

The demise of the *shunto*

Japan's union offensive fails for the third year in a row

Terry Cook
15 April 2000

This year's *shunto* —spring wage offensive—in Japan again highlights the inability of the trade unions to defend the past gains of the working class, let alone extend them. The “offensive” lasted barely one month before it was called off. The unions accepted a paltry 2 percent wage increase, the third record low in as many years.

The result will go nowhere near compensating workers for the fall in real wages over the last year nor will it offset the ongoing cuts by employers to the traditional summer and winter bonuses that make up a large proportion of workers' incomes. Real earnings fell by 2.5 percent in January this year, the 10th decline in the past 11 months.

The cave-in was hardly the outcome promised by union leaders at the 2000 *shunto* “kick-off” rally attended by 1,800 union representatives at Tokyo's Kudan Hall on February 10. Opening the rally, Japanese Trade Union Confederation (Rengo) president Etsuya Washio said: “We should fight against the suppression of the wage hike.”

The “fight” consisted of limited work stoppages and a tightly controlled street procession in Tokyo on March 4 that attracted 45,000 workers. Days of distributing leaflets outside rail stations and other public venues followed. According to a Rengo bulletin, the “action of the month” was a petition campaign supporting a wage increase, aimed at collecting 10 million signatures to present to the Diet's upper and lower house.

This, according to Washio was a “new turn” aimed at “appealing to public opinion”. In reality, the low-level campaign was designed to ensure the least possible disruption to industry and production while the union bureaucracy attempted to come to an arrangement with big business.

The *Sydney Morning Herald's* correspondent Michael

Millett commented: “This year's ‘confrontation’ was a non-event: the big corporations pointed to their bleeding profits lines and the depressed state of the job market before doling out 2 percent. The small and medium companies, which are next in line, are expected to cough up even less.”

Millett reported a telling comment by Washio that encapsulates the prostration of the entire trade union bureaucracy. Washio declared that the unions were “dissatisfied” with the results of the *shunto* but they “lacked the power, or even the motivation to use industrial action to obtain higher increases”.

Washio added that “debate about the virtue of the annual spring offensive is not restricted to the corporate boardrooms,” indicating that the *shunto's* future is being hotly discussed in the highest levels of the union bureaucracy. There is every likelihood that the *shunto* will be wrapped up for good as the unions abandon even the pretence of defending wages and jobs.

The demise of the *shunto*, once considered by workers to be as eternal as the coming of the Japanese spring and as predictable as the blooming of the cherry-blossom, is a significant development. It is yet another expression of the global decline of the unions and the complete bankruptcy of their perspective.

The annual offensive emerged in the late 1940s under pressure from workers who were organised mainly in company-based unions. They sought to combine their strength on a national level to enhance their fight against the powerful Japanese conglomerates.

Pay was extremely low and conditions in the factories, especially safety, were shockingly poor. In the steel industry for example, from the 1940s to the mid-1950s at least one worker was killed on the job daily. The exceedingly low level of wages in that period can be

judged from the fact that between 1965 and 1995 wages increased by 1,000 percent.

The limited improvements were gained, not by the negotiating skills of the trade union bureaucracy but by the militant action of the working class. For almost three decades the world's media regularly carried images of the spring offensive bringing Tokyo and other major centres to a standstill.

Such actions lasted for days and weeks before an agreement was reached. It was not uncommon for staff workers and management to bring in bedding and supplies and stay-over at workplaces and offices in an attempt to avoid the massive disruption to transport and other services.

The temporary and relative success of the *shunto* was not a testimony to the viability of the union perspective, but was bound up with the boom and general economic expansion that marked the post-war period. The employers in Japan, as elsewhere, granted concessions to the working class to buy industrial peace.

Militant as the *shunto* was, like all union struggles, it never challenged the framework of the capitalist system. The rises gained acted to placate workers and bind them ever more closely to the corporate interests of their “own” employers.

Japanese business, like its global counterparts, has over the past decade experienced an acute economic and political crisis. Japanese corporations are restructuring their operations to match their global rivals. All the past concessions granted to workers are being ripped up with the assistance of the unions.

Growing discontentment among workers is reflected in declining union membership. In 1975, the unions covered one-third of the workforce but by 1998 the figure had plummeted to 22.4 percent. This downward trend is gaining momentum as more workers come to view the unions as having little relevance to their struggles.

The system of lifetime employment, which formed a cornerstone of post-war class relations in Japan, is rapidly coming to an end as the country's major corporations, such as Nissan, Mazda and Mitsubishi, shed thousands of jobs. The unions have embraced this process. Last year, for example, the Nissan union declared its support for the company's restructuring plans that would cost 21,000 jobs, or 14 percent of the workforce.

Layoffs are also sweeping through Japan's banking and financial institutions. At the end of last month Sanwa Bank, Tokai Bank and Asahi Bank announced they would merge and would slash 10,000 jobs or 26.6 percent of

their combined 37,583-strong domestic workforce.

Japan's Management and Coordination Agency reported on March 31 that the seasonally adjusted unemployment rate stood at 4.9 percent while the rate for males reached a postwar high of 5.1 percent, up from 5 percent at the same time last year. In January, 3.09 million workers were jobless, up 110,00—or 3.7 percent—from the same month in 1999.

The downsizing is being accompanied by speed-ups, extended working hours and excessive workloads—a situation presided over by the unions. These chronic conditions are summed up in a new word that has been added to the Japanese vocabulary— *karoshi* —which literally means death by overwork.

In a number of cases, stress and physical trauma have caused mental disorders as well as triggered heart and other diseases. Another chilling addition to the vocabulary is *karo-jisatsu*, meaning suicide induced by overwork.

At the end of last month Japan's Supreme Court recognised the *karo-jisatsu* phenomenon. It found that advertising firm Dentsu had caused the death of one of its young employees Ichiro Oshima by pushing him to work an excessive number of hours, leading to stress and then suicide.

The court heard testimony that Oshima worked to 2am at least two out of every five days. On average, he slept two and half-hours a day and had never taken leave since he joined the firm in 1990. The company's code, outlined in its “10 ruthless rules,” insisted: “See every task through to the end—as though your life depends on it.”

Dentsu is not an exception. The National Defence Council for Victims of Karoshi estimates that at least 10,000 deaths each year are “attributable in part to fatigue and stress caused by excessive work”.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact