

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF JAPANESE *KAROSHI* (DEATH FROM OVERWORK)*

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Abstract

The Japanese Company System is often seen as a possible model of a democratic and participatory workplace. However, the ILO World Labor Report 1993 revealed that Japanese workers suffered from long working hours and even from *KAROSHI* (death from overwork). The average working hours in Japan of 2,124 hours per year in 1990 were 500 hours longer than in France or Germany. This comparison is, however, based only on the available official statistics. The real working situation in Japan should be considered in terms of so-called service overtime-work (unpaid overtime-work), the gender and company-size gaps, the team-based competition among workers, the weakness of trade unions, and the lack of governmental regulation over private companies. I would like to discuss such issues related to the Japanese workplace and show the alternative idea of Ergology, rather than Ergonomics, similar to the alternative concept of Ecology over Economics.

I. *Long Working Hours in Japan and the Karoshi*

The ILO Report on Japanese Karoshi

The Japanese company system is often seen as a possible model of a democratic and participatory workplace. However, the ILO World Labour Report of 1993 showed us, that Japanese workers suffered from heavy stress associated with long working hours, and even from *Karoshi* (death from overwork). The ILO report concluded that:

“Stress has become one of the most serious health issues of the twentieth century—a problem not just for individuals in terms of physical and mental disability, but for employers and governments who have started to assess the financial damage.”

“Job burnout is frequently associated with people who have become ‘workaholics,’

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working up to 80 hours a week. Such long hours can strain the physical system even though the damage may not be evident until later. Nor is there any evidence that the working long hours will produce a corresponding increase in output. Japanese office workers, for example often stay at their desks to demonstrate loyalty to the company. As measured by the goods that can be bought for one hour's labour, productivity is much higher elsewhere—46 per cent higher in France, for example, and 39 per cent in Germany.”

“In Japan this issue has been brought to a head recently by claims related to the *karoshi*—death from overwork. The Japanese work longer hours than most other industrial nations: officially 2,044 hours in 1990 (compared with 1,646 in France, for example). In fact the working year is generally much longer because of unpaid ‘service overtime.’ A survey by Keidanren, a federation of employers’ organizations, indicated that 88 per cent companies rely on such overtime. Many Japanese bank officials, for example, work 3,000 hours per year—the equivalent of 12 hours a day for 250 days. And a survey by the Institute for Science of Labour indicated that the number of hours worked at one major insurance firm had risen from nine hours a day 15 years previously to 11 hours 20 minutes in 1991.”

“Such long hours inevitably take their toll. One psychiatrist in 1992 reported, for example, that the number of patients consulting him for stress problems had quadrupled over the previous ten years. According to Dr. Tetsunojo Uehata (who coined the word *Karoshi*), the problems first emerged at the end of 1970s when Japanese companies cut their payrolls in response to the oil crisis and increased the load on employees.”

(ILO, *World Labour Report 1993*, Geneva 1993, pp. 65, 67)

In fact, the actual working hours of manufacturing workers in Japan, 2,124 hours per year in 1990 according to official statistics, were approximately 500 hours longer than in France or Germany. This comparison, however, is based only on official statistics. As the ILO report suggests, real working conditions in Japan should also reflect the so-called service overtime work (unpaid overtime work), the gender and company-size gaps, the team-based competition, the weakness of trade unions, and company-oriented governmental regulations.

I would like now to discuss such issues related to the Japanese workplace and present the idea of ergology, as an alternative to ergonomics, similar to the alternative concept of ecology over economics.

Which is a Disease?

The economic growth of the 20th century has been so tremendous that while great material productive forces have been created, the ecological environments of the earth are rapidly being destroyed. The tempo of Japanese development has, likewise, been exceptional. Many business managers and politicians abroad admire the achievement of Japan's successful development, describing it as a miracle, and fear that this development may bring about the Japanization of their country.

Certain economists sometimes liken economic growth to a healthy body, and in adopting this approach diagnose stagnant growth as a disease. These economists coined the terms, ‘British Disease’ to describe the pressure on Britain's economy caused by workers' wage increases, ‘Swedish Disease’ to describe Sweden's welfare burdens, and recently

'Korean Disease' to describe the decline of diligent work ethics as a result of the marked increase in middle class workers in Korea. The term 'Japanese Disease' has now been applied to describe the current economic situation in Japan following the collapse of the bubble economy caused by necessary restructuring of Japan's economic system and adjustment to meet international policies.

However, one of the most important questions we must ask ourselves at this point is whether this 24 hour working rhythm, diagnosed as healthy by western practitioners, is not really a disease. Would oriental or Muslim practitioners make the same diagnosis as their western counterparts? Is not the golden age of economic growth which western medical scientists diagnosed as healthy surely a disease, due to the accumulation of stress at work and symptoms of arteriosclerosis that it has thus far produced?

In drawing our conclusion we should perhaps consider whether a stressful working life with little free time that may bring great material gain is more healthy than a simple but stressless life with a comfortable amount of free time.

This paper will examine these questions by comparing working conditions in Japan with conditions in other countries, and by an examination of the standard of economic democratization based on ecological and human ergological criteria as opposed to industrial economic or ergonomic criteria.

What is "Ergology"?

The word "ergology" may be new for some readers. "Ergology" is derived from the Greek word "ergon," which means work or labour. The study of ergology originated in Germany, but development of this field has essentially taken place in Japan. At the beginning of the 20th century, a famous German biologist, Dr. Ernst Heinrich Haeckel, named the physiology of nature "ecology," and the physiology of human beings "ergology."

In Japan, the word "ergology" was introduced by human anthropologists in the 1950s at the beginning of Japan's so-called 'miracle' period of growth. During the rapid economic growth of the 1960s, Japanese people faced serious environmental pollution and many industrial injuries.

In 1968, Japanese natural scientists, concerned about the trying working conditions brought about by this rapid industrialization, formed a small academic society dedicated to the study of Human Ergology. Thereafter, the society expanded to form a nationwide research group whose aim was to study ideal working rhythms and conditions from a humanitarian perspective. The group's work involved such things as measuring the working tempo and rhythm of factories by employing the circadian rhythm theory, and bringing about an awareness of the vocational diseases brought on by long working hours and the shift work system.

The association today has approximately 300 members belonging to various professions, including anthropology, biology, sports science, medicine and industrial sociology. A quarterly English journal entitled "*Journal of Human Ergology*" is also published by the Human Ergology Society in Tokyo and is jointly edited with the South-East Asian Ergonomics Society.

The question I would like to raise at this point is why Japanese natural scientists have this concern with ergology? The answer, in short, is that this interest clearly stems from

the great change in Japan's social environment which occurred during the period of rapid economic growth. The rapid and unregulated industrialization of the 1950s and '60s brought with it environmental pollution and disease such as Minamata-disease and Itai-itai-disease, problems conventional economic theory was not equipped to treat.

Some humane economists adopted the new theory of ecology, searching with natural scientists and medical doctors for solutions to urban air pollution. Further, a group of lawyers created a new concept in human rights to defend victims of pollution, the right to environment.

Moreover, Japanese working people also suffered a high degree of industrial injury and vocational disease in factories as well as in offices. Conventional western ergonomics, or human engineering, also treated the working environment, but it examined only economic efficiency and productivity.

Ergology was originally a part of ergonomics, but it diverged in order to analyse elements of industrial labour in terms of the more essential criteria of physiology and work-science. Ecology examined environmental problems associated with the production cycles of orthodox economic theories, air pollution and waste cycles for example. Ergologists, likewise, sought to apply such theories, but only in terms of the natural and social limits of human labour.

Ergologists now concern themselves with a number of topics related to working conditions in Japan, such as office design, the speed of factory beltconveyers, the decline of eyesight resulting from computer usage, and of course the problem of Karoshi, death from physical and/or mental exhaustion associated with the long hours and demanding work of Japan's company-centered society.

What is Karoshi?

Perhaps many of you are familiar with the relatively new Japanese word, '*Karoshi*.' It is now in use not only in Japan, but also in advanced capitalist countries, just like the words *KANBAN*, *KEIRETSU*, *NEMAWASHI* and *KAIZEN*. The word Karoshi has come to symbolize Japan's workaholic society.

Karoshi is a socio-medical term used particularly in applications for workers' compensation, especially in cases of cardio-vascular disease brought on by excessive workloads and occupational stress. Dr. Tetsunojo Uehata, who coined the word Karoshi, has defined it as "a permanent disability or death brought on by worsening high blood pressure or arteriosclerosis resulting in diseases of the blood vessels in the brain, such as cerebral hemorrhage, subarachnoidal hemorrhage and cerebral infarction, and acute heart failure and myocardial infarction induced by conditions such as ischemic heart disease (IHD)" (T. Uehata, *A Medical Study of Karoshi*, in, National Defense Counsel for Victims of Karoshi, *KAROSHI*, Mado-sha, Tokyo 1990, p. 98).

Although there are no official government statistics on Karoshi in Japan, the word Karoshi has been widely used particularly by lawyers who have consulted victims through a "Karoshi Hotline Network" established in 1988. Lawyers on the National Defense Counsel for Victims of Karoshi estimate that, annually, about 10,000 workers are victims of Karoshi, a figure similar to the annual number of deaths due to motor vehicle accidents in Japan.

Data received by the "Karoshi Hotline Network" from June 1988 to June 1993 have been compiled into Table 1. The victims of Karoshi came from various occupations, were both male and female, as well as bluecollar and whitecollar workers. The three occupations which figured highest in the data were drivers, journalists and machinery workers. However, recently bank officials, school teachers, construction workers, and foreign migrant workers have begun to figure more prominently in the data received by the Network. Directors and managers, including some Presidents of big companies, also accounted for a number of the cases reported to the Network.

TABLE 1. SUMMARY OF 3,132 CASES REPORTED THE KAROSHI HOTLINE NETWORK FROM JUNE 1988 TO 1993

1 Contents of Consultation	Total	3,132
	Workers' Compensation	2,265 (72.5%)
	(Death Cases)	(1,466) (47.0%)
	Health Care	797 (25.6%)
	Others	59 (1.9%)
2 Clients	Total	3,062
	Workers	633 (20.7%)
	Wives	1,549 (50.6%)
	Other relatives	560 (18.3%)
	Trade Unions	32 (1.0%)
	Others	288 (9.4%)
3 Age	Total	3,062
	under 30 year old	197 (6.5%)
	30-39 years	362 (11.8%)
	40-49 years	794 (25.9%)
	50-59 years	797 (26.0%)
	over 60 years old	174 (5.7%)
	D.K.	739 (24.1%)
4 Sex	Total	2,265
	Male	2,136 (94.3%)
	Female	102 (4.5%)
	D.K.	27 (1.2%)
5 Occupation	Total	2,265
	Director	96 (4.2%)
	Manager	454 (20.0%)
	Manufacturing Worker	572 (25.2%)
	Office Worker	491 (21.7%)
	Driver	220 (9.7%)
	Technical Worker	179 (7.9%)
	Governmental Employee	160 (7.1%)
6 Name of Disease	Total	2,265
	Cerebral hemorrhage	363 (16.0%)
	Subarachnoidal hemorrhage	372 (16.4%)
	Cerebral thrombus, infarction	149 (6.6%)
	Myocardial infarction	225 (9.9%)
	Heart failure	393 (17.4%)
	Others	763 (33.7%)

source: Summary of Karoshi Hotline, as of June 11, 1993.

Long Working Hours

Why is the incidence of Karoshi so high in Japan? The main reason is clearly related to the disproportionately longer working hours in Japan. According to an official international comparison with other advanced countries conducted by the Ministry of Labour, Japanese working hours per year are about 100–200 hours more than in the US or in Britain, and 400–500 hours more than in Germany, France or North European countries (see Table 2).

These official statistics, however, reflect neither the real situation nor the feelings of ordinary working people in Japan.

Firstly, these statistics are derived from the average working hours of firms with over 5 employees. However, there is a significant gap of working conditions between big companies and small ones. In Japan we have many small companies with under 30 employees. In fact, people working for small businesses comprise about 60 per cent of the workforce. Further, these workers often work longer hours and harder than their big business counterparts, as many small business companies cannot operate on a regular five day work week. Under the pressure of the subcontract system to big business, these small companies must often open even on holidays.

Secondly, these statistics were calculated from official figures received from the various companies. However, Japanese companies usually regulate official overtime work in order to reduce the cost of overtime pay. While companies regulate official overtime, they often demand of their employees what is known as service overtime, overtime without pay. According to the ILO Report, this overtime can reach up to 100 hours per month for bank officials.

TABLE 2. INTERNATIONAL COMPARISON OF ACTUAL WORKING HOURS
(Estimated values for 1990, limited primarily to workers in manufacturing
and production industries)

	Hours actually worked			Overtime work	Days worked
	1990	1979	1970	1990	1990
Japan	2,124 hrs.	2,159	2,269	219 hrs.	247 days
United States	1,948	1,907	1,913	192	226
United Kingdom	1,953	1,886	1,939	187	219
Germany (West)	1,598	1,717	1,889	99	208
France	1,683	1,712	1,872	—	211
Iceland	2,016	(no data)		—	
Italy	1,717	1,738	1,905	—	
Norway	1,650	1,572	1,794	—	
Denmark	1,635	1,639	1,829	—	
Finland	1,608	(no data)		—	
Netherlands	1,584	1,669	1,893	—	
Sweden	1,472	1,513	1,744	—	

sources: Data for Japan, US, UK, France, Germany in 1990 comes from the Labour Standard Bureau, Ministry of Labour, Japan. Data for other Countries in 1990 comes from the SAF, *Fakta om Sveriges ekonomi 1992*, Stockholm, p. 13. Data for 1970 and 1979 are from J.B. Shore, *Workers of the World, Unwind, Technology Review*, Nov./Dec. 1991, MIT Press, p. 26.

According to another official survey in which the workers themselves were interviewed (by the Management and Coordination Agency of the Government), the average working hours per year came to over 2,400. From this figure we can estimate a worker's average service overtime is approximately 350 hours per year.

Thirdly, the official statistics do not reflect the difference in working hours between male and female workers. Female workers in Japan, for the most part, work only part-time and in a clerical capacity. These positions do not generally demand the same amount of overtime as positions held by male workers. If we view only the statistics for adult male workers as provided by another governmental source, the actual working hours per year increase to about 2,600, 500 hours more than indicated by official statistics.

Additionally, it is well known that housing is both limited and excessively expensive in central city areas where the companies are located. Thus, workers often spend over 2 hours a day commuting from their homes to their workplaces. A typical Japanese worker leaves home at 7 in the morning and returns after 11 at night. Some call this lifestyle "Seven-Eleven."

We thus estimate that 8 to 10 million Japanese workers, or one fourth of the male workforce, work over 3,000 hours annually, and amongst them are surely many potential Karoshi victims.

II. *Non-Decision-Making by the Japanese Government*

Without Official Acknowledgement, No Policy on Karoshi

Karoshi is of course a socio-medical phenomenon. It is now so widely known in Japan that about a half of all Japanese answer that they (or their family members) feel anxious over the prospect of death from overwork (*The Yomiuri Shinbun*, February 13, 1993).

However, curiously enough, there has not been any official acknowledgement from the government on "Karoshi," which has not appeared in any of the official papers published by the Japanese Government. *The Annual Economic Survey of Japan*, *Annual Report on the National Life for the Fiscal Year*, *Annual Report on Labour*, or *Annual Report on Health and Welfare*, were all published without any mention of "Karoshi."

Japan's Ministry of Labour informally protested to the ILO when the ILO printed the word "Karoshi" in its 1993 Report, because the Japanese Government does not formally acknowledge the existence of Karoshi. One reason given for this is that the Japanese Medical Science Society has not yet used the term "Karoshi" as an official cause of death. Medical doctors have up to now used a more neutral word "*Totsuzen-shi* (Sudden Death)" instead, as "Sudden Death" can occur from multiple causes and cannot be defined solely as death from overwork. Amongst the statistics produced by the Ministry of Health and Welfare for their annual report, no figures were given for the incidence of "Karoshi," reflecting the government's lack of policy on the issue.

Perhaps the reason for the government's failure to acknowledge "Karoshi" can be traced to the liability they would assume under the Workers' Compensation Insurance system. If the Ministry of Labour were to admit death from overwork as an official cause

of death, the Workers' Compensation Insurance Scheme would be put under great pressure. I should at first map out the general framework of working conditions under Japanese Labour Law.

The Labour Standards Act without General Standards

The general framework of working conditions in Japan is set out in the Labour Standards Act, which was revised 1993. It states that the maximum working hours is 8 hours a day and 40 hours a week. However, there are many loopholes in this law.

For example, this law cannot be applied to all workers. In some service sectors (for example, transportation) and small to medium sized companies, the regulations cannot be applied. As over 64 per cent of the working population in Japan work for such companies, we find many "exceptions" to the Labour Standards Act, with people working in excess of the prescribed 8 hours a day and 40 hours a week.

Further, there is no official regulation limiting overtime work. However, it would be advisable for employer and employee representatives, preferably trade unions, to meet and reach agreement on limits to overtime. Such an agreement would also facilitate clearer definition and higher statistical accuracy on working hours. And within the limits on hours set by the agreement, workers should obey their employers' request for overtime work.

It is well-known that Japanese trade unions are organized at the company level, and the unions are weak and often agree to things like limitless overtime work. For example, one agreement stated that, "overtime work should be limited to no more than 5 hours a day for males and 2 hours for females," but "in the case of male workers during 'special busy' times required for production, maintenance or repair, the limit can be 15 hours a day." This agreement actually means that the employer can order workers to work up to 23 hours a day!

Moreover, current overtime pay rates under the Labour Standards Act are "more than 25 per cent of the normal wage and the premium for late night work shall be more than 50 per cent of normal wage." This "normal wage" in the Japanese context excludes things like family allowance, transportation allowances and bonuses, which play a great role in the Japanese wage system. For this reason overtime pay rates in Japan are exceptionally low in comparison with other countries. Employers however rely on this overtime in order to adapt their production to current business trends, and thus can generally count on their workers to be flexible enough to work overtime when requested.

Thus, we may conclude that the Japanese management system is protected by government policies which allow employers to arbitrarily determine their employee's overtime hours.

The Ineffective Workers' Compensation System

The government has hitherto taken a negative view towards claims for workers' compensation by Karoshi victims or their dependents.

The basic role of the workers' compensation system is to compensate victims by providing income and other necessities to maintain them and their dependents at an acceptable standard of living, with the further function of attempting to discourage the future occur-

rence of similar injuries or diseases by means of its insurance system and active investigation of working conditions. The criteria governing compensation coverage, its content and the amounts of funding allotted to the compensation system, must all be tailored to fulfilling these goals.

The reality, however, is that the Ministry of Labour seems to be attempting to restrict the payment of benefits to Karoshi victims. The Ministry of Labour's criteria for compensation eligibility are particularly strict, but the Ministry is known to actually be employing an even stricter formula that appears in a confidential manual for inhouse use only. There are also administrative barriers for victims to overcome, such as time-consuming proceedings and the task of gathering the necessary evidence, a process which proves to be a tremendous burden on the applicants filing claims. The companies to which the victims once belonged, naturally wishing to avoid any publicity which might give them a bad name in the public eye, tend not to help in a victim's claim for compensation.

The legislation guiding worker's compensation claims in Japan until 1987 provided mainly for drivers in traffic accident, for miners in cave-in accidents, and for the industrial injuries of machinery workers, but not for death from overwork. The dependents of a worker, who died after 24 hours of particularly hard work, were only granted an insurance payout.

In 1987, the law was revised, but the basic problems still remain. According to our ergological research, the accumulation of physical and mental stress due to hard work over a long period of time is a significant cause of Karoshi. The guideline of new law, however, states that the only acceptable cases of death from overwork for which insurance may be claimed are when workers work twice the hours of a regular working week without a holiday, or triple the regular working hours the day before dying. Thus, if someone works 5 days over 16 hours a day but has one holiday and then dies, any claim for insurance would be unsuccessful. Following the revision of this law, dissatisfied families of victims and lawyers took their complaints to court, but they failed to bring about any further revision to the law.

The number of applicants claiming insurance by reason of Karoshi annually is about 500, which is only 5 per cent of the 10,000 victims of Karoshi each year. Further, of those applicants, the number who make successful claims are only between 30 to 40 per year, that is, under 10 per cent of the total applications and less than one per cent of annual Karoshi victims.

Thus, in the eyes of the Japanese government and politicians, there is no Karoshi problem at all in contemporary Japan. Indeed, official statistics do not register figures on Karoshi and there seems to be some deliberate effort on the behalf of policy makers to prevent this issue from making the government's agenda. This is a typical case of "non-decision-making" as defined by P. Bachrach & M. Baraz (*Power and Poverty*, New York 1970) or of the "concealing mechanism of the state apparatus" as put forward by Claus Offe (*Strukturprobleme des kapitalistischen Staats*, Frankfurt/M 1972).

III. *Social Effects and Determinants of Long Working Hours*

Five Flaws in Japanese Society

The long working hours of the average Japanese worker also appear to have some negative ramifications for Japanese society as a whole. Professor John Dower of MIT once characterized five flaws he believed to be evident in Japan's society related to Japan's rise to economic superpower status.

The first of these is "wealth without pleasure." While Japan is a massive producer it has little time for the consumption of these products. This production has made the country wealthy, but people cannot gain pleasure from just their incomes or from the nation's wealth. One Australian trade union publication illustrated a satirical figure of the workaholic Japanese (see the next page).

The second of these flaws is "equality without freedom." In Japanese society most people earn enough to enjoy a relatively comfortable standard of living. The gap in salaries between managers and average workers is perhaps smaller than in the US or other advanced countries. However, this type of equality is too uniform. Workers rarely express their own opinions or exhibit any originality in their work. In fact, this is often discouraged.

This lack of freedom is further displayed during political election campaigns. During elections it is not uncommon for companies to 'recommend' to their employees certain political parties or candidates with which that company has some affiliation. Workers who are reluctant to follow the company's recommendation may be considered not to be in harmony with the objectives of the company and even receive a cut in their bonus as a means of re-education. In short, Japanese workers are expected to act in a uniform manner without expressing any individuality.

The third flaw is "high level education without originality." Japanese children attend school approximately 240 days per year, 2 months more than in the US and 3 months more than in France. This figure is very close to the number of working days per year for company workers. Japanese children study hard and have a reputation for exceptional results in international education competitions, especially in mathematics and history. However, children are taught a very standardized syllabus, sufficient for entering a good university and later becoming a good company worker.

The recruitment system of Japanese companies is perhaps different to that of other countries in that the professional training received at university in any given field of study has no bearing on a freshman's recruitment. Rather, a company recruits its new employees based on the name, or more precisely the ranking of the university they attended. University rankings are determined by the difficulty of the institution's entry examination. For this reason school children must study hard from kindergarten until university entry in order to ensure a place at a highly ranked institution.

In the battle to win a place at a well regarded university, school children often attend cramming or supplementary schools known as "*Juku*" in addition to their regular schools. This system breeds a highly educated workforce, but is not conducive to the development

THE OVERWORKED JAPANESE AS SEEN BY AUSTRALIA

Japanese workers are running too fast, as in a racing car with malfunctioning brakes.

Overtime has now become part of the culture of Japanese working life. Japanese workers, like geisha girls have not yet learned how to say "no" to employers demands.

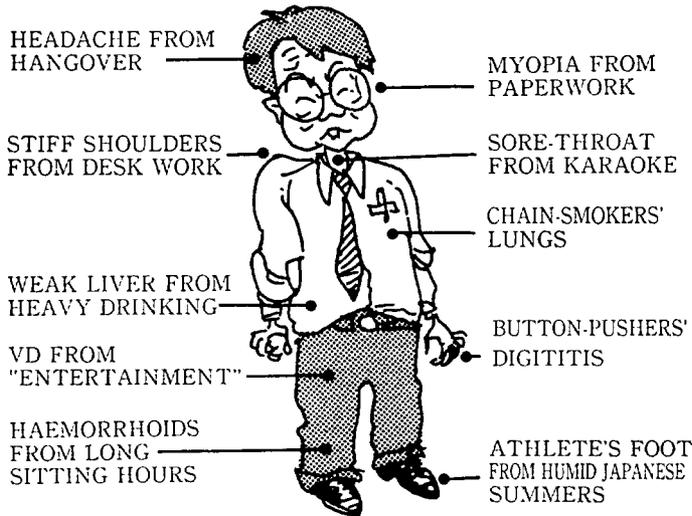
White-collar personnel

keep their jobs to work harder and longer hours.

Rising land prices in the cities force Japanese to move to the suburbs and commute back to their office each day.

In Tokyo, taking three hours

THE SALARYMAN'S HEALTH



Source: The Metal Workers, Organ of the metals and Engineering Workers Union, November 1997, p. 19.

of originality or individual talent.

The fourth of these flaws is "familyism without real family bonds." A husband may work hard to provide for the well being of his wife and children, but in doing this, is left with little quality time with his family. Generally, the working father will only be able to eat dinner with his wife and children on a Sunday night. Moreover, upon being trans-

ferred to another city, it is common for the father to leave his wife and children at home and take up a separate residence (*Tanshin-funin* in Japanese).

Japan has a relatively low rate of divorce, which can perhaps be largely attributed to the economic dependence of wives on their husbands' income. Japanese society may, in some terms, be described as family-oriented, but in actual fact family life has all but collapsed due to the society's overbearing emphasis on work.

The final and fifth flaw characterized by Professor Dower is "economic superpower status without leadership in the world." From a political perspective, due to lack of free time to consider political or public matters, Japanese people cannot fully utilize the democratic institutions given to them during the American occupation. The Japanese government, and politics itself, is too economy-orientated and fails to address key national and international political issues.

The average worker shows little interest in diplomatic or international issues except when they relate to the domestic economy or more precisely the well-being of their company. Politics is a sphere monopolized by professional politicians, not statesmen, because they have the time to treat public problems and because they are agents of the business world. However, without free time for ordinary citizens to debate public issues, there can be no real democracy.

Four Determinants of Long Working Hours in Japan

Why is it that Japanese people work so hard? Are they very diligent by nature, their national character of collectivism? I do not take such a cultural approach. The historical background may be important, but there is no clear evidence that Japanese people before the Meiji Restoration in 1868 worked harder than the people of other pre-industrial societies. I will now treat what I believe to be the four essential factors that determine contemporary Japan's long working hours.

The first is the weak power of workers' organizations and their inability to launch successful protests to reduce working hours. Japanese trade unions are isolated within each large company, and there are generally no unions for workers in small companies. The unions were, however, successful in securing higher wages for their members during Japan's period of rapid economic growth, but they made no effort to bring about shorter working hours.

The second factor relates to the Japanese company's management system. Within any given company, strong competition within industry sectors, among sections within firms and factories, and among team-based small groups are the engine powering its production process. This organized competition lies at the heart of Japanese management practices. I have discussed these aspects of Japanese management in more depth in my book published in English, entitled *"Is Japanese Management Post-fordist?"* (edited with Rob Steven, Mado-sha, Tokyo 1993).

The third point determining Japan's long working hours is the non-decision-making by government in regard to working hours. In its 5 year economic plan under the Miyazawa Cabinet, the Japanese government declared that it would bring about 1,800 working hour year. However, the government effected no policy or regulation geared towards restricting overtime work or reducing the incidence of Karoshi. Industrial relations in Japan are

perhaps the most “free-market” or “non-regulated” sphere of a company’s operation, with only minimal “administrative guidance” from the government.

The fourth point, paradoxically, relates to international pressure. Japanese companies and the government appeared to examine the prospect of reducing working hours only after attacks from the US and other western governments who argued against the “unequal competition in the world economy” that Japan’s disproportionately high working hours was causing. For example, the five-day working-week system of national universities was adopted only after US-Japan trade friction reached boiling point. Further, the Miyazawa cabinet’s plan to reduce the annual working hours to 1,800 as a part of their 5 year economic plan was also a product of international pressure.

However, Japan’s integration into the world economy has meant that bank officials and workers of securities or insurance companies must keep a constant watch on the world market so that they may adjust to changes in financial markets and to foreign exchange rate fluctuations. Such workers, as well as those of trading companies and transnational corporations must often be prepared to work 24 hours a day to adjust to the movements in world markets, from the Tokyo, the New York to the London markets. This need for 24 hours alertness quite obviously causes tremendous mental stress and can be strongly linked to the recent increase in young Karoshi victims from banks or securities companies.

IV. *Conclusion—From Ergonomics to Ergology*

The collapse of the bubble economy may have played a role in the slight reduction of official working hours from 2,052 in 1990 to 1,972 in 1992. However, it did not lead to a corresponding reduction in actual working hours. According to research conducted by some lawyers and ergologists, service overtime in fact grew following the reduction of paid-overtime. A small reduction of official working hours was also seen immediately following the oil crisis of 1973–75, when Japanese companies employed what was described as a “shape-up management” style in order to survive in the world market.

The most important issue confronting the Japanese workplace today is the need to change the present conception of labour. In order to bring about economic democracy in Japan, working hours need to be reduced and the incidence of Karoshi eliminated.

A certain degree of international pressure calling for “fair competition in the world market” might be welcomed for this purpose. However, outside pressures often create nationalistic reactions from within the country. The undertaking of an ergological study into Japanese working conditions and the promotion of increased free time are two possible vehicles that may be used to change the current conception of labour.

The lawyers of the Karoshi-Hotline-Network further proposed some alternative ways to survive in Japan’s workaholic society. These proposals appear to be sounder than the government’s five year plan to reduce to 1,800 the official number of working hours per year.

The following is a summary of these alternative proposals.

- (1) For overworked workers,
Your company will run without your work. Make time to break your tense work cycle!
Do not work through 24 hours a day! Make sure you give yourself sufficient free

time daily!

Find time to talk with your wife and revive yourself at home with your children!

Determine your own overtime, rather than have it determined by your company! After five is your own time! Do not rely so much on such aids as stamina drinks to get through the day!

Take a rest before you too become one of the victims of Karoshi!

(2) For housewives,

House work and nursing should be a cooperative effort with your husband! Divide the household chores!

Dinner should be a pleasurable time for all the family! Please make a happy household!

Try to ensure that there is good communication between parent and children!

Make a family culture together with your husband!

(3) For you and your fellow workers,

Decide with each other on a no-overtime day each week, and negotiate a regular working cycle!

Do not make an agreement that allows flexible overtime hours! Pressure your union to raise the rate of pay for overtime!

Attempt to realize your 1,800 working hours per year by such means as suggesting worksharing schemes!

The employment of more workers under this scheme should allow you to take annual holidays freely without fear of overburdening your fellow team members!

Bring the Japanese Constitution into your company! Human rights and freedoms must be revived at your workplace!

(4) For a comfortable society,

Complete realization of a 40 hour working week by rigid application of the Labour Standards Act!

Implement a five-day work week system both at the workplace and at school!

Restrict any kind of overtime through strong administrative regulations over working time!

Reform the standard of Workers' Compensation Insurance for Karoshi victims!

More time at home for men, more time at work for women! Real equality between men and women begins with the elimination of disproportionate working hours!

My conclusion is now clear. Democracy in the workplace is heavily dependent on political democracy. Further, for political democracy, the elimination of excessive working hours is crucial, at least in contemporary Japan. Moreover, to realize a free and comfortable ecological society, we must revise our conception of labour from the present ergonomic perspective to an ergological one.