

HUGH WILLIAMSON, *Coping with the Miracle. Japan's Unions Explore New International Relations*. London/Boulder, Colo: Pluto Press, 1994. XX, 333 pages, £ 14,95 Pb. ISBN 0-7453-0937-2.

This book deals with the international activities of the Japanese labor movement both analytically as well as in encyclopaedic empirical detail. There is little doubt that to the general reader the analytical chapters are of greater interest than the evaluation of e.g. some Japanese invitation programmes to union officials from East Asia (which apparently absorb too much international energy of the Japanese union federations as well as too much space in this book). The Japanese union movement – now confederated in the 8 million member *Rengo* suffers from several dilemmas:

- the parochial nature of its dominant enterprise unions – which have turned more and more into management tools with only marginal international perspective except a vague notion of what is good for the export interests of their respective companies and of corporate Japan.
- the (verbally) doctrinaire left-socialist stands of most public sector unions originally federated in the now defunct *Sohyo*. *Sohyo* has been absorbed into *Rengo*, where it has left little trace on this private sector-oriented federation's pragmatic and partly government-financed (ODA monies!) international activities.

In the past, *Sohyo* member unions were prominent in the Communist led WFTU world federation, expressing support for dictatorships ranging from Erich Honecker to Kim Il Sung.

Today, *Rengo* and the closely related actions of the Ministry of Labor and its affiliate institutions focus exclusively on the – often discredited – "official" labor movements, mostly in East Asia, which cooperate with the various authoritarian regimes in the region.

In substance the Japanese educational and PR work praises the model character of Japanese-style paternalist and hierarchical labor relations for national development.

This is done notwithstanding the continuing decline of Japanese unionization rates and of the electoral implosion of the Japanese Socialist Party. (Curiously the first Socialist Prime Minister in 50 years is now pursuing a conservative policy in Japan).

In terms of real support for stronger unions in East Asia (be it in Japanese-owned subsidiaries or in the country in general), Japanese initiatives are either non-existent or fairly ineffective. Rather, in their nationalist frame of mind Japanese enterprise unions appear to have accepted a divi-

sion of labor in which workers in Japanese MNCs operating in Malaysia, Korea, Thailand and elsewhere are used as cheap labor substitutes with little job safety, poor labor conditions and subject to corporate resistance to unionization. It is all the more startling then to see Japanese representatives, on the basis of their extensive cash contributions, attempting to dominate more and more (mostly Asian) international labor organisations and union federations and impose their self-serving compliant and nationalist views. In contrast, the policies pursued by the US (AFL-CIO), German (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung) and Scandinavian labor organizations appear not only more effectual and helpful at the grass roots in East Asia, but are also more in line with the movement's internationalist tradition.

Hugh Williamson has investigated his subject extensively. His presentation is rich in literally exhaustive detail. While a more discerning and concise approach would have enabled the reader to concentrate on the relevant, the study is a useful investigation of a hitherto little researched subject.

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