

# The Future of Labor Feminism in Germany and Japan

by  
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## Abstract

In this paper, I will explore new possibilities and future issues in labor feminism in Germany and Japan, focusing on women's linkage and organic networking within and outside the institutional union movement by comparing the cases of the DGB Women's Department in Germany and "Women's Union Tokyo" in Japan.

By comparing Germany's and Japan's cases based on available data, we can make the four observations which are developed in this paper. My present analysis clearly demonstrates that in both Germany and Japan, in order to solve women's problems under their own initiative, women forge linkage through networks inside and outside unions by reverting to the very principle of labor feminism.

Key Words: union movement, women's movement, German Trade Union Federation (DGB), Women's Department, "Women's Union Tokyo", labor feminism

## 1. Introduction

Despite their long history of "union movements" and "women's movements," in Germany and Japan, which will be the focus of this paper, the legally institutionalized union movements may be said to be on the verge of death, due to extremely low union membership rates, down almost to 18 percent.

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Germany and “Women’s Union Tokyo” in Japan.

It draws on first-hand materials published by the DGB and women’s groups and organizations in Germany and Japan as well as my face-to-face interviews with women’s groups and organizations in the two countries.

With the German Trade Union Federation (*Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund* (DGB)) as my research topic, for the past 20 years I have scrutinized how the DGB has been tackling women’s/gender issues, by comparing the central body of the DGB and the DGB Women’s Department<sup>1</sup>. For those who are not familiar with the DGB, it is a national center founded in 1949, which also functions as an umbrella organization comprised of eight trade unions organized by industry.

As a “gendered unit” under the male-dominated DGB, the DGB Women’s Department has long been a driving force for women’s movements within trade unions. It has played a pivotal role in taking action to promote “gender mainstreaming” concurrently with the EU’s move toward “gender mainstreaming”<sup>2</sup>. Although fully recognizing “gender mainstreaming” as an important political issue, the DGB is confronted with enormous difficulties in implementing it<sup>3</sup>.

Moving on to the present conditions of working women, the employment rate among German women is on an upward swing, reaching almost 65 percent. Yet many German women have unstable employment as part-time workers, fixed-term workers, or mini-job workers<sup>4</sup>, receiving only a subsistence-level income.

What can unions, especially their women’s departments, do for the benefit of these disadvantaged women? This is the central theme of my research. To date, in Germany problem-solving in the area of employment had been handled mainly by unions. After the German reunification, both male and female unionization rates declined by more than 10 percent.<sup>5</sup> Customarily, German unions are organized by industry, and workers join unions at their free will. For the benefit of workers, solutions should be offered to improve the matters where union membership rates among women stand extremely low at 15 percent and unions have grown unattractive to those women suffering labor problems. How should the Women’s Department deal with such women’s issues?

Japan is similarly marked by a steady drop in union membership rates. Being an industrialized nation, Japan has the third largest poverty gap in the OECD area. Especially after the end of the 1990s when the economic bubbles burst, there was a significant rise in the number of non-regular workers, working as part-timers, dispatched workers, or contract workers, the majority

of whom are either youth or middle-aged men and women, leading to the emergence of the so-called “working poor.” In response, a new form of labor movement that has no parallels among existing enterprise unions has burgeoned, namely individual-based “unions” (voluntarily) organized by middle management workers, women, and later on youth. And in 1995, “Women’s Union Tokyo” was established. In what ways could women come to be involved in this new current of labor movement? This is one of the questions I would like to examine in this paper.

Due to the negative impacts of economic recession and global economies, women in both Germany and Japan are increasingly marginalized in the labor market, making “women’s poverty” a social issue, regardless of growth in corporate earnings amid a sign of the economic recovery afterwards. I would like to contend that now is the time for women to join hands to protect their own rights.

This paper is mainly made up of two sections. The first section is on Germany’s case and the second on Japan’s case. In the first section, I will briefly discuss the transformation of women’s movements and then describe women’s movements within unions and women’s networking. In the second section, I will talk about the emergence of new women’s movements in Japan. In closing, I will offer some of the observations I have made in this study.

## **2. Germany’s Case**

### **2.1 Transformation of women’s movements in Germany**

Autonomous women activists who have been working since the 1960s have regarded existing institutions, such as the political parties and trade unions, as patriarchal and have retained an anti-institutional stance by distinguishing themselves from those groups that support a male-dominated society (Rucht 2003, 246–47).

Thanks to the United Nations Decade for Women (1976–1985), in the 1980s, women’s/ feminist movement began to advance together with the Establishment. In this process, the relationship between “autonomous” women and women unionists underwent a change as evidenced by my interview with a female historian specializing in women’s labor movements<sup>6</sup>. She says in the 1970s women unionists distanced themselves from “autonomous” women because they would rather avoid antagonizing men, whereas in the 1980s when the issues of quota systems and sexual harassment caught attention, it was difficult for women unionists to

cooperate with male unionists in their union activities, simply because there were perpetrators of sexual harassment among union members. By the end of the 1980s, through thus the newly emerging “women’s issues,” the bases upon which women unionists collaborate with women’s movements had been built, with women unionists representing part of women’s movements.

Besides currently women’s movements have lost momentum. At the same time as women’s policies as a system were being framed by the government in a top-down manner, women’s “grass-roots” movements have been dormant for the past 10 years.

## **2-2 Women’s movements within unions — The DGB Women’s Department**

Let us now turn to women’s movements within unions. Situated within German trade unions where blue-collar workers and male workers traditionally formed a fundamental basis known as “workers’ patriarchy,” the Women’s Department virtually has played a central role in women’s movements within unions.

In a series of “discussions on reform,” through the contribution of the Women’s Department, after the mid-1990s, gender democracy and gender mainstreaming gained a “core” position within the DGB through the amendment of the Bylaw (*Satzung*) (DGB 2002) and the overhaul of the fundamental program (*Grundsatzprogramm*) (DGB 1997).

What I would like to emphasize here is that although the framework for changes that accompany the introduction of gender mainstreaming has been prepared, self-gendering within the DGB itself has limitations as this requires creation of a gender department apart from the Women’s Department, and incorporation of a gender perspective into policies and programs in every field. One executive member of the Women’s Department pointed to the status quo where each of the departments constituting the main body continue to be responsible for its own assigned tasks and there is no inter-departmental organ, which she described as “parallel society” (*parallele Gesellschaft*)<sup>7</sup>.

## **2-3 Women’s networking**

A key to the solution of these problems can be found in women’s networking<sup>8</sup>. As one illustrative example, a women’s lobbying organization named the German Women’s Council (*Deutscher Frauenrat*; henceforth DF) has consistently tackled women’s issues since its former body was established in 1951 in the history of German women’s movements<sup>9</sup>. The DF is a

national council of 56 nationwide women's associations and organizations, having a membership of 1.1 million. Within the DF, the DGB is the most powerful force.

In Germany, the DF and the DGB Women's Department form organic ties to support women's labor movements. As mentioned earlier, from the end of the 1980s onwards, with the increasing importance of "women's issues," women unionists started to collaborate with women's movements outside of unions. In fact, the Women's Department is always seeking partners in a wide range of themes other than works agreements that are to be reached between employers and trade unions. As my interview with some of the executive members of the Women's Department shows, particularly because the DF is a group of women professionals, it is relatively easy for the Women's Department to cooperate with other groups once the common ground is found<sup>10</sup>, and the DF can hand in their demands to the political leaders in the government more promptly than the Women's Department<sup>11</sup>. In other words, women's voices can be sent directly to the government, without having to go through the approval process within the male-dominated DGB.

One of the remarkable achievements of this coalition is a one-year campaign (*Frauen Initiative*) titled "I am more valuable" (*Ich bin mehr wert*) that started on this year's International Women's Day (on March 8, 2008) in which gender pay gaps were highlighted for the first time in Germany<sup>12</sup>, which has the widest gender pay gap among EU nations, through the concerted efforts of six women's groups—the DGB Women's Department, the DF, Business Professional Women Deutschland, the League of Women Journalists (*der Journalistinnenbund*)<sup>13</sup>, the Federation of Medical Professions (*der Verbandes der medizinischen Fachberufe*)<sup>14</sup>, and the League of German Academic Women (*der Deutschen Akademikerinnenbund*)<sup>15</sup>. Surprisingly enough, the DGB provided all the necessary budgets for this campaign<sup>16</sup>.

### 3. Japan's Case: Emergence of new women's movements

#### — "Women's Union Tokyo"

We now turn our attention to Japan's case. Amid the stagnation of existing trade unions, a new form of labor movements was launched by the initiative of individual-based "unions." Unlike industrial unions in Germany, trade unions in Japan are mostly enterprise-based unions organized at each business establishment, but aside from them it is also possible to create a

new trade union<sup>17</sup> if composed of more than one worker, as stipulated in the Labor Contract Law. Upon entering the 2000s, mainly through the endeavor of youth, there was a dramatic mushrooming of individual-based unions which targets contract and part-time workers and young atypical workers among others<sup>18</sup>.

Since the Equal Employment Opportunity Law came into force in 1985, women's job categories have been expanding; yet, their working conditions have not improved as much as expected. From the end of the 1980s onwards, recognizing the limitation of existing trade unions which were unable to put women's demands on the agenda, women who shared the same concern started women's labor movements, as members of NGOs and/or citizen's groups by filing a suit based upon gender pay gaps and sexual harassment.

"Women's Union Tokyo," having a membership of approximately 230 as of 2008, helps women deal with their labor problems. Generally, women are dissatisfied with the treatment towards women in male-dominated trade unions. The chairwoman of the Union comments<sup>19</sup>: "Women are treated as ornamental beings or something like ad pillars. Not a few women are exposed to sexual harassment within trade unions. In contrast to citizen's groups, trade unions feature male-centered culture and deep-rooted sexism."

The chairwoman says women were also to blame; women tended to hide behind men during collective bargaining and have a sense of dependence on something more reliable, abiding by the Japanese proverb "Select a bigger tree for your shelter." According to the chairwoman, the Union originated with the aim to "enable women to better appreciate their *raison-d'être*" and "to empower the concerned women to be able to work out solutions by themselves." She stresses that ideal trade unions ensure that concerned parties take the initiative in presenting their demands instead of a top-down approach. In the chairwoman's words, "The very beginning of trade unions can be traced back to the well-known tragic story of female factory workers (*Joko Aishi*)... In this sense, what Women's Union Tokyo is now doing reflects the original goal."

"Women's Union Tokyo" considers networking with the national center Japanese Trade Union Confederation (Rengo) and existing enterprise unions is out of question, because, to quote the chairwoman: "Networking with Rengo and its Center for Irregular Workers (*Hiseiki Center*) founded in 2007 is difficult, though we have no hostile relations with them. 'Women's Union Tokyo' adopts different strategies from those of Rengo which has been unsuccessful in organizing irregular workers and women. Rather, we form flexible alliances with youth-oriented

unions according to each theme. As a matter of fact, on this year's May Day, we took action together with them under the banners of 'May Day for Freedom and Survival' and 'May Day to Combat Poverty'."

As for the future course of "Women's Union Tokyo", the chairwoman recounted: "We are not necessarily ghettoizing women, but we would like to further empower women however harshly criticized as male-haters. At this stage, we need to be women-only. My wish is to gather more women who are ready to act, where we have only several hundreds now. If this comes true, then we would welcome men to join us. "

#### **4. Future of Women's Labor Movements**

By comparing Germany's and Japan's cases based on available data, albeit limited, we can make the following four observations.

First, while gender mainstreaming constitutes the core of the DGB, so-called self-gendering did not gain as much currency as expected. For this reason, the DGB Women's Department is compelled to function as a "gendered" department in charge of women's issues" and the range of activities allowed within the DGB is quite limited. As such, the Women's Department is solely responsible for dealing with "women's issues," including support for work-life balance, gender pay gaps, and more importantly, women who work irregularly; therefore no satisfactory solutions have been offered.

Second, despite the absence of momentum typical of past women's movements, existing groups/organizations of women activists successfully transformed themselves into the agent of the movements and pushing forward women's movements that have the potential to increase their social visibility. In short, women unionists mostly from the DGB are building networks through the channels of the DF formed by an amalgamation of small-scale women's groups, making women's linkage surface as a big surge.

Third, in Germany at the same time as the Women's Department strives to foster changes from inside the DGB, women inside and outside unions link organically to carry on women's movements in the area of employment. Now that more people withdraw from unions and women's movements come at a standstill, it is essential that women's groups of relatively large scale proceed to further movements in a way that renders women's issues visible to the public.

The most important future task for the Women's Department involves whether women's movements can produce sufficient achievements to bring about the improvement of women's working conditions. For this purpose, along with the reform from within the DGB, the Women's Department is urged to strengthen linkage with forces outside the DGB to facilitate internal changes with a help of external pressure.

Fourth, in Japan, although in this study we could not analyze changes within Rengo, it was found that individual-based unions that were disappointed with existing enterprise unions began to energetically work for the causes of women. "Women's Union Tokyo," which specifically targets "women," is committed to empowering women in order to help them recover "women's self dignity." However, as of now, there is no women's group in Japan that unites small-scale women's groups like the DF in Germany. Besides, "Women's Union Tokyo" has no linkage with the national center. Regrettably, movements arising from organic and dynamic linkage like those in Germany are absent. Nevertheless, it is notable that with the establishment of "Action Center for Working Women" by "Women's Union Tokyo" and others, we have reached the stage to consider how to unite women's groups.

My present analysis clearly demonstrates that in both Germany and Japan, in order to solve women's problems under their own initiative, women forge linkage through networks inside and outside unions by reverting to the very principle of labor feminism. It is to be hoped that women's networks will mark one step forward and be part of a surging change for the regeneration of labor feminism. For my future research, I am determined to continue to pay attention to how women's movement to deconstruct the socially constructed "gender" in the field of labor will evolve, which hinges on whether women, who are increasingly marginalized in the labor market, can elicit support and build networks.

### Notes

- 1 It is currently called *Gleichstellungs- und Frauenpolitik*, roughly meaning a department of gender-equal policies and women's policies. Henceforth, we refer to it simply as the Women's Department.
- 2 [http://ec.europa.eu/employment\\_social/gender\\_equality/gender\\_mainstreaming/general\\_overview\\_en.html](http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/gender_equality/gender_mainstreaming/general_overview_en.html)
- 3 For an analysis of the DGB's policies in the mid-1990', see Yuki and Yamada (2004).
- 4 Mini jobs are defined as "a job which does not exceed a monthly pay of EURO 400." Mini jobs are

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- exempt from social insurance contribution if the employee has no other income; they are also exempt from income tax (Dribbusch 2007).
- 5 As of 2007, the number of DGB members total 644 million, of which 439 million are men and 205 million women (DGB 2007).
  - 6 Based on the interview the author conducted with a female historian in Recklinghausen on March 2, 2007.
  - 7 Based on the interview the author conducted with an executive member of the DGB Women's Department in Berlin on January 19, 2007.
  - 8 Suggested possibilities of women's networking, see Yuki (2008).
  - 9 [http://www.frauenrat.de/module/frauenrat/geschichte.aspx?S\\_ID=45365720090113085504591593698543879954074&lc=en](http://www.frauenrat.de/module/frauenrat/geschichte.aspx?S_ID=45365720090113085504591593698543879954074&lc=en)
  - 10 Based on the interview the author conducted with an executive member of the DGB Women's Department in Berlin on January 19, 2007.
  - 11 Based on the interview the author conducted with an another executive member of the DGB Women's Department in Berlin on February 2, 2007.
  - 12 <http://www.dgb-frauen.de/>
  - 13 <http://www.journalistinnen.de/english/index.html>
  - 14 <http://www.vmf-online.de/>
  - 15 <http://www.dab-ev.org/>
  - 16 Based on the interview the author conducted with an executive member of the DGB Women's Department in Berlin on January 19, 2007.
  - 17 "Women's Union Tokyo" and "Kanrishoku Union" (union of middle management workers) are among the leading pioneers of this new movement.
  - 18 Among examples of individual-based unions are: "Haken Union" (a union of workers listed with temp staff agencies as well as contract and part-time workers), "Freeter Union" (a union of young atypical workers), "Shutoken Seinen Union" (a union of youth in the Tokyo Metropolitan area), and "Hyogaki Union" (a union of those who were employed during the long hiring slump popularly known as the employment ice age).
  - 19 Based on the interview the author conducted with the chairwomen of the "Women's Union Tokyo" in Tokyo on May 26, 2008.

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### Remarks

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