

Seeking a More Humane Way of Working: the Workers' Co-operative Movement in Japan

Japanese Workers' Co-operative Union

Japan is a highly developed capitalist country, with a huge productive capacity second only to that of the United States. The Japanese capitalist system was established very rapidly over the last 100 years, but development brought with it many victims. Many Japanese workers work in bad and inhumane conditions, they are exploited and overworked, in some cases this can lead to Karoshi (death from overwork), an aspect is not widely known outside Japan. In recent years, the Japanese government has been trying to restructure and deregulate the existing political, economic and trade system. A new era of mega-competition is arriving, and the Japanese market economy system is drastically changing; it is becoming like the law of the jungle. Under these circumstances, the Japanese Workers' Co-operative Union wants to create a new humane form of enterprise and a new way of working. We believe the answer to be workers' co-operatives where workers invest, create jobs and manage themselves in a democratic way.

Our philosophy

We have learned much from the experiences of workers' co-op movements in Europe such as Lega (in Italy) and Mondragon (in Spain). We began the workers' co-ops in Japan in the early 1970s. In 1992 we became affiliated with the International Co-operative Alliance (ICA). Our philosophy can be summarised as follows:

- Participation of all members in management (one member - one vote).
- The rehumanisation of labour.
- The renaissance of life, labour and community.
- The creation of a new society of well-being.

We believe it is important that workers should not be

subordinated to the demands of capital but instead work should be meaningful and working conditions should be fair. Every worker should have equal rights and duties and workers should be in control of their own workplaces. In brief we want to make working conditions more humane and more worthwhile. In this way, we want to gain the trust of society by improving the quality of work. At the same time, we believe that solidarity with, and contribution to, the renaissance of communities is very important. Communities have been neglected in the capitalist system and older persons have been marginalised and isolated from society. We believe solidarity with the old is a very important task and that is why we have begun to organise Elderly Persons' Co-operatives in each prefecture of Japan with the purpose of creating a new society of caring and well-being.

In 1992, the Japanese Workers' Co-operative Union decided, by a vote of members, on the following seven principles. We aim:

1. To construct a co-operative movement in which the workers are the key actors, reinforcing a real democracy with joint responsibilities.
2. To achieve a high quality of work and to contribute to the good of community, to overcome the servile and passive mentality of the employed.
3. To improve the quality of work and the standard of living by increasing jobs, based on business plans and by strengthening management ability without making a deficit.
4. To attach greater importance to education and learning, by pursuing human development with 'self-support, co-operation and love' through labour.
5. To develop the workers' co-operative movement and other co-operative movements to seek social change and to reinforce the co-ops with a nationwide outlook.
6. To make enterprises, communities and a society in which workers and citizens are the main actors, by working together with labour unions, and by combining with a wide variety of grass-roots movements.
7. To promote a movement and businesses which will overcome the crisis facing the human race, by strengthening international solidarity.

We decided on these principles by studying and examining our experiences by ourselves. Nevertheless it can be said that these principles are recognised internationally, because they are very similar to the values and principles of the ICA as decided at the centenary congress of 1995 (our president Yuzo Nagato is a member of the executive committee of CICOPA, one of the specialised bodies of the ICA).

Progress of the movement in Japan

The Japanese Workers' Co-operative Union has over 8,000 members (figures from 1997). These include:

2,500 members of Center Jigyodan, the biggest national co-operative organisation of our Union.

about 5,000 members of 50 local Jigyodan, locally based co-operative organisations

the remainder belonging to producers' organisations, farmers' organisations and elderly persons' co-operatives.

Our organisation has an annual turnover of 15 billion yen of which Center Jigyodan makes up 6 billion yen, local Jigyodan 8 billion yen, and the others 1 billion yen, annually. If one compares these figures to those of workers' co-ops in Europe, they are not so big, because our history is not long and it is difficult to enlarge businesses in Japan. However, if one compares these figures to those of workers' co-ops in Japan in 1988 then turnover and membership have almost doubled.

The most important decision making body for our Union is the general assembly which is held every year. The delegates to the general assembly are elected by the base-level co-operatives. The board of directors (who are chosen at the general assembly) make decisions during the year. The president, the vice presidents and the director general are elected by the members of the board of directors and come from amongst them. By our statute, each co-operative pays its dues in proportion to its turnover. In 1997, the total budget of our Union is around 200 million yen. In Japan although agricultural co-ops and consumers co-ops are

recognised in law, there is no such recognition for general co-ops or workers' co-ops. Since workers' co-ops are not recognised as legal bodies, we are in an unfavourable position, especially under the tax system of Japan. In this respect, Japan is far behind Europe. We are seeking to legalise workers' co-ops, by drafting a proposal of legislation, in collaboration with many other organisations such as 'Workers' Collectives'. This is a very important goal for us.

In 1991, we established the Japanese Institute of Co-operative Research to promote systematic research into co-operative organisations, especially workers' co-ops. This institute is the only one of its kind in Japan. The institute is funded by investment and dues of its members, and unites many professors, scholars and co-operative members. Its activities include the holding of symposiums, meeting of study groups on subjects such as employment and co-operation, collection of information about workers' co-operatives all over the world, and the publication of magazines and brochures. Through this institute we have formed a network with people from many different organisations and communities. Our movement attaches a great deal of importance to networking: our ideas and principles cannot be realised only by ourselves, but only with the force of solidarity. In 1993, in collaboration with other organisations the Union made a film, 'Dying at a Hospital' (directed by Jun Ickikawa), the subject of which is the care of terminal cancer patients in hospital. Concerned with the dignity of life through patients dying of cancer, the film was shown voluntarily by our Union in many cities throughout Japan and was seen by about 250,000 people, a record turnout for this kind of movie projection in Japan in recent years. After the Kobe earthquake of January 1995, about 1,000 members of our Union went to the area to help the victims. We collected more than 10 million yen as a donation to help them. When France and China did nuclear tests in 1995, our Union sent a letter of protest to the leaders of both countries. We have a long tradition of opposing atomic weapons as well as fighting unemployment and misery.

In April 1995, the first co-operatively managed high school, Tugeno High School, was established in a rural area of Aichi prefecture. This high school connects study and labour and is rooted in the community. More than 1 million people supported

the establishment of this high school. The Japanese Workers' Co-operative Union invested 10 million yen and made a nationwide appeal for it. This high school is also a member of our Union. The Union also publishes a newspaper and a magazine: *Rokyo Shinbun* (workers' co-op newspaper) published 3 times a month, and *Shigoto no Hakken* (work discovery), a magazine published every two months. These publications are important not only to transmit our practices outside of the Union, but also to regularly inform and up-date members of workers' co-ops with our ideas.

A brief history of our union

The Japanese Workers' Co-operative Union is about 25 years old. It developed from the Trade Union Movement. Our forerunner was the Day Workers Trade Union which supported the workers who worked on a day-to-day casual basis for local governments. When these governments stopped giving day work to these people, the Day Workers' Trade Union began to try to create jobs themselves in many cities throughout Japan. In the early 1970s, they began to organise local Jigyodan (business groups) in many prefectures seeking to organise a new way of working: neither public sector nor private sector but a third sector. In 1979, local Jigyodan groups established a national council to decide on and promote their principles and purposes and to work, not for profit, but for the community. In 1982, Chokkatsu Jigyodan (business group managed by the national council), the fore-runner of Center Jigyodan, was established for three purposes: to make a model Jigyodan as an example to follow, to establish the financial base, and to form a centre of learning for our members. In 1986 we changed the name of the National Council to the National Union and in 1993 we changed the name of Jigyodan to 'Workers' Co-operative'. We hope to have turnover of 30 billion yen (double that of today) by the end of the century. We want to continue organising elderly persons' co-operatives in each prefecture based around workers' co-op. We are developing an influential network of many groups including architects, technicians, construction workers, farmers who are looking for new ideas about work and life.

Our main area of work is the service sector. This reflects the

fact that we started from the Day Workers Trade Union and with a poor accumulation of capital. Our most important areas are the maintenance of hospitals and buildings, distribution and sorting of everyday goods in collaboration with consumers co-operatives, park maintenance and gardening. We do the maintenance work in more than 80 hospitals. We do more than 20 sorts of works in these hospitals, such as cleaning floors, managing shops, the disposal of medical garbage, catering and managing restaurants, telephone switchboards, and so on. Our work in distribution and sorting of commodities began 15 years ago as co-operation between co-operatives and now we are working at 14 distribution centres. Park maintenance and gardening are mainly entrusted in us by local governments and we are trying to make cities greener.

In Japan, people over 65 years old make up 15 per cent of population and this figure is increasing year by year rapidly. For us carework for the elderly is becoming one of our most important areas of activities. About 600 careworkers belong to our Union. The care workers take care of older persons as home helpers or distributors of foods. We are educating them, by opening the classes licensed by the Ministry of Health and Welfare, and we hope to make more careworkers contribute to the community. Our philosophy is to encourage elderly persons to lead a normal life so they do not become bed-ridden, and to try to help elderly persons become more active and healthy. We have created many home helpers' workers co-op and we plan to make care centers as meeting places of elderly persons. In the near future, the welfare of the aged will be one of main businesses for our workers' Co-op Union.

As mentioned earlier, our members went to Kobe after the terrible earthquake and helped the dismantling and subsequent repairs of houses with the support and encouragement of co-operatives throughout the world. The Japanese Workers' Co-operative Union then established the Workers' Co-op of Construction in Kobe, and 200 members participated in the General Assembly of this establishment. The aim was to break the monopoly of big construction companies. The Workers Co-op of Construction began to construct new buildings as well as house repairs. In 1996, we opened the metropolitan office of Workers Co-op of Construction in Tokyo. We hope to develop

these works by linking them with elderly persons' co-operatives and with many kinds of specialists.

Another developing field for our Union is foods and agriculture. Our principle with regard to foods and agriculture is to produce and provide the products that are 'healthy and safe' and to encourage Japanese agriculture. Japanese agriculture is in crisis because of the politics of the Japanese government such as the promotion of the importation of foreign foods. Now Japan imports about 60 per cent of all foods consumed in this country, like ancient Rome just before the collapse of its Empire. Recently many farmers' organisations such as Muchachaen (orange cultivators) and Vigour farm (dairy farmers) have joined into our Union. We want new, better ways of agricultural working and the invigoration of Japanese agriculture, against the massive importation of, and the dependence on, foreign foods. As mentioned earlier, we manage hospital restaurants and do the catering for many elderly persons. Center Jigyodan started new food production businesses, including bread bakery and Tofu (soybean curd) factory. They use ingredients produced in Japan and adhere to the notion of 'healthy and safe'. These business fields will develop further in the near future.

We began to organise elderly persons' co-operatives in each prefecture of Japan to fulfil the objective 'work, welfare and enjoyment' (Ikigai in Japanese). The elderly persons' co-operatives are autonomous organisations established and managed by older persons. In Japan, the level of social security, pension and public care for the elderly is low and they are isolated from society. Elderly persons' co-operatives are alternatives to such situations. Elderly persons' co-operatives help the elderly to create jobs themselves. They invest and manage home care, food distribution, house repairs, funerals and the collective purchase of everyday necessities. For these co-operatives, study and enjoyment are also a very important field. Each elderly persons' co-op runs classes in culture, health, language and computers and organises travel. Thus these co-operatives try to make a network of elderly persons helping each other. We began to organise these types of co-operatives in 1995 and by April 1997 we have established them in 13 prefectures. More than 15 thousand people joined in these co-operatives with many more supporters. Their activities are widely reported on TV and in the

newspapers. We are determined to establish elderly persons co-operatives in all of Japan's 47 prefectures and to make a national union of elderly persons' co-ops within 2 or 3 years. We are very interested in the activities of the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), which has over 30 million members and is active in various fields. We invited the President-Elect of AARP to our study meeting in 1996 and we have twice sent a study delegation to the United States. 1999 is the International Year of Older Persons, decided by the General Assembly of the United Nations. We hope to contribute to the success of this year together with many organisations from all over the world.

Note:

Elderly persons' co-operatives recently opened a home-page on the internet. The address is: <http://www.mmjp.or.jp/ecoop>