

HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT AND EMPLOYMENT RELATIONS

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ROLE OF TRADE UNIONS IN EMPLOYMENT RELATIONS IN JAPAN

Japan is a well advanced industrialized country. Although there had been severe recessions in Japan, it is still the second largest economic power in the whole world. The industrial relations in this nation are classified as co-operative. The industrial relations are comprised of three stages, namely, enterprise unionism, lifetime employment and seniority-based wages. The factors which distinguish the Japanese workplaces from the rest are their arrangements for bonuses and the internal promotions. Furthermore, they provide a very high security i.e. if an employee chooses to commit to the work place; they are surely to get a lifetime employment (Brown, 2012).

The trade union in Japan is crucial to the enterprises and not the crafts, unlike other trade unions in most of the countries. The formation of these unions is limited in the organization itself and these unions are known as company or enterprise unions. The upper echelons of these trade unions collaborate with the industry federations which are components of the political bodies spread through the nation like Japanese Trade Union Confederation (Rengo). Therefore, one can describe the Japanese unionism to be comprised of three stages. The members at the bottom level are involved with the matters of the floor such as determining the wages, promotion, safety at workplace, redundancy, transfers as well as retirements. The common attributes shared by every company union are:

- The membership is limited only to the workers who are regular.
- The same union applies for both white and blue collar employees.
- The officers of the union are the regular employees of the organization.

These unions generally focus on issues like the increment of wages. The agenda is mainly determined and decisions are made by the federations through the company unions as proper channels. It can be stated that the enterprise unions do not make decisions, those are rather made by the federations. This is done to prevent the clash of the different trade unions from different companies of the similar industries. Hence, the federations can be considered as self-regulating bodies which maintain similarity and peace between the similar fields. For example; only after unofficially negotiating with the organizations of the same industry, the federation determines about the basic increment in wages for the workers (Gumbrell-McCormick, 2012).

ROLE OF TRADE UNIONS IN EMPLOYMENT RELATIONS IN UNITED STATES

The employment relations of the US are affected by the competitive market economy of the nation i.e. The US Capitalist. The relationship between the firms and the unions is known as adversarial and anti-unionism is deeply essential to the culture of American business. The goals and aims of the unions are basically economic, more of the “bread and butter” kind of unionism. The organization of the employers is dormant to the cause

of maintaining employment relations (Schelkle, 2011). Recently, several changes have been seen in the labour movements of America and hence, various outcomes have been predicted.

The organization of the American unions is relatively liberal as compared to other developed countries. The national unions comprise the American Federation of Labour – Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL – CIO) where about 90 per cent of the union members in the whole nation are united. The roles of the AFL – CIO have been stated below:

- Plays the voice for major public and political relations on behalf of the American Labour Movement.
- The disputes among the members related to jurisdictions are solved by it.
- Policies and practices are enforced on sex and racial discriminations.
- The American labors are only connected to the international labour movement through the AFL – CIO (Buhle et al., 2011).

The nation's labour movements are mainly influenced by the national unions. Collective bargaining, which is a fundamental right, and the strike funds are controlled by them. The routine works such as carrying out strikes successfully, managing the social activities among the members and bargaining and negotiating the terms of new agreements are taken care of by the local unions (Devinatz, 2010).

UNION REVITALIZATION IN JAPAN

Several examples of revitalization have been seen in the union history of Japan. According to Rengo, a company with the motive of promotion of the development of competent staff and stability of employment, it should not give up on the policy of lifelong employment in lieu of a flexible labour market. Fairness in the criteria of evolution should be established along with the consent of workers so that the performance and capabilities of the workers can be measured. Furthermore, it has been proposed by the federation that the wage schemes should be fair for the labour along with ensuring that the cost of living is stabilized. In order to keep up with the revitalization of industries, certain wage policies have been proposed. Trade unions are relentlessly utilizing their potential of organized labour and also exerting their ethical as well as intellectual capabilities.

Most of the private sectors in Japan have launched the Union Identity which revitalizes the activities and organization of the union. This campaign changed the outlook of unions mostly among the young workers and new styles were being introduced in proposals, events, community activities and the communication too (Phelan, 2011).

UNION REVITALIZATION IN USA

The union revitalization strategies in the USA are mostly empirical. After the introduction of the new legislation, memberships have mushroomed in the USA due to the increased degree of organization in the unions. This increase in the organization activities has been possible due to the participation of common people and the distinct innovations and resources which have come up lately (Baldwin, 2003). The local as well as the international alliances have seen to it that the activities and the influence of the political groups take a heads up along with the turn-out of voters and the social movements.

It has already been mentioned that the mentality of the American employers is anti-unionism and hence, according to them, union revitalization is achieved by limiting the bargaining reform heavily.

STRUCTURE OF TRADE UNIONS IN JAPAN

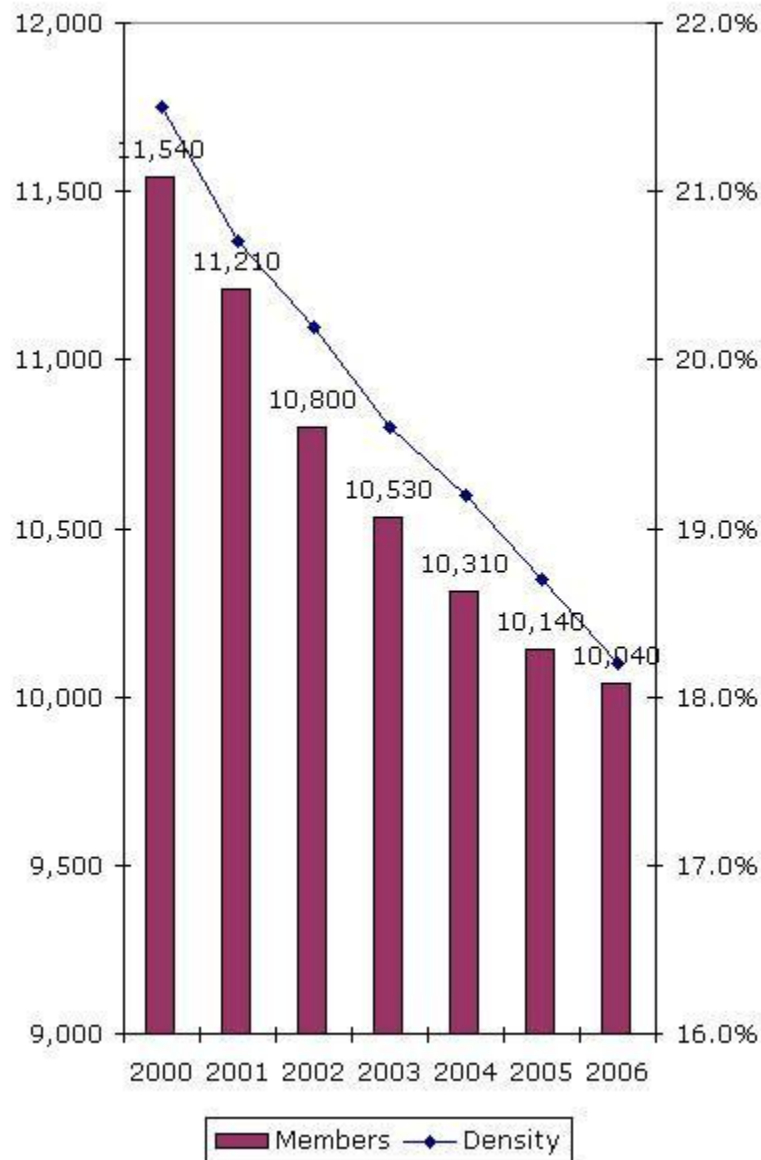
Although most of the organizations have only one union, sometimes there might be some industrial type unions which are weaker and are of the second type but is not prevailing. Local plants might mushroom but they are always connected to the enterprise unions. This structure of unions in Japan is enterprise based which signifies that unions were founded to manage the large number of employees in the government agencies and larger organizations (Ad sc litei and Guga, 2015).

The key aims of these unions are fulfillment of economic motives such as increment of wages, improvement of the working conditions and job security. These goals are attained by collective bargaining which has been going on since the advent of trade unions. The economic activities of the organization and the enterprise based structures of unions go hand in hand and hence, are termed as business unionism. These business unions oppose the interests which are antagonistic in nature and thus, are revolutionary and social-democratic in nature. This structure helps Japanese companies to work independently of the state and no other political parties could try to impart influence on them. Since, their strategies are widely based on the markets; they have in their way encouraged cooperative arrangements with the employers (Undy, 2015).

Only the regular full time employees are eligible for membership in the unions which denotes that women are barred from joining those unions since they are part time workers. Therefore, the enterprise union consists of only male workers and they work to maintain it that way.

Company unions are parts of industrial federation which in turn is affiliated to a general peak union organization, which is known as Rengo in Japan and fifty different company unions form the Rengo.

The following chart provides a statistic of the fall in membership of the unions and the density of the same.



Source: Goerke and Pannenberg (2012)

Due to the fall in membership, the unions are now expanding themselves to include women and other part time workers along with the workers who work in subsidiary and subcontracting companies. This strategy was necessary to follow to keep the unions in working conditions with all the powers intact.

STRUCTURE OF TRADE UNIONS IN USA

Types of union structures in America are stated below:

Craft unions

This group consists of workers who share the same set of skills and occupation (Craft, 2014). For example: carpenters, electricians, plumbers etc.

Industrial unions

This type of unions is comprised of workers who have different skill sets but are located in the same industry or site of operation (Howell, 2015).

Amalgamated craft unions

The union which is a combination of several crafts is termed as amalgamated craft union. For example: International Brotherhood of Iron Ship builders, boilermakers, forgers, blacksmiths and helpers – ACTWU – ILGWU (A history of the electrical trades union in Western Australia and its place in the labour movement from 1905 to 1979, 2013).

Multi-industrial unions

When several associated industries join hands, they form multi-industrial unions. For example: OCAW – UAW – URW – IBT – USA

In America there is rare existence of solely craft and pure industrial unions. The unions in USA do not follow any pattern, rather they move into any area which suits them the most as already said, not much attention is being paid to the formation of unions in America (Addison and Schnabel, 2013).

Almost all of the unions are based on the local units in USA. They are generally situated in a small area where all the members can be present during a meeting. The local union is a Democratic Organization where the members are the holders of power. A set of laws is applicable which define the terms, numbers, duties, salary and election of the local officers (Babcock and Scott, 2011).

There is a broad range of disagreements between the employers regarding the need of unions but no one ever questions the need for management in organizations. The collective bargaining between the employers and union take place in a contractual relationship which is constricting. According to Crouch (2015), the employer cannot be held responsible for providing any economic benefit to the worker except paying the fixed wage and other fringe benefits which are associated with the job till the employee stays committed to the job and the performance is satisfactory. In simple terms, it can be stated that the employer does not face any obligation from the customs or country to retain the employees who are not beneficial for the company and hence, are unwanted.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Nature and role

Remarkable difference can be seen in the nature and role of the unions in Japan and USA. In the United States, the union is of less importance since the approach towards economic management and maintaining industrial relations is liberal. In Japan the unions are involved in political affairs but the process is totally based on the requirements of the top notch officials who use these unions to gain power instead of focusing on the collective betterment. In America the unions have little or no socio-political relevance since they focus on the basic objectives in a workplace such as determination of wages (Roper, 2010). They mainly operate in the structure of business unionism. Japan follows political unionism since they along with focusing on the basic objectives also shift to the social and economic issues.

Centralization

In Japan the union is much more centralized as compared to that of America. The bargaining in Japan occurs via the federations which are widely spread throughout the industry while in America; collective bargaining is extremely limited and is mainly controlled by the local unions (Hein and Pelletier, 2015).

Unionization

The trend of unionization in both of the countries is somewhat similar. The membership of unions has seen a decline in these countries. The reasons for the decline of trade union membership in these countries have been due to economic, social and political changes (Oh, 2012).

Union activities

The main concern of unions in Japan and America are the wage negotiations and other basic issues related to workplace and thus, they are of business nature. The major way to achieve the goals of the union in the US is by holding labour strikes frequently (Brenner, Day and Ness, 2014). No strikes are being carried out in Japan. The main means to resolve controversial problems is by negotiating between the federation and management after consulting every issue with the organizations (Mwamadzingo and Chinguwo, 2015). Hence, in America the labour-management relation is adversarial whereas in Japan it is highly co-operative.

Future of trade unions

While there is still hope for the trade union in Japan to turn around again, there is no hope for the American unions to have a future. The private sector is experiencing a downward trend and there is no abatement of the issues. The Congress did not enact law reforms for labors and hence, organizing is still difficult. The public sectors are

facing fiscal austerity and in that situation the collective bargaining is receiving continuous blows which is threat to their proper functioning (He, 2013).

Unlike the employer hostility in the United States, Japan does not face such type of situations which is crucial for employment relationships. Trade union in Japan is not hostilely influenced socially and the market based strategy approach is gaining grounds although there is a rise in unemployment (Maki, 2012).

CONCLUSION

This essay discusses about the peculiarities of unions in Japan and America and their role in maintaining the employment relations. The roles, revitalization and their comparison against each other have been emphasized on. From the comparative analysis it is clear that with some similarities between the trade unions in these countries, there are remarkable differences too. These differences affect the industrial relations. Nevertheless, these differences can be counted for losing their intensity soon since this is the age of globalization and the industrial relations occur among international borders. Therefore, it can be concluded that while in Japan unions play a significant role in shaping the employment relations, in America those are of secondary importance.

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