigns at the local and national levels for candidates supported by unions have been traditionally pursued by many labor unions, particularly

former affiliates of Sohyo. Thus, percentages of other items reflect more accurately the extent to which community unions are involved in broad social problems. Among other items, community unions have relatively high levels of involvement in issues related to foreign workers, housing and other livelihood problems, and demands related to public services (36.0 percent, 34.9 percent, and 32.6 percent, respectively).

(2) Alliances with Social Movement and Community Organizations

Previous studies of social movement unionism regard alliances between labor unions and social movement/community organizations as the core characteristic of this type of labor movements. I however argued elsewhere that the forms and the extent of labor-social movement, labor-community alliances are influenced by the state of civil society: while SMU-oriented unions in a country where civil society is relatively strong, such as the U.S. and Canada, tend to form such alliances, alliance-formation across the boundary of labor and social movements is not active in a country where civil society is relatively weak, such as Japan (Suzuki 2008). According to the survey reports on activities of community unions affiliated with the CUNN in 2006 and 2007, an overwhelming majority of unions were either not active in “activities reaching out to communities” (*chiiki no torikumi*) or participated in such activities through “regional labor councils centers” (*chikuro senta*), relatively small-scale regional federations voluntarily established by labor unions (mainly former Sohyo affiliates) concerned with peace issues and committed to the movement to protect the Constitution of Japan. However, a small minority of community unions reported coalitions with residents’ movements and with social movements on such issues as opposition to US bases, gender equality, assistance to foreign workers, and occupational safety (ibid., 505).

If coalition-building with social movement organizations is not a key characteristic of social movement unionism in Japan, community unions are active in forming networks with other community unions and in forming personal networks among union activists, activists of various social movements, and experts such as lawyers and academics. Unlike coalitions between organizations, these personal networks are fluid and lack solid organizational structures. The CUNN is a typical example of networks among community unions. It is a loose nation-wide network of 74 community unions without any hierarchical relationship between its headquarters and member unions. The CUNN publishes newsletters and hold annual meetings where activists of community unions form personal networks and exchange information and opinions on various issues. Community unions in certain regions (e.g., areas around Tokyo or

Osaka) form smaller networks among themselves (Takasu 2010, 46). Some networks were formed to tackle policy issues such as deregulations of Labor Standards Law and social issues such as an increase in working poor among young people. These networks were often based on loose personal networks among activists of community unions, those of labor-related NPOs, labor lawyers and academics (ibid.; Shinoda 2009; Azuma 2009). Such a personal network played an important role in the movement to set up an emergency camp at Hibiya Park in the center of Tokyo (called “*Haken Mura*,” literally “a village of [jobless] dispatched workers”) during the year end and new year periods in 2008 and 2009. Activists of the JCUF were among key players of the “*Haken Mura*” movement. The emergency camp provided food and shelter for about 500 unemployed non-regular workers, who had lost their jobs and places to live because of the economic and financial crisis. This movement drew wide media attention and put strong pressure on the government to reconsider its neo-liberal labor market policies, particularly de-regulation of manpower dispatch business (for details, see Shinoda 2009; Endo 2009).

Results of the OISR survey indicate that those community unions that are involved in community and social problems often cooperate with other organizations. The survey asked the 86 unions that listed in Table 1 “involvement in problems of community and/or social problems in general” as one of their activities to indicate whether and with what organizations they cooperate when they were involved in these problems (see Table 3). The table shows that only a small number of community unions are involved in community and social problems without cooperation with other organizations (5.8 percent), and that a majority of unions cooperate either with union organizations at the prefecture or regional levels (79.1 percent) or with NPOs and social movement organizations (50.0 percent) in engaging in these activities. It should be noted, however, that those community unions that were involved in community and social problems in cooperation with NPOs and social movement organizations (43 unions) accounted for 27 percent of the total of 160 respondents. It should also be noted that what these 43 unions regarded as “NPOs and social movement organizations” were not necessarily “genuine” not-for-profit or social movement organizations. Rengo and Zenroren (particularly the latter) have “companion organizations” concerned with political and social issues, such as peace and anti-nuclear armament, improvements of social security provisions, human rights, and women’s issues. Some respondents may have included these organizations in the category of NPOs and social movement organizations.

Concerning network-making, one of the survey questions asked what types of

cooperative and/or support relations community unions formed with other organizations and individuals in providing labor-issue counseling (Table 4). It can be argued that those unions that chose the fourth item in the table (“Cooperate with NPOs specializing in various issues and activities and refer those cases that community unions cannot deal with to these NPOs”) formed some sort of alliances with NPOs (22.5 percent). And those unions that chose the first, second, third, and fifth items of Table 4 (39.4 percent, 39.4 percent, 40 percent, and 38.1 percent, respectively) may be seen as active network-makers with other community unions and/or with supportive individuals.

(3) Involvement of rank-and-file-members in union activities

In contrast to the bureaucratized organizational structures typical of enterprise unions, community unions have high levels of rank-and-file participation. The high levels of participation reflect the fact that community unions cannot hire many full-time activists (according to the OISR survey, a community union, on average, hires 1.3 full-time activists) and depend on members’ support for engaging in various activities. In some unions, active members participate in activities normally performed by full-time activists, for example, by volunteering as labor-issue counselors for other workers and as union representatives in other members’ collective bargaining (Kotani, 1999, 2001). According to the OISR survey, 31.3 percent of respondents reported that rank-and-file members volunteer as labor-issue counselors. Among those unions that listed “collective bargaining” as activities besides labor-issue counseling (see Table 1), 17.5 percent of them reported that union members other than union officials and members directly involved in labor disputes “often” participated in collective bargaining as union representatives, and another 46.3 percent them reported that they “sometimes” participate in collective bargaining.

Although rank-and-file members are relatively active in core activities of community unions such as labor-issue counseling and collective bargaining, they seem to be less active in other activities. For example, the OISR survey asked the 86 unions that engaged in activities related to “problems of community and/or social problems in general” (see Table 1) the extent to which rank-file-member participated in these activities. The most frequent answer was “about 10-20 percent” (41.9 percent), followed by “less than 10 percent” (31.4 percent) and “about 30-40 percent” (17.4 percent), and “about 50-70 percent” (5.8 percent). Rank-and-file participation in labor education was somewhat more active than the case of community and social problems. Among the 95 unions involved in “labor education” (see Table 1), the more frequent

answer was “about 30-40 percent” (37.1 percent), followed by “about 10-20 percent” (34.3 percent) and “less than 10 percent” (17.1 percent), and “about 50-70 percent” (8.6 percent).

In sum, community unions in Japan have the characteristics associated with social movement unionism, but in somewhat different ways from SMU-oriented unions in the U.S. and other industrialized countries. A great majority of community unions seek broad goals, typically redressing discriminatory treatments against non-regular workers and other issues of economic injustice, through daily activities of labor-issue counseling and collective bargaining. Community unions are less active in coalition-building with community and social movement organizations. About 20 to 25 percent of them form coalitions with NPOs and social movement organizations when they are involved in community and social problems and when they provide labor-issue counseling. Community unions seem to be more active in making networks with themselves and with specialists in labor-related fields and supportive individuals. As shown in Table 4, about 40 percent of the responding unions cooperate with other unions (in the same region or nation-wide) and with specialists in providing labor-issue counseling. Some rank-and-file members participate in union activities as volunteer labor-issue counselors or as union representatives in other members’ collective bargaining. Participation of rank-and-file members, however, are less active in activities not directly related to unions’ core activities (e.g., involvement in community and social problems and participation in labor education).

3. Limit and possibility of a future development of social movement in Japan

In September 2003, the Rengo Assessment Committee, a committee of seven external members (one lawyer, three academics, one journalist, one NPO activist, and one writer), submitted its final report to Rengo. The report made critical comments on the current state of Rengo and its affiliates and made proposals for the future direction of the labor movement. One section of the report was devoted to criticism of enterprise unions. It stated that enterprise unions were no longer able to adapt themselves to rapid social and economic changes, and called upon the labor movement to shed enterprise unionism and to become more independent as a social movement. To realize this goal, the report proposed that Rengo adopt a new organizing policy that would promote establishments of labor unions that organized workers across enterprises, such as unions of part-time workers, craft unions, and community unions. It also

recommended that Rengo and its affiliates revise membership rules to allow their members to join two unions at the same time. For example, the report suggested that part-time workers organized by enterprise unions be allowed to join part-time workers' unions organized at the regional level (Rengo 2003; Suzuki 2009b, 184-185). Although Rengo incorporated general ideas of the committee's report into its policy, it did not adopt the policy recommendations to reform the enterprise-centered labor movement. This was because leaders of major Rengo affiliates, such as UI Zensen, JSD, and JAW (Confederation of Japanese Automobile Workers' Unions), and Kikan Roren (Japan Federation of Basic Industry Workers' Unions) disagreed with the committee's criticism of enterprise unions. They argued that enterprise unions were basic units of the labor movement, and that the revitalization of the labor movement should be achieved not through overcoming enterprise unionism but through strengthening functions of enterprise unions (Suzuki 2009b, 185). In this way, Rengo failed to adopt the policy aimed to promote the environment more favorable for the development of social movement unionism due to the resistance from the institutionally embedded mainstream enterprise unions.

Will the social movement unionism in Japan remain a minor force in the labor movement dominated by cooperative enterprise unions, as suggested by the third approach discussed in the first section? The institutions of enterprise-based industrial relations seem to be as stable as ever, as leaders of enterprise unions remain strongly committed to the existing system of institutions, typically labor-management consultation through which union leaders and management share information based on mutual-trust (e.g., Inagami and Whittaker 2005; Mori 2003). The institutions have been stable, despite the fact that, even in large private-sector firms, employment of full-time workers has become less secure, and that wage levels of many workers have remained stagnant or even declined. The stability is indicated by statements made by leaders of enterprise unions in the 2000s. My analysis of their statements shows that union leaders are still strongly committed to "politics of productivity." They think that industrial relations should contribute to the competitiveness and productivity of their firms, and accepted measures to downsize employees such as voluntary retirement schemes as difficult but inevitable choices for the sake of the development of the firm. Some leaders argue that one of the future missions of enterprise unions is to assist those union members who have accepted voluntary retirement so that they will make a smooth transition to their "second career" (Suzuki 2009a, 38-43).

The continued stability of the dominant part of industrial relations institutions also indicates that social movement unionism in Japan (i.e., community unions) has not

grown institutionally influential (in terms of membership size and resources) enough to undermine the legitimacy of enterprise unionism, contrary to the first approach discussed in the first section. The institutional influence of community unions is weak, despite the fact they have “a relatively high profile” in the news media. The media often cite leaders of community unions as “knowledgeable or expert sources on labor problems.” Community unions are also portrayed as “innovators of labor strategies and models of progressive Japanese-style unionism” (Weathers 2010, 69). Some observers and academics, in line with a somewhat inflated media image of community unions, expect community unions to play a revitalizing role for the labor movement as a whole. For example, one labor scholar argues that community unions have potential of transforming enterprise unions by infusing a different organizing principle (individual-based affiliation) into their members from the outside (Kinoshita 2007). We, however, should be aware of the difficulties of the countermovement at the “margin” of institutions against the institutionally-embedded enterprise unions, and need to be cautious about an overly optimistic view about the capability of community unions to revitalize the labor movement.

If the dominant institution of industrial relations poses constraints on the development of SMU, other institutional and socio-economic factors may provide opportunities for its development. Here, I discuss the impact of the economic and financial crisis of the fall 2008 on employment conditions (socio-economic factor) and insufficient social security provisions for those affected by the economic difficulty (institutional factor) as possible factors promoting a development of SMU in the future. As in other industrialized countries, the economic and financial crisis of the fall of 2008 created havoc on labor markets, causing a large increase in unemployment rate (from 4.0 percent in 2008 to 5.1 percent in 2009) and a drastic decline in job-offers-to-seekers ratio (from 0.88 in 2009 to 0.47 in 2009). Non-regular workers such as part-time workers and dispatched workers took the brunt of the deterioration of employment conditions, and the above-mentioned emergency camp to assist these workers (the *Hanken Mura* movement) dramatically demonstrated the dire state of these workers to the general public. Although social and labor movement activists, policy-makers, concerned citizens, and academics had recognized the issue of working poor without sufficient social security protection as one of the serious social problems brought about by a series of neo-liberal labor market policies since the mid-1990s, it was not until the mass dismissals of non-regular workers, particularly dispatched factory workers in manufacturing industries, in the aftermath of the economic and financial crisis that the general public came to realize the seriousness of poverty among non-regular workers.

The fact that many non-regular workers who suddenly lost their jobs also lost their places to live¹² pointed to the social problems associated not only with the precarious employment of these workers, but also with the social security system incapable of providing these workers with necessary assistance.

Observers point out many problems with the ways in which social security policies are implemented. Particularly relevant to the issue of working poor are problems of the unemployment insurance and livelihood protection systems. Concerning the former, many non-regular workers, even though their terms of employment make them eligible for unemployment insurance, are not able to receive unemployment benefits because their employers have evaded payments of employment insurance fees. The rate of recipients of unemployment benefits among the total of unemployed workers was 21.6 percent in 2006 (Yuasa 2008, 25, 31). As for the latter, unemployed or under-employed workers are often denied payments of allowances under the system of livelihood protection, a system of public assistance for low-income households to maintain the minimum standards of living. Local government officials, in mean-testing applicants for livelihood protection, exclude from assistance those whom they judge as having an ability to work. It is estimated that only 15 to 20 percent of those who live below the minimum standards of living receive livelihood protection allowances (Tange 2009, 63).

Community unions, through their labor-issue counseling, deal with “cutting-edge” problems faced by workers. Thus, some of the cases received by labor-issue counselors involve livelihood issues due to “malfunctioning” of social security institutions. Results of the OISR survey show that 30 unions, 18.7 percent of the total, are involved in housing and other livelihood problems (Table 2). Thus, a minority of community unions expanded their realm of activities into workers’ livelihood issues, for example, by giving advice to unemployed or extremely-low paid workers on how to apply for livelihood protection allowances. The “fusion” of labor and livelihood issues promoted formation of alliances and/or networks between community union activists and activities involved in various anti-poverty movements (see Azuma 2010, 221-222). The most famous example of such networks is “Anti-Poverty Campaign” (*Han Hinkon Net*), a Tokyo-based network that led the *Hakenmura* movement. The network consists of activists of various anti-poverty movements, union officials and activists, lawyers and other concerned individuals, and seeks to realize humane livelihood and labor conditions based on social and political solutions of poverty issues (*Han Hinkon Net* website, assessed June 7, 2010). Although it is not clear to what extent similar networks among activists of anti-poverty movements, community union activists, and

other concerned individuals spread to other parts of Japan, such networks across the boundary of labor and livelihood issues may become the basis for the future growth of social movement unionism. In other words, if a prospect of the growth of social movement unionism within the existing industrial relations institutions is limited, social movement unionism in Japan may find a new plane of activities and growth by addressing problems associated with broader social security institutions.

Conclusion

This paper examined possibility and limit of social movement unionism in Japan in the context of industrial relations institutions. Previous studies of social movement unionism tended to treat industrial relations institutions as restraining the growth of SMU and therefore as a target for SMU to overcome. While such characterizations of institutions may not be off the mark, they tend to overlook how cross-national differences of industrial relations institutions have influenced the development of social movement unionism in different countries. The paper showed that the industrial relations institutions in Japan were dominated by cooperative enterprise unions, and that these institutional arrangements imposed constraints on the growth of social movement unionism in two senses. First, mainstream enterprise unions were embedded in the existing industrial relations institutions despite the institutionally weak position of organized labor as a whole, and therefore were not receptive to the idea of revitalizing the labor movement based on SMU-oriented strategies. Second, although community unions developed as the counterforce against the conservative dominant unions, they developed only at the institutional margins, their development being limited by the unfavorable institutional environment (except for the liberal union recognition procedure) as well as by their own organizational and resource-related problems.

The paper also examined to what extent community unions seek broad goals, form alliances with social movement organizations, and have rank-and-file involvement, based on results of the OISR survey. Community unions had characteristics of social movement unionism in terms of seeking broad goals and of having relatively active rank-and-involvement. Community unions were less active in forming alliances with social movement and community organizations. However, they were active in forming networks with other community unions and in forming personal networks among union activists, activists of various social movements, and experts such as lawyers and academics. Unlike coalitions between organizations, these personal networks are fluid

and lack solid organizational structures, but sometimes exert strong influence as in the case of the *Hakenmura* movement.

The paper drew a rather pessimistic picture of the future development of social movement unionism in Japan. It is largely due to my assessment of the dominant part of industrial relations institutions, i.e., labor-management relations at the enterprise level. In my view, they remain as stable as ever, despite economic and social changes surrounding the institutions. In other words, enterprise unions continue to commit themselves to labor-management cooperation based on the idea of “politics of productivity,” and are not receptive to the argument such as the one made by the Rengo Assessment Committee. On the contrary, some of enterprise unions do not hide their hostile attitudes to community unions by characterizing them as “outside forces” only interested in extracting compensation money from employers on behalf of workers with individual grievances. Rather than focusing on the industrial relations institutions, I shifted my attention to the current troubled state of broader social security institutions, and suggested a possible future growth of social movement unionism in the arena created by the fusion of labor and livelihood issues. This possible growth may be realized if community unions take full advantage of their ability to flexibly create networks with activists of anti-poverty movements and other concerned individuals and form such networks not only in urban areas where they seem to be concentrated, but also in other parts of Japan. To what extent such networks will spread and to what extent the expansion of community unions’ activities into the realm of livelihood issues will strengthen the influence of social movement unionism in Japan are subjects of future research.

Table 1: Activities community that unions engaged in besides counseling services on labor issues (multiple answers)

Activities	Number of Unions	Percentage
1. Collective bargaining	140	87.5%
2. Mobilizing union members in support of union members currently in disputes with employers	82	51.3%
3. Organizing new members	73	45.6%
4. Labor education	95	59.4%
5. Cultural and recreational activities	70	43.8%
6. Involvement in problems of community and/or social problems in general	86	53.8%
7. Making demands related to labor policies	39	24.4%
8. Other activities	12	7.5%
NA	3	1.9%

Table 2: Specific social problems and activities in which community unions were involved (among the 86 unions that chose “Involvement in problems of community and/or social problems in general” in the question of Table 1) (multiple answers)

Problems and activities	Number of Unions	Percentage
1. Housing and other livelihood problems	30	34.9%
2. the protection of the Constitution of Japan and peace issues	73	84.9%
3. Demands related to public services (such as a movement to enact a living wage ordinance, a movement for maintenance or improvement of quality of public services)	28	32.6%
4. Election campaigns (both local and national levels)	43	50.0%
5. Problems related to environment, development and nuclear power plants	22	25.6%
6. Gender-based discrimination and other gender-related issues	12	14.0%
7. Problems related to working conditions and livelihoods of foreign workers	31	36.0%
8. other problems	10	11.6%
NA	1	1.2%

Table 3: Forms of cooperation with other organizations when community unions are involved in problems of community and/or social problems in general (among the 86 unions that chose “Involvement in problems of community and/or social problems in general” in the question of Table 1) (multiple answers)

	Number of Unions	Percentage
1. Almost by themselves (without cooperation with other organizations)	5	5.8%
2. In cooperation with prefecture or regional organizations of labor unions	68	79.1%
3. In cooperation with NPOs and social movement organizations	43	50.0%
4. Others	6	7.0%
NA	1	1.2%

Table 4: Types of cooperative and/or support relations that community unions form with other organizations and individuals in providing counseling services on labor issues (multiple answers)

	Number of Unions	percentage
1. Cooperate with other community unions in the same region and exchange available councilors between unions	63	39.4%
2. Set up a joint desk of counseling services with other community unions in the same region	63	39.4%
3. Participate in occasional nation-wide joint desks of counseling services	64	40.0%
4. Cooperate with NPOs specializing in various issues and activities (e.g., poor people’s livelihood, domestic violence, young people’s issues, mental health, and assistance to foreign workers and their families), and refer those cases that community unions cannot deal with to these NPOs	36	22.5%
5. Take advantage of counselors’ personal networks with specialists in other fields	61	38.1%
6. Others	22	13.8%
NA	5	3.1%

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¹ The labor movements in South Africa and Brazil have been also the focus of previous studies of social movement unionism (e.g., Seidman 1994; von Holdt 2002). In these countries, the labor movements played an important role in struggles against an authoritarian state, and in the establishment of a democratic state. Acknowledging these previous studies, the previous studies referred to in this paper are mainly those on social movement unionism in industrialized countries in the North.

² These four aspects of social movement unionism can also be applied to labor movements that have similar characteristics to those of social movement unionism but are called by different names, such as “community unionism” (Australia) or “social unionism” (Canada).

³ Region-based, individually-affiliated unions are commonly called “community unions” (*komyuniti yunion*), but are also called “local unions” (*rokaru yunion*) and “regional unions” (*chiiki yunion*). The latter two are used to refer to region-based unions established by Rengo and Zenroren, respectively. To be exact, community unions refer to those affiliated with the CUNN (Community Union Nationwide Network, a loose federation of 74 region-based unions, many of which are not affiliated with either of the two national confederations). For the sake of simplicity, however, this paper uses the commonly used term, “community unions,” to refer to region-based unions.

⁴ We sent survey sheets to 298 individually-affiliated unions (a more general term of community unions) in November and December 2009, and 160 unions had answered the survey by April 2010 (a response rate of 53.7%). The survey questions consisted of three parts. In the first part, the survey asked organizational characteristics of unions, such as membership size, a founding year, a number of full-time staff, and annual budgets. The second part asked counseling activities on labor issues, such as a number of cases handled by unions per month, a number of persons available as counselors, contents of complaints, and a percentage of those who become union members out of a total number of workers seeking counseling services. And the third part asked activities unions engage in besides labor-issue counseling, such as collective bargaining, labor education, and involvement in problems of community and/or social problems in general.

⁵ The union density was 34.4 percent in 1975. It declined to 28.9 percent in 1985, to 23.8 percent in 1995, to 18.7 percent in 2005, and to 18.5 percent in 2009. The union density in the private sector declined from 20.8 percent in 1995, to 16.4 percent in 2005. The private-sector union density in 2009 was 16.9 percent, an increase of 0.5 percentage points from 2005.

⁶ If community unions are defined to include region-based unions affiliated with general unions (*ippan roso*) that organize SME workers, their total membership becomes about 100,000 (Takasu 2010, 64). These general unions are often loose federations of enterprise unions established at SMEs, but have a minority of individually-affiliated members.

⁷ While a community union organizes a certain number of members each year through counseling services on labor issues, many of them leave the union when their individual disputes with employers are resolved. In addition, their small organizational size and weak financial base (according to the OISR survey, an average membership of community unions is 292, and 68 percent of the unions are operating at the annual budget of less than 2 million yen) make it difficult for community unions to allocate enough financial and human resources to organizing activities (Suzuki 2008, 500-501; Weathers 2010, 68).

⁸ Rengo, in its 2005 convention, formally adopted the policy to strengthen functions of Rengo’s regional councils, and reorganized 481 councils into 386 councils. However,

activities of regional councils and community unions organized by them did not seem to grow very active to the point of being competitive with enterprise unions, as feared by UI Zensen.

⁹ Rengo, the dominant confederation, has a membership of 6.8 million. The membership of Zenroren, the leftist rival of Rengo, is about 1.3 million. These membership figures are based on each confederation's own survey in 2008. Besides these confederations, there is another federation, called Zenrokyo, whose membership is 144,000 (as of 2008). Zenrokyo does not characterize itself as a confederation, but as a loose nation-level federation of various types of leftist unions.

¹⁰ In cases of dismissals, community unions often make compromises with employers in such a way that that employers pay "compensation money" to dismissed workers in return for the acceptance by unions and concerned workers of arbitrary dismissal by employers. And that is why leaders of enterprise unions sometimes accuse community unions of being only interested in extracting compensation money from management.

¹¹ Its Article 9 states that "the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes."

¹² For example, many dispatched factory workers in manufacturing industries lived in dormitories or apartments owned by manpower dispatching companies near the factories where they worked. When the economic and financial crisis hit the Japanese economy, many factories reduced the scale of operations, and stopped receiving dispatched workers. When their employment contracts with manpower dispatching companies were not renewed or cancelled in the middle of contract terms, these workers had to leave the dormitories and apartments.