

16th JTUC-RENGO Biennial Convention - President's Address

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Japanese Trade Union Confederation
President Rikio Koza

Acknowledgments

Thank you for gathering here for the 16th JTUC-RENGO Biennial Convention. Good morning.

I would like to thank, from the bottom of my heart, the many guests who have taken time out of their busy schedules to join us today, including government representatives, leaders of political parties, and the mayor of Shinjuku, where this event is being held.

I would particularly like to acknowledge the participation of 55 international guests from 40 organizations, including Deputy President of ITUC, Karl-Petter Thorwaldsson, Shoya Yoshida, who was just re-elected as General Secretary of ITUC-AP at the regional convention that finished yesterday, and General Secretary of OECD-TUAC, Pierre Habbard.

They have added a special touch to this convention, which marks JTUC-RENGO's 30th anniversary. I am deeply grateful for their contributions. Thank you very much.

Introduction

On behalf of the hosts, I am honored to make the following address. Personally, I feel that our labor movement has great historical significance. I would like to reinforce the position of RENGO as the national center of trade unions in Japan and make it a common platform for future initiatives and activities. Thus, I will leave reflection on the previous period, and key points for the 16th period such as the new RENGO Vision and Action Policies(draft) for explanations of proposals to General Secretary Aihara and others.

JTUC-RENGO's 30th anniversary - placing this milestone in a global context

In the history of the world, trade unions only arose in the 18th century. The origin of trade unions lies in the solidarity and cooperation of factory workers in the latter half of the 18th century, united in an effort to escape the poor working conditions that arose as a result of the industrial revolution. You may think this was a long time ago, but in the context of human history as a whole, 250 years ago is relatively recent.

During this period in the 18th century, people drastically changed the course of history. We must confront our place in human history, giving particular consideration to the impact and meaning of the two world wars that occurred during this period and what problems they continue to cause in the present.

This year, as you know, it is the 100th anniversary of the ILO. It was founded soon after the World War I, which is the event that had the largest impact on the fate of humanity. The establishment of the ILO is deeply connected to reflection on the World War I.

The spirit of the ILO is to spread the tripartite relationship structure of government, employers, and workers, by getting the governments of individual countries to engage with the fundamentals of multilateralism, and with building relationships between workers and employers at its core.

The preamble to the ILO Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work, which was adopted at the ILO Conference in June of this year, states that “the continuous and concerted action of governments and representatives of employers and workers is essential to the achievement of social justice, democracy, and the promotion of universal and lasting peace.”

I believe that war and terrorism will continue to exist for as long as poverty exists. Furthermore, in real terms, we are best positioned to put a stop to poverty. Only trade unions and labour-management relations can create and distribute wealth, and thereby create a secure society.

I would once more like to emphasize that the creation of trade unions really was an extremely recent occurrence in the history of the world. Our work has only just begun when considered from the perspective of the long history of the human race. Trade unions gives rise to the collective labor-management relations firstly, which realize the demands of workers, secure workers’ rights, and protect workers’ lifestyles. Only when workers are enthusiastic about their work, companies can create high-quality products and exceptional service. In this manner they can achieve added value, which influences distribution, and create wealth.

I would like to say it aloud. Trade unions are the one to save the world, and we JTUC-RENGO must lead the way.

Diversity - the importance of multilateralism

After the World War I, which had claimed the lives of more than 20 million people, humanity, which should have pledged never to go to war again, went on to fight the World War II, which took a terrible toll with 50 million casualties.

We must continue to pose the question of how humanity can overcome these kinds of problems.

It is beyond doubt that economic upheaval was one of the underlying causes of the world wars; however, it would be fair to say that the most fundamental factor behind such an outrageous number of casualties was elimination of diversity.

As I said, the ILO’s value is built on the foundation of tripartite relationships and multilateralism. We must revitalize multilateralism, which is one of the aim of various international institutions, including the UN. As members of the International Trade Union Confederation, we are the people who understand that best and are in the best position to provide support. The labour movement is a pioneer of social movement. It is clear that the establishment of the League of Nations, the UN, and the ILO, was based on international solidarity between trade unions. Trade unions have been able to go beyond national borders to respect diversity, show solidarity, and influence international movement.

We must unify around ITUC in order to prevent unfettered domination by short-sighted political leaders. If political leaders are going to be blinded by the hatred that surrounds them right now and succumb to it, the risk of an extremely volatile situation involving the use of nuclear weapons is likely to materialize.

Recently, the risk of the collapse of human civilization has been gradually increasing as there have been more and more setbacks to disarmament. The future is at risk of going off the rails so we must change course in order to realize the future that we hope for. It is the social responsibility of trade unions and the personal obligation of each of us to constantly strive to achieve this for the next generation.

Collecting 10 million signatures in support of the abolition of nuclear weapons, which we all are currently working towards, is a part of this. JTUC-RENGO, the Japan National Conference Against Atomic and Hydrogen Bombs, and KAKKIN must work together to make our wishes known to the Japanese government and the UN at the Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, which is held every five years, as representatives of the only country in the world to have been the victim of atomic bombs. Peace is the foundation upon which our lifestyle and work is based. Trade unions must strongly urge to the world.

Surroundings and local areas

The new RENGO Vision states that its vision for society is “a society that accepts diversity irrespective of attributes such as age, gender, nationality, or disability, in which individuals mutually recognize and support each other, and in which no one is left behind.” Furthermore, the Action Policies (draft) for the next period lists realization of workplaces and a society in which true diversity is deeply rooted as one of its three priority areas.

If you look at the current state of affairs, the foreign workforce in Japan reached approximately 1.46 million workers in 2018 and the record-high turnover rate continues. A new status of residence was added in April, and I’m sure that more will continue to be added going forward. If we are going to welcome these workers to Japan, we must ensure that they are accepted in their local communities.

Also, we must respect equal human rights, and realize workplaces in which people feel secure regardless of sexual orientation and gender identity, including coexisting with people with disabilities, which we were already working towards.

This is what I think. Life is about chance. Everyone has their share of good and back luck. Each person shines in their own unique way. Things like whether a person makes money and whether they have extensive knowledge only account for a small part of their value in the world. Each person born into the world has their own unique intrinsic value.

People cannot achieve happiness in a society that doesn’t respect diversity, one that forces people to live their lives according to the circumstances into which they are born with no prospect to improve their lives through effort, and in which an unfair set of values holds sway. That kind of society causes harm, the accumulation of which will result in the downfall of nations. If this form of society becomes too common, it can only speed up the end of the world.

Trade unions can play a role to increase cooperation as an important community stakeholder that aims to create an inclusive society in which people acknowledge and support each other.

The doctrine of personal responsibility that has taken root in Japan is extremely dangerous. I think we should create a society based on the doctrine of ‘all for all,’ where everyone supports each other.

Trade unions and Japan’s post war values

In Japan, labor movements that spoke up at the end of the Meiji period were subject to repeated suppression thereafter and even suspension during the war. Immediately after the war, they were revived and took root by order of GHQ and continue to this day.

However, Japan has benefited from great economic prosperity, which has resulted in an extremely weak safety net from the perspective of workers and ordinary citizen. The rights that should have been guaranteed to people remained buried. I have a deep sense of foreboding that this will further impede diversity and vigor in Japan, which could lead to the downfall of the nation.

I wonder if pacifism, basic human rights, and the sovereignty of the people, which are values that were supposed to have been put in place after the war and which are the fundamental to the Japanese constitution, have really taken root in the Japanese psyche and whether they are wavering. As we enter the new Reiwa era, I feel that we need to question our values once again. Are the three rights of workers listed in Article 28 of the Constitution, namely the rights to organize, collective bargaining, and act collectively, widely exercised in name and substance in order to support workers? We must do better at highlighting the issues around us.

Firstly, we must engage with the Work Style Reform Bill that has been sequentially implemented from April. We must ensure that it would take root in society in true sense. We at JTUC-RENGO must firmly advocate that it is essential to establish and expand collective labour-management relations for all workers. In order to make the “Work-style Reforms” meaningful to workers and not to end up only in form, we must have through discussion between labour and management to operate and revise its system appropriately for each companies.

Without trade unions, it would be difficult to resolve instability and disparity of part-time, fixed-term, or temporary workers, in contrast with full-time regular workers, and to ensure equal pay for equal work.

Furthermore, we must spread “raise wage” movement and its effect throughout society as wages are a core labor condition.

In addition, as the global economy progresses, rapid digitalization, impoverishment of the middle class, rise of the gig economy, and spread of inconsistent employment have presented us with a number of challenges.

The pressing issue is that an increasing number of workers are in a de-facto dependent employment relationship, but are not eligible for the rights granted to employees according to legal definitions and application. This is a social absurdity to which trade unions cannot turn a blind eye. We must never allow a business model that allows an employer to circumvent labor laws by abusing or disguising the form of contracts, such as in the Bellco case, which is currently being litigated.

Work, itself, has been diversifying, so we can no longer protect all workers and ensure the security of the whole of society by only paying attention to people in regular employment. We must establish and expand collective labor-management relations, fight hard in local communities, spread to all corners of society, and create a society where even those that work without being employed can join trade unions.

Workers are central to our goal of “protecting, connecting, and creating.”

JTUC-RENGO’s path: Unwavering progress

Through the so-called “lost two decades,” it is said that Japan became a lukewarm society. The belief that the future will neither improve nor worsen became commonplace, hopes for the future faded, and feelings such as “there is uncertainty but satisfied,” “individual good trumps public good,” “present trumps future,” and “reality trumps expectations” became commonplace in society.

We got a glimpse of this from the internet survey conducted by JTUC-RENGO in April. Although more than 70% of respondents said “I am uncertain about the future,” the majority of respondents said they are “satisfied” with their current lifestyle.

Apart from the few exceptions, such as the tripartite agreement to enact reforms linking social security and tax pushed through by the Noda government, Japan has put off dealing with major issues for many years. When you consider this in combination with the “lukewarm society,” it is actually quite a serious problem. It is essential to implement reforms that allow the government to embrace a brighter outlook for the future without lapsing into makeshift short-term policies and without averting their gaze from the allocation of burden.

We cannot avoid politics as a means to plan out future. While politics come in many forms, democracy is the most beneficial to us.

However, are we really utilizing this system as it was designed? Is Japanese society reaping the benefits of true democracy? Has the principle of sovereignty of the people as set out in the Constitution really taken root?

Looking back on contemporary history, by being defeated in the war, Japan has escaped the totalitarian social structure that was in place before and during the war. Furthermore, we have reduced the influence of communist ideologies, which have a propensity for systems of one-party control. From this perspective, it seems that the two-party system has succeeded due to the promotion of political reforms in the 1990s and the formation of the 2009 DPJ government.

However, this progress was set back due to the collapse of the DPJ government in 2012, and since then, there has been repeated reformation and fracturing of the DPJ. The hopes of the many voters that hoped for a roll back of single-party politics have been dashed.

Clearly there is an extremely great responsibility placed on the joint factions created at the extraordinary session of the Diet convened under these circumstances. They are expected to repeatedly produce the kind of inspirational results that resonate with the hopes of voters. Also, this is only the beginning of the factions so I hope that the parties can work together courteously and with

respect for each other's positions. JTUC-RENGO also hopes for close policy cooperation with the Diet.

We must again make our claims. Politics is merely a means to an end, and it is up to the voters to really utilize this system. Voters must get back the weight of sovereignty.

We trade unions should systematically exercise its influence as groups of voters in order to realize policies based on work and life. For a long time after the war our labor movements has been struggled to dull the influence of ideologically skewed political forces; however, we must now separate ourselves from the pointless confusion of the world of politics.

As we do that, our original outlook, or in other words, how we frame events, is extremely important. Many of political news are based on the views of the players in the political world, in other words, the outlook is of Nagata-cho "the centre of politics", where the Diets located. We must confront the negative impact this would have. We must make a case for the original meaning and significance of sovereignty both inside and outside our organizations. The original outlook of voters being in the spotlight must become widely recognised by society.

In order to achieve this, we at JTUC-RENGO must work with caring politicians to realise policies for workers and ordinary citizens to the very end. Caring politicians are politicians that is considerate of and respect workers' values and expectations and strive to confront and solve issues in local communities. They thoroughly investigate and do not deviate from policies for workers and ordinary citizens.

We must return to this foundation and embody our goals again while fully demonstrating the power of the network of affiliated organisations and local RENGOs and the policy capabilities of RENGO Headquarters and using the RENGO forum as a springboard. Only by doing this on an ongoing basis can we ensure that the currently unbalanced two-party system operates effectively.

The opening video showed the journey of JTUC-RENGO leading up to our 30th anniversary, including the night before JTUC-RENGO was established. We overcame many difficulties from the time of the separated National Centers to the unification of the Policy Promotion Labor Union Congress, the All Japan Council of Private Labor, and the Japanese Private-Sector Trade Union Confederation with the Japan Council of Public Service Unions, and RENGO established on November 21, 1989.

Since then, we have taken the middle of the road. Although that road is wide, we have not taken any sharp deviations from the middle and we have not wavered in our progress. This is extremely significant in Japan, which is undergoing great turmoil.

I'm sure that the environment surrounding us will continue to undergo great changes. Given that, we must courageously accept challenges, while keeping in mind our slogan of "We will change the future—Towards a Secure Society."
Thank you for your attention. I look forward to working with you all.