

Japanese Workers in Protest: An Ethnography of Consciousness and Experience.



Review Author[s]:
William W. Kelly

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rary policy and economic issues, and one about the shortcomings of Marxism, critical theory, and theories of social change, with a sprinkling of feminist theory thrown in as well. While I applaud the authors' ambitious treatment of a complex subject and their efforts to use social theory to interpret current work trends, I would also suggest that they've rendered an argument that should be understood by college students studying stratification, work, and political economy, not to mention many American workers, only partially accessible to the vast majority of them.

Japanese Workers in Protest: An Ethnography of Consciousness and Experience. By Christena L. Turner. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995. Pp. xiii + 268. \$35.00.

William W. Kelly
Yale University

One might glean from many reports of contemporary Japan the image of a passive and pacified work force, if not satisfied then at least somnolent, organized obligingly into company-unit unions given only to the most innocuous, ritualistic displays of defiance and collective action. This is precisely the view that Turner contests in her absorbing case study of two 1980s examples of employee takeovers of bankrupt companies. For the last several decades, Japan has had the highest corporate bankruptcy rate among OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) countries, related to and centered in its vast medium-small enterprise sector. Unikon and Universal, pseudonymous companies manufacturing camera parts and shoes respectively, were among thousands of similarly hard-pressed companies whose management preemptively declared insolvency in the late 1970s and attempted to close operations. In these cases, though, unions refused to disband, took over the plant facilities, and sued for the right and resources to continue under worker ownership. Both were ultimately successful, and their long and difficult processes of mobilization, consciousness-raising, and agitation form the substance of Turner's study.

Turner combines extensive interviewing with her experiences working on the assembly lines at both companies' plants and interacting with a broad range of employees and union officials. What marks the book as ethnographic is her presentation of the argument through a series of diagnostic incidents about the struggles at both companies. Part 1 is comprised of three chapters about events in Unikon workers' struggles between March and July of 1980, including their participation in a massive all-day demonstration through the streets of Tokyo, organized by the national labor federation (chap. 2); a union-organized outing to a popular resort (chap. 3); and the period of disillusionment and fallout between union leaders and members over the leadership's unilateral decision to reorganize factory opera-

tions at a new site and as an “ordinary company” following the settlement with company management and creditors (chap. 4).

Part 2 is companion trio of chapters about events surrounding Universal Shoes from July 1980 through January 1981. She reports on a protracted union meeting that exposed the gap at Universal between leadership initiative and rank and file reticence that frustrated efforts to achieve union democracy (chap. 5); she follows members along as they join another mass labor federation demonstration (chap. 6); and focuses on the work routines that were “at once goal, strategy, and substance” (p. 221) of factory life during their protracted dispute (chap. 7).

The two companies are an instructive complement because they vary in their history of unionization, characteristics of the plant environments, and their progress towards worker control. Unikon at the time was widely viewed in labor circles as a vanguard case, much admired and emulated, while Universal workers were still coming to terms with the movement they were just undertaking as Turner’s research began. Turner extends her analysis beyond this period of fieldwork through later short visits and continued contacts with union leaders and company employees. Both companies still operate, although under quite different forms. Unikon remained under conventional organization, with the union president becoming company president; Universal, by contrast, chose to become a worker-owned cooperative company.

As a fellow anthropologist, I may be uncritically partisan, but Turner’s ethnographic approach is essential to any social science of industrial labor. By situating labor struggles in everyday experience, she is able to make comprehensible these worker demands for dignity, equity, livelihood, and control and their acts of solidarity and even militancy. An extensive scholarship has taught us that such labor demands and actions are neither self-evident nor inevitable products of structural circumstances. They must be articulated and negotiated, felt and enacted, by individuals drawn towards one another in common cause while pulled apart by competing interests, obligations, and doubts. It requires sustained encounters with such workers and their struggles, however, to be able to represent concretely and sensitively this tangled complex of motivations and subtle process of realization, empowerment, and action. Turner’s is a distinctive and distinguished addition to our understanding of Japanese corporate organization as experienced and shaped by workers themselves, when they are moved to grievance, defiance, and a tenuous solidarity.

I am tempted to amend the subtitle slightly. The relationship she actually elucidates so well is between consciousness and structure, a dialectic of growing awareness of worker class identity and emerging sturdy labor organization. Both are accomplishments, not premises. What mediates their dialectical conditioning is individual experiences and collective practice. It is a struggle to come to struggle, and Turner’s subtle analysis is an inspired perspective on Japanese inflections of an uncommon but consequential occurrence in industrial societies everywhere.