

Japanese department store workers vote to strike

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Thousands of workers at Japanese department store company Sogo & Seibu overwhelmingly voted to strike last week to protect their jobs after the proposed sale of the company was announced last year. The strike vote is significant in Japan where the trade unions have suppressed strikes and while an upsurge of workers' struggles takes place around the world.

On July 25, the Sogo Seibu Union confirmed that its members had approved a strike in a vote that took place between July 9 and 22. The union represents approximately 4,000 workers at ten department stores around Japan bearing either the Sogo or Seibu name. Out of a total of 3,833 ballots, 93.9 percent of workers cast votes in favour of a strike. They are demanding guarantees that their jobs will be protected after the sale of the company.

Sogo & Seibu is currently owned by Seven & i Holdings, which claims the department store company is unprofitable and plans to sell the unit to the US-based Fortress Investment Group for approximately 210 billion yen (\$US1.5 billion). Fortress is controlled by Japan's SoftBank Group and plans to join with Yodobashi Holdings, an electronics retailer, to complete the deal, which was originally struck in November 2022.

Union chairman Yasuhiro Teraoka stated while announcing the strike vote results, "It is nearly the unanimous position of the employees. Union members have expressed their belief that Seven & i's stance is overly dishonest. We will increase our resolve to demand collective bargaining, including to get information from the company."

At the same time, however, Teraoka made clear that the union is not currently planning to call a strike. He stated, "Rather than starting a strike immediately, we'll first try to boost our bargaining power." He also added,

"We have many local customers and suppliers. We would like to make a careful decision (before striking)."

In other words, while acknowledging the overwhelming demand among union members to strike, Teraoka made clear that the union bureaucracy is concerned over the impact on its business partners. Sogo and Seibu workers should take this as a warning. The union bureaucracy is not leading a defence of workers' jobs, but instead attempting to defuse workers' anger while orchestrating a backroom deal with the company.

The Sogo Seibu Union is affiliated with the Japanese Federation of Textile, Chemical, Food, Commercial, Service and General Workers' Unions (UA Zensen), which itself is part of the Japanese Trade Union Confederation, commonly referred to as Rengo, the largest union organization in Japan. According to UA Zensen, which represents 1.83 million members, the last strike of department store workers was in 1957.

This struggle is not limited to Japanese department store workers. The working class throughout Japan has faced huge attacks on its economic and living standards. Wages have remained stagnant for nearly three decades. Total real wages have decreased in recent years, falling 2.4 percent between February 2019 and February 2023.

In addition, nearly 40 percent of Japan's workforce is comprised of non-regular workers, which includes part-time, contract and dispatch workers. These workers lack the protections of regular workers and are paid less. The number of non-regular workers continues to grow, with 260,000 more workers in this category in 2022 over the previous year, according to a government survey. At the same time, there were only 10,000 new regular positions.

Alongside their class brothers and sisters around the world, the Sogo and Seibu workers are joining a growing strike movement that includes autoworkers in the United States, dock workers in western Canada and postal workers in the United Kingdom. They are responding to the attacks on all sections of workers which have intensified as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the US/NATO-instigated war against Russia in Ukraine.

The unions in Japan, which have done nothing to defend workers, are deeply fearful of a united movement of the working class growing in Japan and throughout the world.

The government of Prime Minister Fumio Kishida has promoted plans for wage increases as part of its economic policy dubbed “new capitalism.” In reality, this amounts to providing government handouts to businesses, claiming this will raise wages.

However, wages, even at large companies, are not keeping up with inflation. During negotiations this year between Rengo and major Japanese firms, the latter agreed to increase wages by an average of 3.58 percent. Yet, inflation in Japan reached 3.3 percent in June, meaning whatever increase workers receive will be eaten up by rising costs. Furthermore, 70 percent of the workforce is employed at smaller firms and will not see this paltry increase.

Rengo President Tomoko Yoshino admitted as much, saying, “There are some industries that did not see substantial wage hikes and real wages remain under pressure from price increases.” The statement is an indictment of the trade unions that have presided over declining wages.

Over the past 40 years, trade unions have moved far to the right and have been instrumental in suppressing workers’ struggles. This is particularly true for Rengo, with approximately seven million members. At one point affiliated with Japan’s Democrats, currently known as the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan, Rengo has drawn closer to the ruling right-wing Liberal Democratic Party in recent years.

It is also notable that the majority of workers do not even see unions as a presence in their lives. A Rengo survey from October 2022 found that approximately two-thirds of workers were dissatisfied with their jobs, with low wages the most common complaint. When asked what workers did to resolve problems at work,

only 3 percent consulted a union while 58.9 percent did nothing. Younger workers were more likely to be unsure if they were even a member of a union or not.



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