

Japanese department store workers strike in Tokyo

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Around 1,000 Seibu department store workers in Tokyo, Japan struck last Thursday to halt the sale of their company and protect their jobs. The workers had overwhelmingly voted to strike in July as part of a growing militancy of Japanese workers and workers around the world. At the same time, the Seibu workers face the conscious opposition of the trade union apparatus to expand their struggle.

The one-day token strike took place at Seibu's flagship store in Ikebukuro, Tokyo, as it was closed throughout the day. Strikers marched around the store holding signs calling on workers to back their struggle, reading "Let's fight together." They also appealed to passers-by for support, many of whom expressed their approval for the walkout.

One Tokyo resident speaking to the media drew the connection between the strike and the deeper economic issues, saying, "When the cost of living is high due to price hikes, I hope the strike will provide an opportunity for people to become aware of the importance of workers uniting and raising their voices."

The workers walked off the job to try to block the sale of department store company Sogo & Seibu, which operates 10 stores throughout Japan bearing either the Sogo or Seibu name. They fear that the sale will result in large-scale job cuts and other attacks on their working conditions. That same day, Sogo & Seibu's parent company, Seven & i Holdings, voted to sell the company to the US-based Fortress Investment Group. Fortress is controlled by Japan's SoftBank Group.

The day after the strike, Fortress acquired Sogo & Seibu for approximately 220 billion yen (\$US1.5 billion). Fortress then announced plans to sell assets from Sogo & Seibu to Yodobashi Holdings for nearly 300 billion yen (\$US2.05 billion). The latter intends to renovate branches such as Seibu Ikebukuro, Seibu

Shibuya, and Sogo Chiba and open electronics stores inside them.

The department store workers demonstrated their willingness to fight. From among nearly 4,000 members belonging to the Sogo Seibu Union, workers voted to strike by 93.9 percent in July. This is highly significant in a country where the class struggle has been strangled for decades by the pro-capitalist and pro-company trade unions.

According to the Japanese Federation of Textile, Chemical, Commerce, Food and General Services Workers' Unions (UA Zensen), the August 31 walkout was the first at a major department store since 1962. Sogo Seibu Union is affiliated to UA Zensen.

The Seibu strike demonstrates that the unions are increasingly unable to contain the anger and discontent of the working class. Wages have remained stagnant for decades while real wages in Japan have fallen throughout the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, declining 2.4 percent between February 2019 and February 2023.

The conditions facing department store workers in Japan are found throughout the world. In the United States, for example, 150,000 autoworkers are calling for a strike as their contracts expire and mass layoffs similarly loom. Workers are confronting not just management but the crisis-ridden capitalist system that is defended to the hilt by the trade unions.

Thursday's strike took place despite the union bureaucracy's efforts to prevent it. Despite the overwhelming support for a strike, the union refused to call an action for more than a month. Union head Yasuhiro Teraoka stated at the time that he was more concerned with the impact of a strike on the company's business partners than in calling an immediate walk out.

Teraoka claimed the strike vote would enhance the union's bargaining power. Yet throughout August, Seven & i Holdings removed members from Sogo & Seibu's board who appeared hesitant about the sale, though for reasons related to the company's future branding and impact on sales. The parent company made clear that it had no intention of addressing workers' concerns.

The union responded by refusing to call a strike until the last possible moment and limiting the walkout to only a quarter of its membership, knowing full well that the Sogo & Seibu's sale would take place.

Teraoka stated at an August 28 press conference that in regard to the union's request for information regarding potential job cuts, "The company finally began disclosing information this month. But what we got are far from satisfactory answers." He admitted after the sale that he was not surprised that it had taken place.

In other words, the union presented the sale as a *fait accompli* to its members, knowing full well that it would take place and that mass layoffs were planned. The bureaucracy's claim that it was conducting the strike to halt the vote taking place that day is simply a lie. In reality, by limiting the strike to one day, the union was allowing workers to blow off steam while giving the impression that it was defending its members. The union's aim throughout was to limit the strike's impact on the company as much as it could.

Teraoka further claimed that "employment... will be high on the agenda in future negotiations with management." Workers should place no faith in these words. To the extent that negotiations take place, they will be over how best to impose the layoffs.

Workers should place no confidence in the leaderships of other unions coming to their aid, despite the phony shows of support during last Thursday's strike. Union bureaucrats sent around 30 people from 15 other unions to take part in the strike, rather than call out their memberships in solidarity strikes.

Yet UA Zensen, which is affiliated to the Japanese Trade Union Confederation, commonly referred to as Rengo, claims a membership of 1.83 million. Rengo has a membership of approximately seven million. Seibu and Sogo workers should turn directly to these and other workers for support, demand the reversal of the sale of their company and that no layoffs take

place.

To do so workers need to form their own rank-and-file committees, independent of the treacherous trade unions, recognising they are in a political fight against the capitalist system and all of its defenders. Seibu and Sogo workers should therefore turn to their class brothers and sisters in Japan and internationally to take their struggle forward.



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