

Cozy or tense? Rethinking employee voice within enterprise unionism in Japan¹

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1. Introduction

This study aims to elucidate the methods by which Japanese companies and labor unions preserve or establish antagonistic relationships and refrain from engaging in collusive employment arrangements. In recent years, there has been increased scrutiny of the extent and substance of workers' voices, which has been influenced by a range of social phenomena such as wage stagnation, declining unionization rates, and the expansion of the non-regular workforce. Thus, it is socially indicative to explore the tense or contentious relationships that exist between employers and workers and how such relationships were constructed.

In this study, the term "collusion" signifies a state in which management exerts control over labor union via various means due to the enterprise unionism structure and alters the union's relationship with the external labor movement, making it a de facto subcontracting agency of the company (Shirai, 1968, p. 42). The opposing concept of collusion is "tension." If labor unions are able to express their own will, the monitoring of management by employees, who are key stakeholder groups in any company, is considered to be functioning effectively. When labor-management relations are characterized by adequate tension, the voices of front-line workers in manufacturing, sales, and other areas of the company are believed to be reflected in management's decision-making processes, and employees are thought to have the ability to negotiate terms and conditions.

(1) Theoretical background and derivation of research question

In reviewing prior studies, two areas of academic focus were identified in this study. One is research on employees' voice behavior, and the other is on how employees negotiate the terms and conditions of their employment within enterprise unionism that is unique to Japan.

Prior studies on employee voice behaviors

The choice of voice behaviors among the options available to unions is examined within the framework of "exit, voice, and loyalty," as presented by Hirschman (1970). Research on employee voice has been conducted in several academic areas. The mechanisms, conditions, and effects of employee opinions on management are generally found to have a positive impact on business performance (Freeman & Lazeur, 1995; Ichniowski et al. 1997). However, studies have not progressed across borders between organizational behavior (OB), human resource management (HRM), and industrial relations (IR) (Wilkinson et al., 2020). Wilkinson et al. (2020) argued that the IR field has

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focused mainly on workers' rights and has been concerned with the unbalanced "positions" of workers and management, based on the assumption that workers and management are inherently confrontational. On the other hand, the OB field is based on the assumption that employees cooperate with management and that their voice behaviors contribute to the performance and development of the organization.

In this study, labor unions were primarily examined for their role in voice behaviors. This is due to the fact that collective bargaining by unions is more closely associated with the reality of wage and other negotiations in Japan than individual workers do. Unions are legally recognized organizations that represent workers in Japan. Studies on voice behaviors focused on those by unions, meanwhile, consider both management involvement and the negotiation of terms and conditions as "voice" (Freeman & Medoff, 1984; Hisamoto, 2019). This is different from the case where the subject is "employees." Especially in Japanese medium and large companies under the enterprise unionism structure, "employees" and "union members" are almost identical regardless of whether they are blue-collar or white-collar workers, if those employees are at the section manager level or below.

Presumption that labor and management have a contentious relationship in the context of Japanese enterprise-based unions does not reflect the reality. Furthermore, bargaining over employment conditions, which has not been a primary concern of OB, may serve as an indicator of whether employer-employee relations are collaborative. Considering the diverse nature of academic fields, therefore, this study recognizes "voice" as both means of a proactive behavior to improve the company's operations (engagement voice: EV) and as a negotiation tool for working conditions (negotiation voice: NV). If labor-management relations are not cozy, this study posits that employees can voice "about protecting workers and promoting workplace democracy" (Wilkinson et al., 2020, p. 3).

Prior studies on voice behavior within enterprise-based unions

Enterprise-based unions in Japan have been analyzed in terms of their unique corporatist behavior, which encompasses the equal treatment of blue- and white-collar workers, lifetime employment, and seniority-based wages (Gordon, 1985; Hisamoto, 2015). This form of union is thought to serve as a "distributional function supported by production principles," with unions ensuring the maintenance of production activities and thus aligning the interests of the company and its members.

However, some experts have long maintained that there is a fundamental flaw in enterprise unionism that may place Japanese workers at a disadvantage. Critics argue that the upper echelons of these unions are sometimes incorporated into the employers' human resource management systems, leading to conflicts of interest and weakening the influence of the unions. This system can become a double-edged sword, resulting in cozy labor-management relations and a decline in the bargaining power of unions (Fujibayashi, 1963; Oh, 2022). In Japan, the unionization rate has been on the decline due to labor market deregulation and an increase in the number of nonregular and female workers, backed by changes in industrial structure and increased global competition. Moreover, many companies have spun off their manufacturing operations and transformed themselves into multi-layered subcontracting structures since the 1990s, leading to the re-emergence of status inequalities, as companies have reduced the wage levels of blue-collar workers and increased the number of non-regular workers.

Even under enterprise unionism, industry-wide and nationwide federations of unions would still exert pressure on managers from the outside, they have, however, limited influence in labor-management negotiations. During Japan's period of rapid economic growth, such federations and other companies' wage increases played certain roles in wage

negotiations. However, external parties add only limited tension to labor-management relations today (Matsumura, 2015). Nonetheless, many Japanese unions still function effectively today despite these inherent problems owed to the structure of enterprise unionism (Nagumo, 2023).

The following perspectives concerning the framework of company-based unions and bargaining over conditions of employment have been identified from the above information: it is not necessarily the case that all unions are unable to negotiate, as the level of collusion or tension between labor and management depends on the actual state of the union's voice behaviors. Additionally, most previous studies have addressed general trends in labor-management relations but have not provided an explanation for how unions and firms have attempted to avoid collusion (Noda, 2006). The aim of this paper is to elucidate the mechanism by which enterprise-based unions have managed to maintain their voice behaviors despite their structural limitations.

Deriving a research question

Based on a review of previous studies, this study aimed to respond to the following research question:

How did unions acquire and maintain the functions of engagement voice (EV) and negotiation voice (NV) within the structure of enterprise-unionism, even during the reform period?

This study investigated the research question through analyzing how company-based unions have acquired and maintained the function of NV, despite the disadvantage faced by workers during periods of business downturn.

2. Methodology

(1) The survey targets and methodology

Three companies and their respective major labor unions were interviewed and analyzed in this study. The intention is not to generalize the voice behaviors of more than 20,000 labor unions in Japan.

The chemical and chemical fiber manufacturing industries were chosen for examination, as they represent a significant aspect of Japan's modernization and industrialization, as chemical products play a crucial role in defining a nation's economic and war potential (Inoki, 2016, p. 125). This industry has been significant in absorbing a substantial labor force from rural areas alongside Japan's modernization, while also undergoing a lengthy period of reforms in a competitive environment, particularly after the country's rapid economic growth period. Three major companies and their relationships with their core labor unions, namely Sekisui Chemical, Teijin, and Company C, were selected for this study after consultation with the Kansai Productivity Center. The study also includes companies with diverse histories of employer-employee relations and those without collusive relations.

Human resource managers of each company and labor union leaders were selected for the survey, as they are representatives of companies and unions in direct labor-management dialogues. An exploratory approach was employed to arrange and reorganize the verbal information gathered from these individuals. Data collection was concluded once the study reached its "theoretical saturation," the point when no additional concepts were found. In total, 16 interviewees participated in the survey².

² Interviews were conducted between May and December 2021. Information was gathered through direct interviews, online interviews, telephone calls, and partially by emails, depending on the social situation associated with the spread of COVID19.

(2) Survey contents and analysis

This study aimed to investigate the means by which labor unions acquired and maintained their power to voice by conducting a qualitative study based on primary data collection. The focus of this study is on the voice function of unions, including formal and informal channels for labor-management dialogue for workers to voice their concerns.

The survey questions used as a general framework for the study were: “current formal and informal channels of voice,” “timing and background of establishing these channels,” and “the voice situation prior to these periods of business downturn and reforms.” In this study, channels in which unions take initiatives to voice under collective agreements were defined as “official,” while other channels were defined as “unofficial.”

This study compared the periods before and after business downturns and reforms in order to uncover the contrast. The original assumption was that during times of economic hardship, management may seek to reduce employment, while unions may urge employers to maintain employment, leading to tension in the labor-management relationship.

A modified grounded theory approach (M-GTA) (Kinoshita, 2007) was utilized in this study, which entailed the collection of verbatim data from interviews, emails exchanged with companies and unions, and publications issued by these entities. M-GTA is a method that aims to generate theories that explain human behaviors and the data derived from sensory understandings. The theories generated by M-GTA are expected to be practical and applicable in real-world settings. In this study, the use of M-GTA was deemed appropriate as it allowed for the construction of a theoretical process that outlined how unions utilized two types of voice behaviors during times of hardship. The verbatim transcripts were analyzed and categorized into pre- and post-reform definitions, concepts, and categories, and each item was compared in a paired relationship to determine whether the relations between them became more collaborative or confrontational during and after the reforms.

The data obtained from the interviews were classified into three distinct categories: the historical assumptions of labor-management relations, formal and informal expressions of voice (including various subcategories) before, during, and after the reforms, and newly emerging forms of voice (including various subcategories) before, during, and after the reforms. The verbal data were analyzed by sorting, organizing, and grouping similar and different information, and then labeling each data point with a primary code based on its semantic interpretation. These primary codes were further organized into secondary codes (categories), which were grouped into nine concepts, such as the characteristics of labor-management dialogue, formal and informal channels of voice, persuasiveness of newly emerging forms of voice, and inequalities between different statuses within company groups. This process resulted in a total of six categories and nine concepts (ten before the reform).

3. Findings and analysis

Figure 1 illustrates the structure of these concepts, arranged in pairs before and after the reform³.

Figure 1

Structural diagram of interview data, categorization, and semantic structuration⁴

³ Efforts were made to enhance the validity of the analysis. Analysis were examined by a group of researchers in the field of business administration, comprising university professors and doctoral students. They were also examined by the interviewees to eliminate discrepancies.

⁴ Due to space limitation, the author will disclose more detailed information upon request.

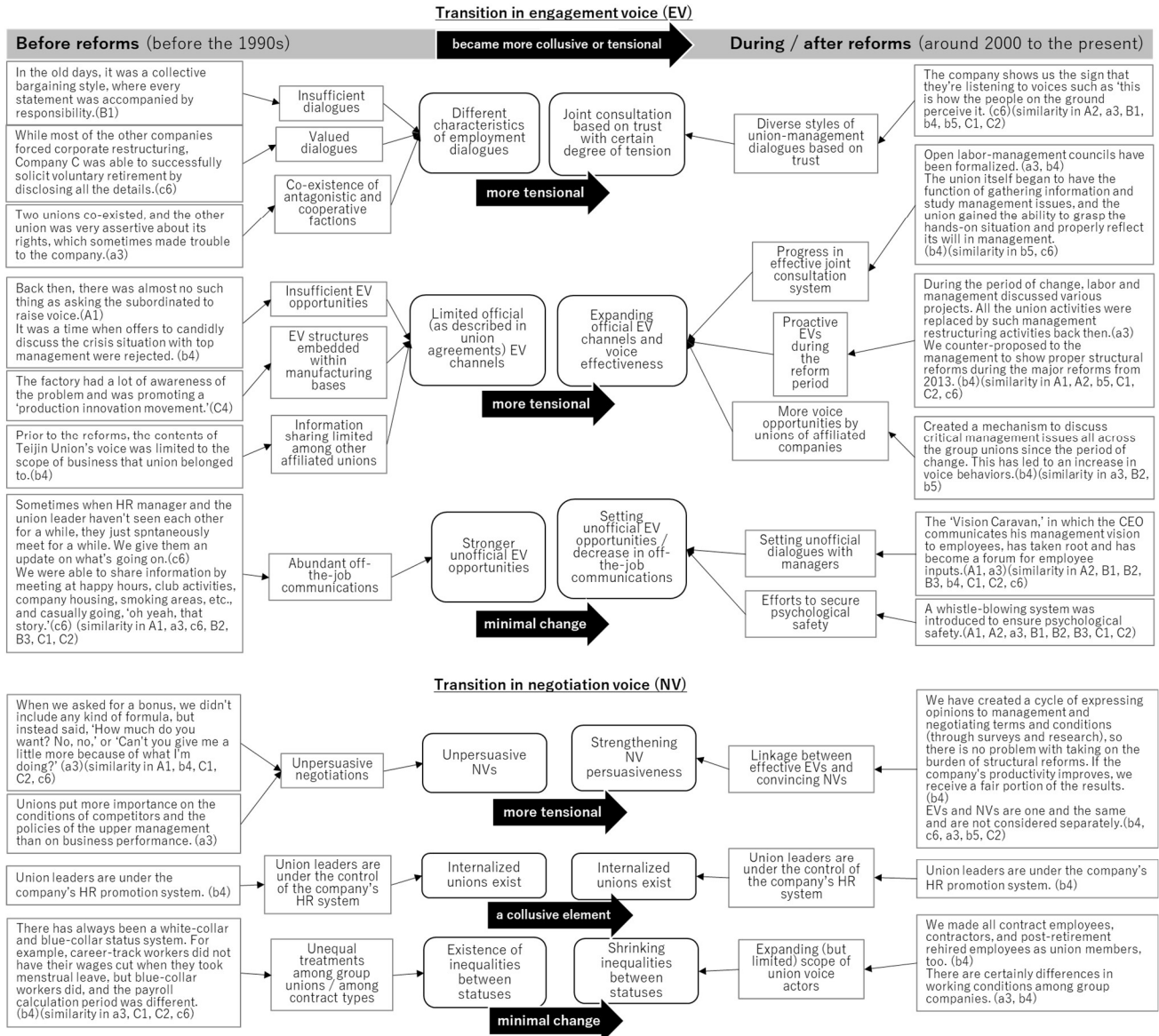


Figure 2 provides an outline of the differences found by labor unions.

Figure 2

Summary of findings by labor union

	History of LU split	NV	EV & NV cohesiveness	HR system of LU executives	Alignment with group LUs	Expansion of union membership to non-regular employees	Industry-level union affiliation
Sekisui Chemical LU	Yes	Effective	Not recognized	Absorbed by the corporate HR system	Exist	No	Japanese Federation of Chemical Workers' Unions (loose engagement)
Teijin LU	No	Effective	Recognized	Independent	Strong	Yes	UA ZENSEN (strong engagement)
Company C LU	No	Effective	Recognized	Independent	Exist	Planned	UA ZENSEN (strong engagement)

After the reforms, the unions' EVs became more institutionalized and encouraged. Unlike NV, union EVs were found to provide value to management and foster trust between labor and management, thereby enhancing the persuasiveness of NV. Unions were found to strategically employ the two types of voice behaviors in a unified manner.

During this period, the union strengthened the skills in EV that contribute to the company's business performance by encouraging formal and informal labor-management channels of dialogue. Furthermore, the union has modified the content of NVs to make them more persuasive to managers, such as introducing a formula for calculating salaries based on performance rather than simply demanding an increase.

(1) Before the reforms

The pre-reform system lacked sufficient design to motivate EVs despite some differences among the samples. For instance, opportunities for EVs were confined to the occasions of official labor negotiations, such as the annual spring labor offensive (*shunto*). Communication between labor and management was evidently insufficient.

We demanded our (union's) management participation to express our intentions, but this was not easy. (snip) We continued to warn the company of union's voice, but our proposal was rejected. In 1978, the company proposed slashing more than 1,000 employees. How they recognized and what they did were problematic. In fact, the number of retirements and transfers reached 2,000. (snip) Finally in 1992, we reached the point of holding a formal management council meeting with CEO of the time.⁵

(2) During and after the reforms

During the reform period around 2000, the three unions successfully formalized labor-management council meetings with top management despite the increased risk of employees being put at a disadvantage during the period of business downturns. Concurrently, similar mechanisms were established at the request of the labor union at the levels of business divisions, subsidiary companies, and manufacturing plants as a result of spin-offs and the shift to the holding company system. These voice behaviors during the period of reforms demonstrate that the proactive participation of unions through EV was institutionalized. Moreover, companies have taken a proactive stance in establishing informal means of communication between managers and workers.

In addition to CEO's and division managers' roundtables, we were conducting dialogues with top managers a greater number of individual businesses around 2000. (snip) Those dialogues were mostly related to whether people would be transferred or laid-off, so at that time union activities were all replaced by such management restructuring activities.⁶

Unions have been proactively engaging in research and information gathering to enhance their value in a combination of both proactive EVs that contribute to a company's performance and persuasive NVs that are mutually acceptable. The Chairperson of Sekisui Chemical Labor Union has recognized the need for the union headquarters to act as a strategic consultant that conducts surveys, research, and offers advice to each workplace. At Teijin, on the other hand, labor-management dialogue was considered inadequate during the period of aggressive business expansion led by a charismatic manager until the 1970s. However, the company has since actively addressed this issue by establishing a system that encourages EVs that contribute to corporate development through union's proactive research functions.

⁵ July 27, 2021; Special Advisor (former Chair), Teijin Union.

⁶ May 13, 2021; Chair of the Executive Board, Sekisui Chemical Union.

*When Teijin carried out the structural reform of the textile business (snip), we made a reasonable proposal based on our actual experience in the field, and the plan was revised. (snip) Since we always create a cycle of expressing our opinions to management and negotiating terms, there is no problem shouldering the burden of structural reform. (snip) If Teijin's productivity improves, we receive the results as dividends. I think it worked because we have been able to turn this cycle around.*⁷

Unions did not only aim for short-term advantages. In order to safeguard the company's long-term interests, Teijin Labor Union sometimes were willing to make concessions about pay raise when the company was trying to increase new hires. Furthermore, the union consented to amend the collective agreement to address any potential modifications that could prove disadvantageous to employees by demonstrating a recognition of managers' right to implement organizational reforms. The following example pertains to union's successful negotiation of the collective labor agreement while simultaneously adhering to the NV principle, despite having no alternative but to accept the transfer of personnel upon the establishment of a holding company and its subsidiaries.

*Many employees insisted that they remain with the parent company after the spin-off, but we had a different idea. The spin-off meant that each operating company was responsible for its own business. (snip) So we had to accept that many employees will be transferred to subsidiaries. (snip) At that time, the general practice was to conclude individual labor agreements in each subsidiary, but since Teijin had a number of operating companies, we did something different. While concluding individual agreements with each subsidiary, we also concluded a "comprehensive labor agreement" on top of that as a higher-level concept, in which holding company's management was responsible for any changes in employment issues related to spin-offs. This "comprehensive agreement" is a system that employment relations cannot be changed by individual labor agreements. If you look at the individual labor agreement, you see the phrase "subject to the comprehensive labor agreement."*⁸

On the other hand, the scope of union membership also changed during the period of reform, although it varied from union to union. In many chemical companies, the status difference between blue- and white-collar workers has existed since the postwar period. In the past, only regular employees (without fixed-term contracts) were union members. This difference in status resulted in the unfair treatment of benefits and employees who were not protected by unions.

Subsequent to the reform period, Teijin implemented various changes, such as the elimination of disparities between white- and blue-collar workers and the extension of union membership to include non-regular employees and re-employed workers (post-retirement). Teijin Labor Union has also strengthened its cooperative mechanisms and information exchange with other group unions, resulting in the promotion of EV and NV not only by the primary labor union, but also by employees across each group company. The expansion of union membership is partly attributed to Teijin Labor Union's affiliation with UA ZENSEN, the largest industry-level federation of unions, which maintains a strong engagement with each member union.

⁷ July 27, 2021; Special Advisor (former Chair), Teijin Union.

⁸ July 27, 2021; Special Advisor (former Chair), Teijin Union.

(3) Influences of employment relations from the past and industrial unions on union voice

Specifically, the historical development of labor-management relations and the affiliation of unions with industrial federations have been found to influence the labor-management tensions. While some unions went through ideological divergence in the past, others did not, which depended on the federations of union to which they belong. For instance, the original Sekisui Chemical Labor Union was affiliated with the *Sohyo*-affiliated *Goka Roren*, a Japanese Federation of Synthetic Chemistry Workers' Unions known for its radical left stance. However, a split in the 1960s resulted in the separation of the union from the rival faction, allowing the ongoing union to cut off the radical faction and ultimately leading to cooperative labor-management relations. On the contrary, Teijin Labor Union and Company C Labor Union, which have remained united, are part of the same labor union federation, UA ZENSEN, and have been significantly influenced by the government's productivity movement.

The extent to which industry-level federations of unions are involved affects labor-management relations. The remarkable increase in UA ZENSEN's membership, which is unusual for an industrial union organization, is indicative of its active campaign to bring in non-regular workers as members (Oh, 2022).

(4) Analysis

Based on the findings, a tentative response to the research question of how enterprise-based unions acquired and maintained the functions of EV and NV during the period of reforms is as follows.

Firstly, NVs are found to be functioning in conjunction with effective EVs. Additionally, unions were successful in maintaining adequate tensions with managers, as NVs were structured in ways that safeguard employees who are directly affected by business closures or spin-offs. These findings indicate a direct link between EV and NV. Meanwhile, unions acknowledged that EVs and NVs are not only interconnected but are essentially one and the same. This perspective is supported by the belief that the primary objective of labor unions is to promote growth and advancement of companies, thereby benefiting employees, rather than utilizing EVs as a means of securing the largest possible share of NVs. Therefore, unions have also been willing to make certain concessions in negotiations, depending on prevailing business circumstances.

Secondly, it was because of enterprise unionism that made unions' strategic EVs effective, as the system fosters a sense of intimacy. However, there is also evidence of labor union leaders being integrated into the human resource system of the company side, which demonstrates that enterprise unionism can result in both collusive and tensional factors. Consequently, the structure of enterprise unionism does not inherently lead to collusion. Rather, the critical factor is whether and how tensional relationships that prevent collusion are maintained.

Thirdly, the findings also reveal that voice behaviors may differ depending on the federation of industrial unions to which union belongs.

Finally, the fact that regular employees in medium or large companies are preserving their capacity to voice to managers stands in stark contrast to the prevailing social issues surrounding increasing number of non-permanent workers and working poor. This research also indicated that unless initiatives to expand the membership of non-permanent workers, or labor unions, are extensively put into practice, such voice behaviors would result in exclusion of non-regular workers. A recent survey conducted by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare revealed that

71.3% of unions have not taken any measures to broaden their membership⁹. The data indicates that numerous unions are prioritizing their members' own interests above all else.

4. Conclusion

The study aimed to address a counterargument to the opinion that company-based unions in Japan are at risk due to a lack of external pressure and collusion with managers. It demonstrated that unions have been able to maintain adequate tensions through their own voice behaviors, with some involvement from industrial federations of unions. On the other hand, this study does not guarantee that unions' capacity to negotiate will not diminish in the future. Instead, both workers and managers are currently working to prevent such a decline.

The study provided a novel theoretical contribution by examining the strengths and limitations of company-based unions' voice behaviors in Japan. It revealed that adequate labor-management tensions have been maintained through this structure and reviewed the definition of employees' voice behavior based on empirical evidence. The revised definition of unions' voice behaviors encompassing EVs and NVs was supported by demonstrating the process by which unions gain and maintain NVs by making full use of EVs.

The study's limitations include the fact that the data obtained were based on speakers' retrospective accounts, which may have limitations in terms of reliability and accuracy. To address this, interviews were conducted multiple times on both the management and labor union sides in a balanced manner to ensure objectivity. In addition, factors such as whether the company's board is composed of people with union leadership experience may be considered in the future research.

⁹ Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare: Reiwa 5 nen rodokumiai katsudoutou ni kansuru jittaishosa (Survey on labor union activities 2023): <https://www.mhlw.go.jp/toukei/list/18-r05gaiyou.html> (accessed on June 29, 2024).

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Cozy or tense? Rethinking employee voice within enterprise unionism in Japan

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Abstract: This study examines why labor unions in Japan typically preserve their negotiation powers within the enterprise unionism framework, despite criticism of potentially fostering collusive employment relations and weak external oversight. By conducting a qualitative analysis from extensive interview data, this research investigates the modifications in the unions' two types of voices throughout the reform period around 2000, when employees were exposed to the increased risk of being put at a disadvantage during business downturns. This study aimed to elucidate the strategies employed by labor unions to effectively utilize both engagement voice (EV) and negotiation voice (NV) inextricably, thereby offering an explanation for the persistence of enterprise unionism without compromising the adequate tension of employment relations. It provided a novel theoretical contribution by examining the strengths and limitations of company-based unions' voice behaviors in Japan.

Keywords: employee voice, labor union, engagement, negotiation, enterprise unionism