

GRASSROOTS-BASED ORGANIC FOODS DISTRIBUTORS, RETAILERS, AND CONSUMER COOPERATIVES IN JAPAN: BROADENING THE ORGANIC FARMING MOVEMENT

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Introduction

Integral to the success of the Japanese organic farming movement are the networks of grassroots-established organic foods distributors, retailers, and consumer cooperatives that are often able to work together to achieve common goals. The phenomenal growth of the organic farming movement in Japan since the early-1970s has enabled these grassroots-based organizations to complement each other's spheres of activities and areas of interest in ways that have given added strength to the movement as a whole. The very diversity of the organizations integral to the Japanese organic farming movement described below has attracted and loosely unified a wide cross-section of Japanese society that would otherwise be separated from each other. Many of the organizations involved in the buying and selling of organically-grown food in Japan have been influenced ideologically by the Japanese Communist Party and New Left groups. It is their combined presence in the Japanese organic farming movement as a whole that gives it its radical character and social transformative potential. It is their combined influence that has allowed the movement to attract such a diversity of the nation's populace. Based on participant-observation research as well as open-ended interviews, my research indicates that the JCP-influenced organizations and the New Left-influenced organizations directly involved in the organic farming movement in Japan have indirectly influenced and strengthened each other.¹

Japan Consumers' Cooperative Union (Seikyō)

The largest consumers' cooperative in Japan (Seikyō), was established in 1951 with strong backing from the Japanese Communist Party, the then Japan Socialist Party, and the trade union movement representing working class interests. New consumers' cooperatives, along with organic retailers and distributors with New Left influences, with their emphasis on grassroots-based and -initiated actions dealing with various cultural, environmental, and women's issues emerged in the early-1970s. Although disagreeing on electoral strategies and having ideological points of divergence, they have found their mutual support of the organic farming movement and related social movements to be the common ground that has permitted them to engage in constructive dialog, and benefit from the exchange of ideas.

¹ This article is based on my doctoral dissertation research which I conducted in Japan between July 1991 and December 1993.

Consumer cooperatives in Japan, following the model of late-19th century England's Rochdale cooperative movement created in the Owenian tradition, are based on principles of open membership, democratic control, equitable distribution of economic surplus, public outreach and education, and cooperation among cooperatives. They are nonprofit organizations that make bulk purchases of consumer goods, and members are both the source of a cooperative's capital and its patrons.

Japan has one of the best developed and politically active consumer cooperative movements in the world. In 1990, the 674 primary Seikyō (JCCU) food cooperatives alone had a national household membership of 14.14 million. Including the family members of each co-op member, more than 40% of the Japanese population belong to a consumer cooperative (Iwadare 1991:429).

The Japan Consumers' Cooperative Union (Seikyō) is the largest mass-membership organization in Japan (Iwadare 1991:430). Seikyō (*Seikatsu Kyōdō Kumiai*) employs about 47,000 unionized workers on a full-time basis, operates 2,400 retail outlets, and had a turnover of ¥2.78 trillion (\$28 billion) in 1990 (Iwadare 1991:430). Since the major portion of Seikyō's retail sales consists of food products, it has a formidable presence in the retail food marketplace.²

Seikyō operates through retail outlets and through a weekly group ordering system, the core of which is the *han* (delivery post). Seikyō has a total of over one million *han* comprising five million members. Orders are processed by computer, and deliveries are made weekly. The *han* system accounts for 44% of the total revenue of Seikyō; 56% is generated by Seikyō Co-op retail outlets (Iwadare 1991:432).³ An important function of the *han* is to ensure that each member has an equal say in a co-op's management, and opinions expressed at regular *han* meetings regarding, for example, what products a co-op should or should not be selling, or whether a co-op should involve itself in a political issue, are passed on to the upper levels of the

² Consumers Co-op Kobe, with more than one million members, easily qualifies as the world's largest cooperative, with sales of ¥92.4 billion (\$924 million) in 1991. The next largest consumer cooperatives in Japan in terms of sales in 1991 were: Consumers Co-op Tokyo (¥56 billion); Fukuoka Consumers Co-op (¥52.1 billion); Osaka Izumi Citizen Co-op (¥49.5 billion); Chiba Consumers Co-op (¥49.4 billion); and Okayama Shimin Seikyō (¥36 billion). Consumer cooperatives' average growth rate in 1991 was 9.7% (Japan Economic Almanac 1993:244-245).

³ I often shopped for grocery items at the Seikyō Co-op in Kunitachi, a western suburb of Tokyo. The retail outlets, from all outward appearances, are large supermarkets. However, the prices for food and non-food household items are often substantially lower than those at conventional supermarkets; the employees are unionized and enjoy benefits not available to conventional supermarket employees; and organically-grown produce is more readily available, especially at Japanese Communist Party-affiliated stores.

I found that Seikyō not only buys directly from farmers, with farmers receiving 10% to 20% higher prices for organically-grown produce, it also produces its own food items such as soybean paste, soy sauce, rice vinegar, noodles, and bread, along with non-food household and everyday-use items such as biodegradable detergents and soaps, paper products, and natural cosmetics.

Talking with Kunitachi Seikyō Co-op members, I was told that members interested in obtaining a weekly supply of organically-grown produce could either join an existing *han* or form their own *han* of at least three households, and then choose the amount and variety of food items they want delivered to a designated location (usually a member's house) from a computerized list.

One of the members, a working mother, emphasized the convenience of having her weekly grocery shopping delivered to her door. She said that everything she needs, from milk and eggs, organic vegetables and fruits, and meat and fish, to canned and dry goods, laundry detergent and toilet paper, is delivered as ordered, so by eliminating the time and energy it takes to go shopping, she has more time and energy to spend on her family after coming home from work.

organization (Iwadare 1991).

There has been growing consumer concern in Japan since the 1960s with agricultural pesticides and food safety, with environmental and health consequences of phosphates in detergents, with overconsumption and environmental degradation, and with the demise of farming and fishing villages. This growing consumer concern has led Seikyō to increasingly offer its members organically-grown produce direct from the farm, produce its own biodegradable soap products and food products free of artificial ingredients, increase the scope of its direct-marketing relations with farmers and fishers, and limit its product range to a minimum number of brands for any given product category, producing its own generic brand whenever possible.

Seikyō's ability to offer safe, high-quality products at prices lower than those at conventional supermarkets, and its emphasis on direct-marketing from producer to consumer enabled it to enjoy average annual growth rates in gross sales of close to 10% since the late-1960s (Japan Economic Almanac 1993:244). With its low prices and trade union affiliations through the JCP and former JSP, many low-income and working class families do their shopping at Seikyō.

Seikyō Co-ops occupy an important position in Japanese grassroots movements, and its members have prominent roles in the peace movement, the environmental movement, the women's movement, and the organic farming movement. Many social activists I talked to told me that they became members of Seikyō primarily because of its involvement in social movements that they strongly supported. Seikyō sent large delegations to participate in both the Second and Third United Nations Disarmament Congresses in New York in 1982 and 1988, and each year co-sponsors the huge international anti-nuclear weapons conferences in Hiroshima and Nagasaki (Iwadare 1991:433-434).

The Seikyō leadership is composed of two ideological factions; one affiliated with the Japanese Communist Party (JCP), and the other affiliated with the former Japanese Socialist Party (JSP), recently renamed the Social Democratic Party (Ohno1993). With this apparent ideological divergence, independent Seikyō Co-ops differ in manner of operations, and commitment to the growth of the organic farming movement and identification with farmers struggling to survive, with JCP-affiliated cooperatives strongly supporting organic farmers' groups throughout the nation.⁴

One woman member of the Kunitachi Seikyō Co-op in her early-30s who is a supporter of the Japanese Communist Party, told me that the party affiliation of individual co-ops is no longer so clear-cut. She stated:

⁴ Organic farmers I talked with in Niigata and Nagasaki Prefectures informed me that the JCP-affiliated Seikyō Co-ops offer a better price for organically-grown produce and are more willing to accept produce with cosmetic imperfections than those affiliated with the politically conservative Social Democratic Party (former Japanese Socialist Party).

A housewife member of Kunitachi Seikyō Co-op told me that because it was JCP-affiliated, the Kunitachi cooperative encourages its members to support not only organic farmers, but to support low-input farmers by buying from both (at slightly different prices). She said that the reason behind this policy was that with more consumers willing to buy produce with a "reduced" pesticide content, it was thought that more farmers would be willing to convert from conventional farming practices relying on excessive applications of pesticides. Allowing this gradual transition from conventional to low-input to organic methods was seen to be more likely to induce more farmers to participate in the grassroots-based restructuring of agriculture in Japan toward a decentralized, direct-marketing system based on organic production.

The ideological component of individual cooperatives reflects the ideological perspectives of their active members. Here, in Kunitachi, many JCP members and supporters are actively engaged in attempting to influence the everyday operations of our co-op, so that's why the Kunitachi Seikyō Co-op has a reputation as being radical. The manager, although liberal, does not support the JCP, so you can't say that it's JCP-affiliated.

During the early postwar years, there may have been a clear split in the national leadership along party lines (JCP and JSP), but I don't think it's true now. I think the input at the ground level, that is, the input of each cooperative's members, is most important in determining the ideological direction an individual co-op decides to take. Some co-ops, such as Seikyō Co-op Kobe or Osaka Izumi Citizens' Co-op, are identified as JCP-influenced, but that's because many of their members are Japanese Communist Party supporters. That doesn't mean that they're officially affiliated with the JCP. Other co-ops are strictly non-political and strongly resemble conventional supermarkets. That's because their members want it that way.

Talking with one of the Jōetsu Organic Farmers' Group farm wives who is a Japanese Communist Party member, I was told that the JCP has downplayed its association with the Japan Consumers' Cooperatives Union (Seikyō) because it has feared that if Seikyō is labeled "red," it may lose the enormous public support that it has enjoyed. She told me that she knows of JCP members who decided to make working at a Seikyō Co-op a career precisely because they were involved in the consumer movement and wanted to influence the nation's largest consumers' cooperative from the inside. She also mentioned that many of the JOFA farmers sell much of their produce directly to the Jōetsu Seikyō Co-op not only because they can obtain a better price than if they were to sell it to Nōkyō, but because they want to make locally-grown and reasonably-priced organic produce available to as many people in the area as possible. All of the organic farmers' groups that I visited throughout Japan sell at least some of their produce directly to a local Seikyō cooperative.

With increasing Seikyō procurement and sales of organically-grown fresh produce and processed foods, obtained through direct-marketing structures and face-to-face negotiations with organic farmers and organic farmers' groups, the role that it plays in the organic farming movement in Japan is of prime importance. With more than 14 million member households throughout Japan, Seikyō is able to influence the eating habits of close to half of Japan's populace. Its emphasis on quality, safety, and affordability allows it to enjoy the trust of its members who regularly buy non-brand name products, and who are increasingly buying organically-grown produce.

Through its self-education campaigns, Seikyō Co-ops are able to inform their members (through informational handouts, members' meetings, or the use of bulletin boards) about a variety of social concerns, including, for example, the issue of Japanese remilitarization; the need for a product liability law; opposing global agricultural liberalization and supporting family farmers through the consumption of directly-marketed organic foods; and global environmental degradation and the role citizens can play in protecting the planet. Clearly critical of capitalist practices that contribute to environmental destruction and the decline in the quality of living for the majority; opposed to the culture of consumption and overconsumption that benefits the rich; and attempting to create a society based on cooperation and mutual sharing, the Japan Consumers' Cooperative Union is a major component of the Japanese organic farming movement, influencing the direction in which the movement progresses.

However, many Japanese who had been involved in or influenced by the New Left movement of the 1960s, distrusted the Japan Consumer's Cooperative Union (Seikyō). Accusing it of being a bureaucratic, commercial organization overly concerned with increasing its profits and dividends by organizational expansion, and of being overly sympathetic to the working class union movement by making low-cost goods available without questioning the consumer culture itself, these ex-student radicals went about establishing what Muto Ichiyo calls alternative livelihood cooperatives (Muto 1993:4-5), along with organic food retail shops, and organic food distributors and delivery services.

I see these grassroots-based, New Left-influenced consumer cooperatives, organic food distributors, and organic food retailers that have emerged since the early-1970s and which have grown phenomenally in the past 25 years as integral components in the Japanese organic farming movement. Their existence has given many organic farmers and organic farmers' groups a much needed alternative marketing outlet. Their concerns have influenced Seikyō over the years to increasingly provide its patrons with safe foods instead of just cheap foods, natural soap products instead of synthetic detergents, and a viable alternative to run-away consumerism. Their rapid growth has impressed upon the Japanese Communist Party the need to support organic farming as a survival strategy for Japan's farmers. In addition, their existence has provided an outlet for the vast energies of urban housewives interested in having a part in the creation of a new society, but who tended to distrust the established political parties of the left and the rhetoric associated with them. Writing about the new consumer cooperatives, Muto aptly notes (1993:9):

There is no doubt that the alternative livelihood coop movement is a dynamic, expanding, and well-organized social movement that has ambitiously walked into the arena of alternative systems from its original turf of the consumer movement. One of its strong points certainly involves ... the everyday life of ordinary people - what they eat, drink, and use every day. This opened the movement to any citizen who wished at least to eat safe food, and thus ensured the participation of hundreds of thousands of people who would have shunned any overtly political commitment. Vaguely sensed aversions to the culture of waste, excess consumption, media-machinated artificial greed, and, for that matter, a sense of powerlessness, on the part of multitudes of citizens, have been effectively tapped and channeled into a social movement with socio-ecological concerns.

Two of the most dynamic, multi-faceted alternative livelihood cooperatives that are strongly committed to social transformation are the Seikatsu Club based in Tokyo and the Green Co-op based in Kyushu. Both organizations have entered the political arena, successfully running their own candidates in local elections; the members and leaders of both organizations are primarily women in their 30s and 40s; and both have involved themselves in numerous socio-political movements, including solidarity with the struggles of residents in the Third World.⁵

⁵ Both Seikatsu Club and Green Co-op have taken the initial steps in committing themselves to Third World solidarity projects by inaugurating alternative trade with villagers on the island of Negros in the Philippines growing bananas organically. Through this alternative trade alliance, direct-marketing relationships with small-scale organic farmers in the Third World that benefit the consumers in the North as well as family farmers and farming villages in the South have been solidly established.

Several articles dealing with various aspects of the alternative trade network and farmer exchange program that have been established between Negros islanders and participants in the Japanese organic farming movement appear in *Japan-Asia Quarterly Review*:24(2). 1993.

Seikatsu Club Consumer's Cooperative Union (SCCU)

Seikatsu Club (also commonly referred to as Seikatsu Club Seikyō, since it is a member of JCCU), was officially founded as a consumer cooperative in 1968 when a group of about 1,000 Tokyo-area housewives who belonged to a milk-buying collective decided to expand their collective purchases to include other primary products such as rice, chicken, eggs, fish, and vegetables (Seikatsu Club brochure. "Autonomy in Life." 1988:4-6). By 1992, it had grown to a membership of 218,256 with 26,801 *han* in 12 prefectures (Seikatsu Club brochure. "Facts and Figures 1993"). Its retail sales in 1992 amounted to ¥71 billion (\$710 million), its shared capital totaled ¥13 billion (\$130 million), and the number of full-time paid staff came to 1,012, with part-time employees numbering in the thousands (Seikatsu Club brochure. "Facts and Figures 1993").

Unlike its parent organization Seikyō, Seikatsu Club has no retail outlets so its members are totally reliant on the *han* structure to obtain their joint purchases through advance orders. Members are encouraged to utilize *han* meetings to learn from each other and discuss issues of mutual interest. These weekly opportunities to express ideas and opinions on personal as well as social issues enable women to gain personal confidence and political strength. Some of the more creative ideas and pressing issues discussed at *han* meetings may be passed on for discussion at branch meetings, and addressed at a meeting of the board of directors or included for discussion at the General Assembly. Each member is thus made to feel that she can affect club policy, and that her input is essential to the well-being of the organization. Goods are delivered directly from producers to *han* through Seikatsu Club Delivery Centers using their own fleet of delivery trucks (Seikatsu Club brochure. "Autonomy in Life." 1988:7).

Seikatsu Club handles a total of only 400 food and non-food items including chemical-free, additive-free seasonings and processed foods; recycled toilet paper and natural soap products; and organically-grown grains, vegetables, and fruits.⁶ It offers only one version of any given processed or packaged product (e.g. an economical one-liter recyclable glass bottle of naturally-fermented soy sauce). By limiting variety, the club is able to streamline production and distribution, and eliminate waste (Seikatsu Club. "Autonomy in Life." 1988:7).

Founded by women, and organized and managed by women (95% of its membership is women and 80% of the board of directors are women), it is not surprising to find that the empowerment of women in Japan is high on the organization's agenda. Since more than half of Japan's women are forced to reenter the labor force (often due to economic necessity) after

⁶ Seikatsu Club has had an agreement with an organic farmers' group in the Shōnai District of Yamagata Prefecture to buy their entire harvest of crops since 1972. Although only supplying the club with rice in the early years, with the dramatic and steady growth of Seikatsu Club over the years, the organic farmers' group also grew dramatically, so that it was able to expand production to include a variety of vegetables, fruits, and roots crops. By 1988, the Shōnai organic farmers' group was supplying Seikatsu Club with 30% of its total purchases of fresh farm crops (Seikatsu Club brochure. "Autonomy in Life." 1988:8).

In order to establish a direct connection between urban consumers and rural farmers, Seikatsu Club organized annual summer excursions to the Shōnai District starting in 1974. Consumers interested in meeting the farmers who grew the food they bought and consumed, visited the organic farmers' group and some engaged in farmwork, participating in weeding tasks or helping with the harvest. Between 1974 and 1988, more than 1,000 Seikatsu Club members visited the Shōnai group of farmers and some lasting friendships have developed (Seikatsu Club brochure. "Autonomy in Life." 1988:8).

their children enter primary school, and with the severe wage discrimination against such women who want to work full-time but are often hired as part-time or temporary employees without any benefits, Seikatsu Club decided to expand its activities from consumption to production by promoting and offering financial support to members interested in creating workers' production collectives.⁷

One Seikatsu Club woman I talked with who works at a worker-owned and -managed translation service in Tokyo explained the rationale behind the decision for Seikatsu Club to assist its members in initiating workers' collectives:

Many of us in Seikatsu Club are feminists and I remember many discussions in branch meetings about women's unpaid domestic labor and the need organize. In the early-1980s, we decided to put theory to practice by forming workers' collectives to meet the needs of community-based women. Since many of us worked outside the home anyway, we felt it to be only logical that we work for ourselves instead of for commercial enterprises, and provide needed services to the community that benefit the lives of women. Many of the workers' collectives that were formed reflected the expertise and interests of the workers themselves: whole-grain bakeries, catering services, shops selling boxed lunches, organic food restaurants, recycling shops, acupuncture clinics, shops selling Chinese herbal medicines, home-care services for the handicapped and the aged, daycare facilities for children of all ages, and shops selling and servicing solar energy products.

I had worked for a translation service company before I had a baby and when I requested my old job back after the baby was two years old, I was told that they could only offer me a part-time position at half the pay I received previously. It wouldn't have been enough to pay for the commuting expenses and daycare fees!

Now, I'm making more than I was before, my hours are flexible and I can work at home and not go to the office if I don't want to for some reason, we can work at much as we want, and there's no one to boss us around. There are seven other women who own and operate the translation service with me here, and if others are interested in joining us, we can easily expand because there's a demand for our kind of work.

⁷ With housewives getting together each week at their *han* (neighborhood group) gatherings to pick up their orders, place advance orders, chat about "everyday life," and discuss various social issues, it started to become apparent that many women were experiencing cracked skin on their own hands and skin irritations on their babies in the early-1970s. The suspected cause was the increasing use of synthetic soaps and detergents, and Seikatsu Club started to purchase natural soap from a local producer in 1974, with 60% to 70% of the membership switching to natural soaps within the first year (Seikatsu Club brochure. 1988:10).

In order to encourage the public at large to use natural soap-based cleaning products, Seikatsu Club in 1984 decided to build its own soap-making plant, and offer its own line of natural soaps and detergents at a reasonable cost to the general public (Seikatsu Club brochure. 1988:10). The Citizen's Group for the Founding of a Kawasaki City Soap Factory was established by Seikatsu Club members in 1984, and after five years of negotiations with the municipal government of the city of Kawasaki, the city was convinced to support the plant construction and agreed to a site location (Seikatsu Club brochure. 1988:10).

Within a year, ¥10 million (\$100,000) was collected from 5,000 individual investors who purchased shares at ¥1,000 each; a loan of ¥100 million (\$1 million) was obtained from a grassroots-based citizens' lending institution called Press Alternative; and Seikatsu Club itself invested ¥140 million (\$1,400,000) in start-up capital. Seikatsu Club organized classes for interested members to learn about the process of producing a line of soap products, seven co-op members formed a workers' collective to run the plant, and the plant started production operations in April 1990, recycling 35,000 liters of used cooking oil into natural soap products in the first year (see Noguchi, Mary Goebel. "The Rise of the Housewife Activist." *Japan Quarterly*. July-September 1992:341-343).

By 1993, more than 150 workers' collectives had been established by approximately 3,000 Seikatsu Club members (Seikatsu Club brochure. June 1993:8). In addition to workers' collectives, jointly-owned and jointly-operated subsidiary companies have been established to facilitate the smooth and effective functioning of Seikatsu Club business operations. They include the Taiyo Shokuhin Hanbai Company, which has a fleet of refrigerated trucks to transport frozen or chilled foods, such as meat, fish, or ice cream; Shinsei Rakuno Company, a milk and dairy products factory run by local dairy farmers; Tochigi Shinsei Rakuno Company, another milk and dairy products factory run by dairy farmers; and Kyodo Tosho Service which buys, publishes, and delivers books (Seikatsu Club brochure. "Facts and Figures 1993").

Seikatsu Club publishes its own theoretical monthly journal called *Shakai Undo* (Social Movements) which offers a diverse range of theories, ideas, information, and opinion. It is published by the Social Movements Research Institute, a Seikatsu Club-funded research center with an open membership policy that has attracted 12,000 members with a diversity of interests from throughout Japan. Looking through a collection of their journals, I found that a variety of movement activists as well as left intellectuals and academics present a stimulatingly eclectic offering of, for example, African American and Asian feminism; neo-Gramscian analyses of Japanese hegemony; new social movement theories; empirical studies of nuclear power plant accidents or destruction of tropical rainforests; the Basque region in Spain's Mondragón cooperatives and workers' collectives; and comparative historical analyses of consumer cooperatives and worker ownership internationally. The range of topics reflect the widely divergent views within an organization that eschews a single theoretical approach to explicate its activities and objectives.

Nevertheless, a unifying thread emerges from an examination of back issues of *Shakai Undo*, and that is the idea of everyday people in everyday situations politicizing all aspects of their everyday lives and critically questioning the environmentally and culturally destructive direction in which the Japanese ruling class has been leading the country in the postwar decades. Tied to the meanings they attach to the concepts of *seikatsu* (quality of everyday life) and *seikatsusha* (counter-hegemonists transforming social relations and redefining social values to create a qualitatively new society), people are encouraged to actively engage in politics, starting at the everyday level of family, friends, and neighborhood, and expanding to the local, regional, and national political arenas in order to transform all realms of living.

Seikatsu Club through its political arm, Seikatsu NET, succeeded in having its first political candidate elected as a representative in Tokyo's Nerima Ward in 1979 (Seikatsu Club brochure. 1988:10). Seikatsu NET enjoyed a major electoral victory in 1987 when 31 Seikatsu Club candidates won seats in Tokyo-area elections (Muto 1993:9). As of March 1993, Seikatsu NET had 75 representatives, all of whom were women, at the prefectural, municipal, and township levels in the Kanagawa area, which includes Tokyo (Seikatsu Club brochure. 1993: 8).

Although each candidate addresses issues affecting the residents in the local area in which she is running and attempts to represent their interests, all candidates are united in supporting the peace movement (e.g. declaring cities nuclear-free zones, opposing the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty, defending the Peace Constitution, fighting against expanding U.S. military bases in Japan); protecting the environment (e.g. opposing nuclear energy, golf course and resort development, water and air pollution, global environmental devastation); working for a new

society based on peace and social justice (e.g. working against social discrimination of all types, increasing social benefits to the elderly, handicapped, and children); and remaining free of any political party affiliations (Seikatsu Club pamphlet. "The Right Livelihood Award." 1989:37). It is claimed in a Seikatsu Club pamphlet that Seikatsu NET's political philosophy closely resembles that of the German Green Party (Seikatsu Club pamphlet. "The Right Livelihood Award." 1989). According to Muto (1993:9), political commentators in Japan have been impressed by the electoral victories of Seikatsu NET's women candidates, recognizing Seikatsu NET as a dark horse in local politics.

In recognition of its accomplishments in creating alternative economic structures and new human values, and its commitment to working for peace, social justice, and the protection of the global environment, Seikatsu Club was selected as the Honorary Award Recipient of the Swedish Parliament's Right Livelihood Award in 1989 (Seikatsu Club pamphlet. "The Right Livelihood Award." 1989). Jakob von Uexkull, a member of the Swedish Parliament, stated, in part, in the presentation address (Seikatsu Club pamphlet. "The Right Livelihood Award." 1989:30):

Alternative economics, in order to have an impact, cannot just withdraw from society but must aim to create a new mainstream. We honour the Seikatsu Club Consumer's Cooperative as a project which has successfully taken up this challenge, proving that it is possible to grow into an organisation of over 500,000 members without losing the original vision. Seikatsu Club practices ecologically sustainable production, exchange, and consumption based on cooperation, self-management, and the abolition of waste.

Seikatsu Club has evolved from an organic food-buying collective to a broad-based and multi-faceted movement advocating radical changes in the structure of Japanese society. It has gained international recognition for its on-going attempt to redefine social values and assumptions, and restructure Japanese society in a more egalitarian manner. Expanding its influence from the Tokyo-area to neighboring prefectures, and as far north as Hokkaido, Seikatsu Club has been able to provide an increasing number of organic farmers an outlet for their produce.

In southern Japan, on the southernmost main island of Kyushu, another new consumer cooperative, Green Co-op Kyushu, has experienced a growth similar to that of Seikatsu Club. Similarly linked to the New Left movement of the 1960s, with activists from that period still exerting influence on the direction in which the organization should move, Green Co-op Kyushu offers an excellent example of how previously antagonistic New Left sects have found the common ground to unite in the long-term struggle to reshape Japanese society from the bottom-up.

Green Co-op Kyushu

Founded in 1988, Green Co-op is a relatively new organization created through the merger of two major coop networks in Kyushu, one based in the city of Kumamoto and the other in the city of Fukuoka (Muto 1993:4). In 1988, it had 160,000 members in Kyushu, and by 1993 its membership had increased to 230,000 people shopping at 52 affiliated coops found throughout Kyushu as well as in Yamaguchi and Hiroshima Prefectures in western Honshu. More than 60% of Green Co-op's sales is through its retail stores, while close to 40% is

through *han* (neighborhood group) deliveries (Green Co-op brochure. 1993:16).

The two major cooperative networks that merged to form the Green Co-op are the Kyōseisha (Convivial) Coop which originated on the campus of Kumamoto University in 1974 and the Chikuren (Regional Cooperatives Federation) Co-op which emerged from the student struggles at Kyushu University in Fukuoka (Muto 1993:5-7). Both co-op networks were founded by student activist members of Zenkyōtō (All-Campus Joint Struggle Committee), with Kyōseisha Coop headed by Yukioka Ryōji, an activist of the Maoist Bund ML faction and chairperson of Zenkyōtō at Kumamoto University in the early-1970s, and Chikuren Co-op headed by Kaneshige Masaji, a Zenkyōtō activist at Kyushu University in Fukuoka (Muto 1993). They are now co-managing directors of Green Co-op.

With their radical origins, both co-op federations were actively involved in social issues such as discrimination against women, ethnic groups, and the handicapped; environmental pollution and the future of farmers; peace and Japanese foreign policy; and international solidarity. With the merger of the two co-op networks, futile competition was averted, resources were consolidated, and a broadened perspective has emerged with the Green Co-op inaugurating extensive ties with organic farmers' groups in the Third World, including buying bananas from organic farmers on the island of Negros in the Philippines and exchanging ideas in meetings with organic farmers' groups and consumer groups in south Korea (Muto 1993).

Although previously eschewing participation in electoral politics, the Green Co-op started running its own candidates in local elections in 1991 and has succeeded in having several of its members elected to local assemblies (Muto 1993). The direct purchase of agricultural products from farmers and sea products from fishers amounted to more than 20% (¥15 billion) of its total goods turnover of ¥75 billion (\$750 million) in 1993 (Green Co-op brochure. 1993:2).

Similar to Seikatsu Club, 95% of the membership of Green Co-op is comprised of women in their 30s and 40s, with women occupying most leadership positions. According to Yukioka, Kyōseisha Co-op was a community movement of women who gathered to form an organization of their own through which they could acquire the leverage to act and change society, a political movement shaped as its members desired, and which became (by 1984) "a formidable force nobody could ignore in Kyushu" with 3,000 women activists among its 70,000 members (Muto 1993:6). Similarly, Chikuren Co-op by the mid-1980s had grown into a cooperative movement of women who had, for example, successfully fought local battles against resort and golf course development, and had established workers' collectives owned and operated by women.

A woman I talked with in her mid-40s who is a member of the Nagasaki Green Co-op told me that she became a member because she wanted to buy organic produce from an organization that was not affiliated with the Japanese Communist Party. She stated:

My husband works as a computer analyst for Mitsubishi Corporation, a major employer here in Nagasaki. They're very anti-communist and my husband was afraid that if I continued to shop at the Seikyō Co-op (which is JCP-affiliated), it might get back to the company and hurt his chances for promotion. Anyway, I didn't get involved in the politics at Seikyō Co-op and I figured that I wouldn't get directly involved in the politics at Green Co-op.

Both my husband and I were involved in student protests when we were university students, and we figure that by buying produce directly from local organic farmers, we're contributing to the movement to decentralize the structure of agriculture and protect the environment from chemical

pollution. It's not much, but we feel better knowing that we're at least doing something. We know that Green Co-op is involved in women's issues, peace issues, environmental issues, and social justice issues, and by being members, we feel like we're involved, too. We don't sign petitions or go to rallies, but we give donations to different causes.

We buy bananas from the peasants struggling for survival in the Philippines, organic coffee and tea from family farmers in Kenya, and shrimp from Indonesia that are grown by families in a way that doesn't destroy mangrove swamps. I know I sound like a typical middle-aged, middle-class housewife who can afford to spend money to ease my conscience, but I really want to do what I can to make the world a better place for our future generations.

This woman's statement clearly reveals the importance of not dismissing a person as incapable of involvement in a social movement just because they enjoy a privileged class position. It is obvious that she and her husband are identifying themselves with the bottom two-thirds of society, and want to be a part of the attempt to transform Japanese society to benefit the majority. The middle classes in Japanese society are also "victims" of a social system that breeds alienation and apathy. Through the organic farming movement in Japan, they are being made a part of the alliance to overcome the obstacles in the way of creating a new society.

Another Green Co-op member I talked with told me that it is only through her active involvement in co-op activities that she is able to feel like she is contributing to the betterment of society. She is in her late-20s and has been a member since 1990, when she and her husband moved to Nagasaki from Osaka. She said that she works full-time at a bank and that her job is unfulfilling, stressful, and demeaning. She explained:

I graduated from a four-year university with a degree in accounting and finance. I've been with the bank for six years now, and they still have me make and serve tea, and sit around "looking pretty." It's disgusting! I can't afford to quit since my husband's salary is not enough to live [comfortably] on. Anyway, I want to work so I can get out of the house.

I really look forward to our weekly *han* meetings when seven of us [women] get together to decide on our advance order, and more importantly, talk about what's bothering us and about what we can do to improve things. We talk about a lot of different social issues too, and it's a real learning experience for me. Without this circle of women friends I've made through my Green Co-op membership, I don't know what I'd do. I've gotten directly involved in the attempt to get the city to build more public daycare centers, and I finally feel a part of the community, a useful member of society.

In this woman's case, the structure of support that she found upon joining the Green Co-op and the satisfaction she feels from involving herself in community politics enables her to cope with the stress of living and working in a male-dominated society. Not only has she been able to make new friends and reduce the stress in her life, she has been able to expand her horizons, learning about social issues she had only been vaguely aware of previously.

Whereas Seikatsu Club emphasizes the importance of *han* meetings and restricts its organizational framework to the *han* system, the Green Co-op, similar to Seikyō, offers its members a choice of joining a *han*, or shopping at a retail outlet. Two other (Tokyo-based)

organizations⁸ that are representative examples of grassroots-based organic foods retailers and distributors, and are integral components of the Japanese organic farming movement, are *Polan Hiroba* and *Daichi wo Mamoru Kai* (Association to Preserve the Earth). They offer the most shopping convenience for working women without the time to commit to meeting with other women to place orders and help divide weekly bulk orders of organic produce. *Daichi* offers direct delivery of organic produce and processed foods to individual families, *han* groups, school cafeterias, natural food stores, and consumer cooperatives, and *Polan Hiroba*, modeled on San Francisco's Rainbow Co-op and emphasizing the importance of a direct alliance between workers and farmers, has 80 retail stores nationwide, with some stores making deliveries to individual households.

The Association to Preserve the Earth

The Association to Preserve the Earth (*Daichi wo Mamoru Kai*) was founded in Tokyo in August 1975 by three men and one woman in their mid-20s who had been radicalized by their involvement in university campus struggles in the late-1960s and early-1970s.⁹ Influenced by Ariyoshi Sawako's book about agricultural pesticides and their health hazards to all life forms, (*Fukugō Osen* : 複合汚染 (Compound Pollution, which had been published earlier that year), these young people decided to try to directly-market fresh produce from area organic farmers to local consumers in the westside Tokyo area. They had seen an article in a weekly magazine about a group of 20 organic farmers who had been convinced by a medical doctor in Mito-shi (a Tokyo suburb) to forego the use of chemical pesticides, and who were attempting to find new market outlets for their produce.¹⁰

⁸ Unless otherwise indicated, the information on *Polan Hiroba* was obtained from a series of interviews with one of its founders, Kano Tsuyoshi, who runs a retail outlet called *Ahiru no Ie* in the western Tokyo suburb of Kunitachi with his wife. Likewise, the information on *Daichi wo Mamoru Kai* (as well as on Hito-ken Co-op and Radish Boya) was obtained from interviews with spokespersons of *Daichi wo Mamoru Kai* at its main office in Ichikawa, Chiba Prefecture.

⁹ The founding members of Hito-ken Co-op (a Tokyo-based organic foods consumer cooperative with 200,000 consumer members) and Radish Boya (a Tokyo-based organic foods home delivery service with 25,000 member households) were also involved in Japan's radical student movement. Radish Boya is an outgrowth of the early-1970s Student Recycling Movement that repaired and then resold discarded furniture, appliances, and other consumer durables at flea markets and garage sales that it organized. *Daichi* has members on Radish Boya's Board of Directors, and the two groups are coordinating their efforts to fight Nōkyō's plans to persuade organic farmers to sell their produce to Nōkyō rather than to grassroots-based consumer cooperatives, distributors, and retailers.

¹⁰ The doctor had conducted chemical warfare and poison gas research during the war for the Japanese government, and when area farmers started coming to him with skin irritations and respiratory ailments in the 1960s, he discovered that they were applying the same chemical compounds on their fields that had been developed by the army to kill people. He reported his findings to the Japanese medical establishment, the media, and various government ministries, but to no avail. He thus decided to encourage as many farmers as possible to convert to organic farming methods. Although 20 area farmers who had experienced pesticide poisonings in their families converted to organic farming, Nōkyō (Association of Agricultural Cooperatives), supermarkets, and major Tokyo wholesalers refused to buy their produce due to cosmetic imperfections. Some Seikyō Co-ops bought their produce, but stopped buying after several weeks because shoppers, used to chemically-perfected produce of uniform size and a sanitized appearance, refused to buy it.

The *Daichi* founders obtained the organic produce from the farmers early in the mornings up front, and transported the produce using hand-carts and bicycle-pulled-carts to apartment complexes and public housing complexes in the Tokyo area. They would hand out information sheets explaining about the dangers of chemical ingestion and the need to support local organic farmers, selling the day's produce directly to housewives interested in saving money, supporting organic farmers, and eating chemical-free fruits, vegetables, and root crops. The next day, the farmers would be paid for the previous day's produce sales, and the vendors would search for other locations to sell their goods.

By handing-out mimeographed information sheets outlining the dangers of pesticide use on the environment and on the health of all life forms; by taking the time to talk with the housewives living in low-income public housing and private apartment complexes; and by proving to the farmers and to the area housewives that they were committed to their goal of establishing direct marketing links between farmers and consumers and thus earning their respect, these ex-student radicals were able to gradually increase the number of regular customers. They then helped organize these women into *han* groups to facilitate delivery, and enable these previously isolated housewives to meet and discuss not only everyday issues but political issues as well.

By 1985, *Daichi's* consumer household membership appeared to level off at about 2,000. In order to increase its membership, it was decided to initiate an individual household delivery system in addition to the *han* (neighborhood group) delivery system that was already in place. With increasing numbers of housewives (even those with pre-school children) working for 30 or more hours per week outside the home (some because they enjoy working, most due to economic necessity), it became obvious that many working mothers did not have the time to meet in *han* groupings to place and pick-up food orders. The individual household delivery service was introduced in 1985 and the response was dramatic. *Daichi's* growth nearly doubled yearly so that by 1993, its consumer membership had increased to 31,000.

As the number of consumer members increased, *Daichi* was able to increase the number of farmer, fisher, and organic food processor members to over 2,000 by 1993 (*Daichi* guarantees to buy the entire crop at pre-negotiated prices from about 1,500 contracted organic farm families throughout Japan). *Daichi* has 140 full-time salaried personnel and 300 part-time workers, and its total sales in 1992 amounted to ¥15 billion (\$150 million). According to Kano Tsuyoshi, director and founding member of *Polan Hiroba* (see below), *Daichi's* phenomenal growth in recent years can be attributed to the perseverance and business acumen of one of its founders, Fujita Kazuyoshi. Kano explains:

Fujita-san was a Zenkyōtō student movement leader so he had the experience in working with people and building up organizational strength. He told me in the past that he didn't think retail stores were the way to go with the organic food market. He always believed in the growth potential of direct-delivery of organic produce, and *Daichi's* success proves him right.

Daichi wo Mamoru Kai is simultaneously a no-nonsense business venture and a social movement advocating a decentralized, grassroots-based organic farming system; basic structural changes in Japanese society to create an environmentally and socially sustainable culture

with egalitarian values; and, solidarity with grassroots-based struggles in the Third World.¹¹

It has established nine joint-stock companies to facilitate business operations and allow the organic farming movement activists within the organization to devote more time and energy to work toward the goal of creating a new society. The nine business divisions are:

1. Daichi Ltd., a retail company that sells organic farm produce to consumers directly through the *han* delivery system (about 1,000 households) and the individual household system (approximately 30,000 households).
2. Daichi Bussan Ltd., a wholesale company that sells organic produce to Daichi Ltd., natural food stores (some stores that are determined to be overly profit-oriented are refused), consumer cooperatives, greengrocers, schools,¹² and other outlets.
3. Daichi Bokujō Ltd., a wholesaler of meats, such as beef, pork, and chicken. It organizes dairy farmers' collectives, and runs its own meat processing plants.
4. Fruit Basket Ltd., processing plants that process organic fruits into jams, juices, and sauces.

¹¹ *Daichi wo Mamoru Kai* established an International Department in January 1990 with the objective of forming alliances between organic farmers in various Asian nations. Between 1990 and 1993, *Daichi* organized ten tours for Japanese organic farmers and others involved in the Japanese organic farming movement to visit organic farmers' groups and other organizations interested in promoting organic farming in Thailand, south Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, and Indonesia. *Daichi* also hosted study tours, friendship visits, and trainees from the Asian countries listed above interested in learning more about Japan's organic farming movement.

Asian farmers' organizations held a symposium on organic farming as an international movement in Khonkaen, Thailand in January 1992. As a result of the discussions, the participants adopted a resolution to form the Asian Monsoon Farmers' Association to develop the network necessary to create a transborder movement centering on organic agriculture and environmental protection as keys to a new transnational social system based on equality.

In order to attain the goal of transborder social transformation using the grassroots-based organic farming movement as a catalyst, direct farmer-to-farmer exchanges were implemented, and farmers from Japan, Thailand, south Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, and Indonesia began homestay programs in which the visiting farmer stays with a host farm family for a period of three to ten months. In this way, by working and living together, it is hoped that true friendships will develop, and insights into the specific social situations in each locality will emerge. Armed with new farming techniques, fresh insights into socio-political issues such as agricultural liberalization and Third World development, different perspectives on a variety of topics, and knowledge of different approaches to organic farming, these farmers return to their home villages inspired, invigorated, and determined to continue the struggle (see Arai, Miyuki. "Asian Farmers To Promote Intercultural Cooperation." *Japan Times*. March 9, 1993: 4).

¹² Due mainly to parental pressure, but also due in part to the increasing public awareness of the dangers, particularly to young children, of chemical residues on food, 30 elementary schools and junior high schools in Tokyo, Chiba, and Saitama Prefectures have contracted with *Daichi* to provide organically-grown food for their school lunch programs.

I was told that although *Daichi* considers providing school lunch programs with organic produce important and hopes to increase the number of schools it delivers to, coordinating deliveries to schools is especially difficult to accomplish efficiently. This is because delivery times must be precise (e.g. 7:00am), and since school lunch menus are prepared in advance and are thus fixed, specific vegetables must be delivered on specific dates and cannot be changed.

Daichi recently initiated a modified policy for school deliveries that allows it to substitute, for example, organic spinach with conventionally-grown spinach (bought from local, family-run greengrocers), if organically-grown spinach is not available on that date. *Daichi* has made the necessary arrangements with ten such greengrocers in the Tokyo, Chiba, and Saitama delivery areas, and school lunch program deliveries are proceeding smoothly.

5. Daichi Sanbu Nōjō Ltd., a pilot farm with 1,500 non-factory chickens and one hectare of vegetable fields rented from member organic farmers in Sanbu-machi, Chiba Prefecture.¹³
6. Restaurant Daichi Ltd., a pub-restaurant in Musashi-Sakai (on the near westside of Tokyo), opened in 1991 in an attempt to popularize the preparation and consumption of organic foods.
7. Daichi Suisan Ltd., a wholesaler of fish and other seafood, with its own processing plants.
8. Daichi Foods Ltd., which runs its own processing plant for hams and sausages.
9. Daichi Ecology Fund Ltd., which provides low-interest-rate loans to organic farmers wishing to expand and to farmers interested in converting to organic production.

Although *Daichi* is an organic farming organization with a diverse membership made up of farmers, processors, distributors, wholesalers, and consumers, it is its very organizational strength, of closely coordinated business ventures, that reflects its weakness, the lack of ground-level input into the decision-making process. Without member input into the decisions that affect the direction in which the organization will evolve, there is a danger of a separation of “business” operations from social activism. Instead of a consumer membership made up of social activists and concerned citizens, a membership of politically apathetic housewives only interested in procuring “safe” foods conveniently, at a reasonable price, may eventually predominate.

However, it appears that the leadership of *Daichi wo Mamoru Kai* are aware of this danger and are attempting to involve its membership more directly in its operational decisions and its social commitments by encouraging members to attend meetings and become directly involved in social movements that *Daichi* supports. Members are kept informed of the organization’s involvement in various social issues through periodic notices and information sheets that are distributed with its deliveries.

Its recent moves into Third World solidarity work and its on-going attempt to broaden the organic farming movement within Japan so that its example will allow the movement to expand to neighboring Asian countries reveals that its commitment to social transformation has not lessened, but has in actuality grown. Burdened by the dual task of building big and staying radical, easy solutions will not be found, but the forward momentum will continue to raise new possibilities.

Polan Hiroba

Polan Hiroba provides the organizational network for independent organic food store owners affiliated with it throughout Japan to establish contact with organic farmers and organic farmers’ groups in their locality, and vice versa. It helps to coordinate contacts

¹³ With increasing numbers of young people interested in being trained in organic farming techniques, but finding it difficult to locate organic farmers willing to accept them as apprentices, *Daichi* began a training program in organic farming in 1990. Two or three young people stay on the farm for a training period of six months, after which those interested in pursuing careers in organic farming are introduced to organic farmers and organic farmers’ groups in different parts of Japan willing to assist them in finding a house and farmland to rent.

between store owners and organic farmers in order to diversify each store's stock to attract more customers and increase farm income simultaneously. Although each store is encouraged to obtain the bulk of its stock of organically-grown fresh and processed foods from local organic (and low-input) farmers, some crops that cannot be locally grown (e.g. potatoes from Hokkaido or citrus from Shikoku) are ordered through *Polan Hiroba* and delivered to the stores.¹⁴

Polan Hiroba also encourages both local store owners and organic farmers throughout Japan to form production collectives to produce processed foods made from organically-grown ingredients. Many organic and low-input farm families interested in and capable of making, for example, *tōfu* (soybean curd), *soba* (buckwheat noodles), *udon* (wheat noodles), *nattō* (fermented soybeans), *miso* (soybean paste), or *tsukemono* (various pickled vegetables), have established their own production facilities and sell their products to *Polan Hiroba*. Since all of the above examples of processed foods have been traditionally produced by most Japanese farm families until relatively recently, many farm families have at least one member of the family who retains the necessary production skills.¹⁵

Polan Hiroba has helped to establish 80 organic food stores and more than 700 organic food processors in less than 20 years. It has contracts with about 600 organic and low-input farmers throughout Japan in which prices are pre-negotiated with the farmers. If the

¹⁴ During its early years of operation, *Polan Hiroba* attempted to make long-distance deliveries to individual stores using its own delivery vans. However, due to a combination of concerns about the organization's responsibility to lessen environmental pollution, and the prohibitive costs of truck maintenance, fuel costs, drivers' wages, and toll charges, it was decided to send all long-distance shipments by rail, using JR (Japan Railways) container box cars.

¹⁵ I talked with one farmer in Nagasaki Prefecture who told me that his father had been delighted when he was asked for advice on how to make *tōfu* and *miso* from soybeans seven years previously. This family had been farming organically for about 15 years, and when *Polan Hiroba* requested farm families interested in making such foods to do so under contract to them, they began producing them at home. He explained:

"We thought my father was going senile because he just sat in his room talking to his cat. I didn't think he'd be able to remember how to make such food products, but when I asked him, he seemed to grow younger before my eyes. We were all amazed at the change in him. He organized everything and closely supervised us. Now, he's involved in the farm business again and is much more active than before."

When I had a chance to be alone with this quiet 86-year-old farmer, I found that he was very enthusiastic about the organic farming movement and the way it was attempting to revive the farming communities in Japan. He told me that he had always felt sorry for his son, having to make a living from farming, but that he was very happy for him now that he was succeeding as an organic farmer. When I asked him about his part in the movement, he confided:

"After my wife died ten years ago, I became very lonely. I knew I was too old to work in the fields any longer, and I not only felt useless, I began to feel like I was a burden on my son and daughter-in-law. I didn't want to bother them, so I just stayed in my room. Well, when they told me that they wanted to try making *tōfu* and *miso* to sell to the organic food store in town and asked me for my help and advice. It was like being born again for me. They gave me a reason to live, made me feel useful and needed. Knowing that I'm contributing to the family income makes me feel like a man again!"

This man's story brought home to me the fact that many elderly people need some kind of stimulation to prevent their withdrawal into depression and senility. By encouraging organic farmers to develop cottage industries and revive traditional production skills, *Polan Hiroba* has allowed elderly family members to participate directly in their families' involvement in the organic farming movement, and their inclusion has given many of them a new lease on life.

conventional market prices for particular crops are higher at the time of harvest for any reason, the prices are revised upward. This, contrasted to the *teikei* (co-partnership) system in which the pre-negotiated prices would not be open to revision, appears to give weight to the farmers' rather than the consumers' economic interests.

Kano Tsuyoshi, founder and director of *Polan Hiroba* explained how the organization has evolved over the years, yet remaining committed to working toward a decentralized, small-scale farming system in which direct ties are formed and relations based on trust are developed between organic farmers and organic food store owner-workers. He stressed the importance of the direct relationship between farmers-as-workers and organic food store owners-as-workers, stating that since both farmers and small store owners are self-employed and their livelihoods depend on the success of selling organic produce and products, the relationship between them is based on equality and can be said to be truly symbiotic.¹⁶

After graduating from university, Mr. Kano (who had been influenced by his involvement in the student movement) became a public servant in the Tokyo metropolitan government because of his interest in strengthening the public sector union movement. However, due to his union organizing activities, he was ostracized by his colleagues in the government office he worked at and made to sit at his desk without anything to do. This tactic (*mado-giwa*) prevalently used in Japan to force unwanted (often for political reasons) salaried employees to resign was stressful and humiliating, but Mr. Kano did not capitulate until after he had decided on a career change in which he may better accomplish his goal of helping to create a more just and humane society. An article he had read in a monthly magazine called *Takarajima* that advocated the creation of a new society through people taking back the control of producing and marketing organic food by grassroots-based action had inspired him to boldly take the first steps to a new life.

He and a group of four "hippy-types who had been influenced by the student movement to rethink social values and create a counter-culture" visited the Rainbow Food Co-op in Berkeley, and upon their return to Japan in 1972, started an organic food co-op in Nishi-Ogikubo, a near westside suburb of Tokyo. Because his friends were not politically motivated and seemed interested only in maintaining their own bohemian lifestyles, and because he was

¹⁶ When I asked Mr. Kano for his opinion on farmer-consumer co-partnerships, he stated that although the idea of direct-marketing may be a good one in that the farmers are guaranteed a market for their harvest and the consumers gain access to a reliable and trustworthy source of organic foods, he feels that the direct-marketing relationship between farmer and store owner is more conducive to effecting social transformation. He felt that the ideological distance and lifestyle difference between farmers and middle-class urbanites were too great to allow them to work together as equals, so that effecting change would be next to impossible.

After I told him about the various social movements in which farmers and consumers in the Miyoshi-Tokyo Co-partnership were jointly engaged in, (e.g. working side-by-side to defeat the proposed golf course construction, hosting the stay of children who were victims of radioactive fallout from the Chernobyl nuclear power plant explosion to publicize their opposition to Japan's nuclear energy policy, inviting farmers from foreign countries as well as from different parts of Japan to see for themselves how to bypass the conventional marketing system by forming direct-marketing relations between farmers and consumers), Mr. Kano expressed surprise, saying that it was quite different from what he had imagined and adding that he would be interested to learn more about it.

His assumption that the consumers involved in co-partnership arrangements are "just middle-class housewives with middle-class values," and his dismissal of co-partnerships as incapable of effecting any type of meaningful social change, points to the danger of relying on pre-conceived notions formed from an ideological inclusiveness that denies the validity of other ideological approaches, and prevents the recognition of a commonality and the forming of a more broadly based coalition.

interested in moving to Kunitachi (a “progressive” westside suburb of Tokyo in which the Japanese Socialist Party and Japanese Communist Party had a strong presence in local government) to sell organic produce, Mr. Kano left the co-op in Nishi-Ogikubo after about one year.

During his first two-and-a-half years in Kunitachi, Mr. Kano sold organic produce that he obtained from area organic farmers using a two-wheel pull cart. He said that selling from a cart was hard work, but that he found it to be very invigorating, stating:

I discovered that it's in peoples' nature to feel compassion for fellow human beings. When people in Kunitachi saw me pulling a heavy cart loaded with vegetables, root crops, and fruit everyday, rain or shine, they'd want to buy something from me. Most of the people weren't necessarily interested in buying produce from me because it was organically-grown. I think they were impressed that a young man with long hair, who, according to the media stereotype was supposed to be lazy, selfish, and on drugs, would work so hard every day, even in bad weather. I remember many people of all ages saying to me, '*Onii-chan, gambare!*' ('Hang in there, brother!'), and I'd get choked up because I know that's what the world should be like, people caring for and helping each other.

Within a year, Mr. Kano was unable to keep up with the demand for organically-grown produce on the streets of Kunitachi, and he invited others to join him. Four friends (two men and two women), pulling their own carts, joined Mr. Kano, and three other local farm families were convinced to convert to organic production. After two years, since there was no need for five people to continue peddling organic produce from carts, Mr. Kano and the two women (one of whom later became his wife) decided to open a store.

The three of them invested the money they had received from their former employers as severance pay, and Kunitachi's first organic food store, *Ahiru no Ie*, was opened in 1977. Shortly thereafter, *Polan Hiroba* was established in order to provide support for those interested in opening organic food stores, and to strengthen the organic farming movement in Japan by forming direct links between organic farmers and organic food store owners.

Polan Hiroba publishes a weekly newsletter with articles primarily dealing with various aspects of the organization, with regular profiles of its farmer and store owner members. It publicizes the various struggles that people are engaged in, such as opposition to nuclear power, Japanese constitutional revision, U.S. military operations in Japan, golf course construction, and environmental destruction associated with uncontrolled corporate expansion. At *Ahiru no Ie*, the newsletters (along with other political handouts) are positioned near the cash register, and those customers interested are free to take copies home with them. According to Mr. Kano:

I used to try to talk to all my customers about various social issues that I was concerned with, but it got to be too much of a strain for me. It's really tough trying to convince someone that they should support some political cause when all they want to do is buy some groceries. My wife and I decided that it wasn't worth the effort and the stress it caused us to worry about how to influence the customers to become social activists.

We decided to concentrate on building good relations based on trust and friendliness between shopkeeper and customer. We found that customers were more likely to take informational handouts and the newsletter if they weren't pressured to. That's why we just leave them at the

check-out counter.

Mr. Kano mentioned that he and his wife were often surprised by how socially and politically active some of their customers are. He said that some of his customers are actively engaged in social movements and that he sometimes envies their direct involvement in politics. Although he was vague when responding to my questions concerning his opinion of Japan's political parties, he gave me the impression that he and his wife refused to vote because of a deep-felt distrust of all political parties and a belief that social change cannot be legislated but must be initiated by people working together at the ground level.¹⁷

Polan Hiroba as an organization is committed to uniting small organic store owners with organic farmers and organic farmers' groups throughout the nation. With the dramatically increasing demand for organic foods in Japan, it is attempting to organize a national network of organic farmers so that they might be able to negotiate with the powerfully-organized consumer movement on a more equal footing. Thus, it fills a needed gap in the Japanese organic food movement; a farmer-oriented Tokyo-based organization that advocates farmer sovereignty in an agricultural landscape that is decentralized and grassroots-based, with locally-based, worker-owned and -managed organic food stores that are financially and ideologically independent.

However, its call for ideological diversity may result in ideological disunity and political apathy. For *Polan Hiroba*, the fine line between ideological independence and political withdrawal must be examined and evaluated carefully so that its members may freely participate in the social transformative direction in which the Japanese organic farming movement as a whole is moving. That direction includes more direct participation in the electoral process by supporting candidates who represent the interests of consumers' organizations such as Seikatsu Club and Green Co-op, as well as candidates at the local, regional, and national level of the Japanese Communist Party, who represent the interests of people in Japanese society who are united by a strong desire to create a new society based on distributive justice.

Conclusion

Many of the leading figures in the organic farmers' groups, new consumer cooperatives, and organic foods distributors and retailers were politicized by the social turmoil in Japan in the 1960s. Their experience as social activists not only alerts them to attempts at cooptation, it enables them to take advantage of windows of opportunity to effect the basic structural changes necessary to create a new society. Taking advantage of these cracks in the system, they have used the media, the schools, and the myriad numbers of organizations and clubs that permeate civil society to further their counter-hegemonic project.

¹⁷ He indicated that he and his wife refrain from participation in the electoral process, disdaining all politicians and rejecting all political parties (virulently opposing the Japanese Communist Party). This anti-politics stand, a legacy of the New Left ideology that renounced political parties as reformist lackeys of the capitalist system, is unfortunately still strong enough among people who still adhere to the tenets of a particular New Left sect or sects they had been associated with, to keep people who should be working together, unnecessarily divided.

The leading members of *Polan Hiroba*, *Daichi wo Mamoru Kai*, and *Radish Boya*, all similarly influenced by New Left ideology during their years at university in the turbulent 1960s and early-1970s in Japan, appear to share a similar disdain for participation in the electoral process.

Seikatsu Club and Green Co-op, organized and run primarily by housewives in their 30s and 40s, have enabled many working women to become directly involved in working for social transformation. Since many of these women, active in student political movements in the 1960s and early 1970s, tended to refrain from political activities because of a disillusionment with electoral politics, these new consumer cooperatives have given them the opportunity to reenter the political arena on their own terms. No longer constrained by sect-defined ideological boundaries, or by a need to identify with either the (former) Japanese Socialist Party or the Japanese Communist Party in order to work for progressive social change, the vast energies of these women have been released so that they are able to create totally new grassroots-based structures that help bring down the old structures of hierarchy and corporate domination.

Establishing a growing number of workers' collectives; involving themselves in local politics by successfully running their own candidates; establishing ties with organic farmers' and consumers' movements in the Third World; reformulating cultural values and assumptions, and redefining social relations; and forming alliances with participants in various social movements throughout Japan, the active members of these new consumer cooperatives are energetically engaged in transforming Japanese society. By encouraging ideological diversity and refusing to promote a specific ideological stance (whether New Left or Old Left), they have been able to attract many new members who would have been put off by conventional political language of the left that relies so heavily on worn-out phrases and overly-confrontational rhetoric. The *han* system used by the new consumer cooperatives acts as a mutual support system; a vehicle for politicization; and a mechanism for women's empowerment.

By offering organic farmers an increasingly localized marketing outlet as the consumer cooperatives expand their operations, farmers are finally in a position to reject the "take it or leave it" offers of the conventional distribution system of Tokyo-based wholesalers and Nōkyō. The direct-marketing relations between the new consumer cooperatives and organic farmers' groups give both farmers and consumers the opportunity to establish long-term relations based on trust. Contracting with the same farmers year after year, consumers are able to identify who grew their produce and consumer visits to farms are learning experiences for both consumer and farm families. Although not as extensive as contacts between consumers and farmers in co-partnership arrangements, this opportunity for urban consumers to meet and talk with rural farmers is an important aspect of the organic farming movement in Japan.

The home delivery services such as *Daichi wo Mamou Kai* and *Radish Boya*, and the organic food stores such as those affiliated with *Polan Hiroba* unfortunately do not place much importance on establishing social relations between consumers and farmers. There is very little opportunity for farmers contracted to these organizations to meet the people who consume their produce, and conversely, little opportunity for consumers to get to know the farmers who grew their food. In addition, since these organizations were established primarily by men who were involved in the radical student movement of the 1960s and early-1970s, women's issues receive a lower priority on their political agenda compared to the consumer cooperatives and the co-partnerships.

However, they are able to provide organic foods direct from organic farmers to consumers (mainly working mothers) who are interested in obtaining "safe" foods but who are too busy to commit themselves to group involvement (either in *han* groups or in co-partnerships). By being able to offer the shopping convenience of a neighborhood, often family-run organic

food store, and of an organic food delivery service that delivers a wide variety of food and non-food items selected from a computerized list directly to the consumer's front door, these organizations have effectively tapped into a new consumer market for organic foods. The dramatic increase in the number of consumers interested in obtaining organically-grown foods has enabled more farmers to convert to organic farming methods. With the continuously rising demand for organic foods, and the pressing need for many more organic farmers to meet that demand in Japan, the growth potential of the organic farming sector in Japanese agriculture is enormous.

The farmer-directed emphasis of *Polan Hiroba*, with its willingness to renegotiate prices to reflect conventional market prices if they are up; its efforts to help establish a national network of organic farmers and organic farmers' groups so that farmers can have more leverage in their negotiations with consumers' groups; and its support of the establishment of farm family-operated organic food processing facilities, points to the need for a closer evaluation of the need to further farmers' interests on the part of the organic farming movement as a whole. However, by concentrating primarily on developing good social and economic relations between organic farmers and store owners, a large segment of the society is excluded from participation, and the formation of broad coalitions becomes problematical.

Seikyō, with its 14 million household members and 2,400 retail outlets found throughout Japan, is certainly in the position to consolidate the gains that have been made by the participants in the Japanese organic farming movement over the past 25 years. Its support of social activists involved in the peace, women's, labor, and environmental movements, as well as a variety of local and regional movements; its direct-marketing structures with organic farmers and organic farmers' groups throughout Japan; its stress on the importance of the *han* system as a means to politicize and thereby empower women; and its indirect ties to Japan's only remaining progressive party, the Japanese Communist Party, clearly reveals the potential influence it may exert not only on movement members, but on the whole of Japanese society.

Although the JCP and the various New Left groups appear at first glance to continue to be antagonistic toward each other, a closer examination indicates that bridges are being built and tentative crossings are being made, particularly at the grassroots level. The separation of social movement from political party is what has, on the one hand, allowed the Japanese organic farming movement to grow as it has, but, on the other hand, is what is holding it back from attaining the goal it has proclaimed for itself: creating a culture of emancipation based on peace, equality, and social justice. The potential of the Japanese organic farming movement to unite movement with party, and the implications that this has for the political economy of Japan as well as for the transnational solidarity of people working together at the grassroots level to effect social transformation, has significant implications for the future course of humanity.

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