

## Book Review

**Anne Zacharias-Walsh (2016) *Our Unions, Our Selves: The Rise of Feminist Labor Unions in Japan*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. ISBN 9781501703041. 240 pp.  
Hardcover US\$89.95 Softcover US\$29.95**

*Reviewed by Zita Lui, City University of Hong Kong, China*

As a former journalist and labour activist, in this book Anne Zacharias-Walsh analyses the internal challenges of organisational structure and daily operations that women's unions in Japan are facing nowadays. She documents how a US–Japanese collaborative project helps Japanese labour activists deal with these challenges and search for new ways of organising female workers.

The book is divided into two parts. The first part describes how the Women's Union Tokyo (WUT) is formed into a network structure which aims to address gender inequality and ensure women's rights across different workplaces. Zacharias-Walsh provides extensive background information on why and how Japanese women have long been bullied and harassed in their workplaces, while their jobs are not as secure as those of their male co-workers. Traditional roles in the family have imposed limitations and brought discrimination against women in the workplace. The book provides a very useful introduction to understanding the gender relations, working culture and condition of women in Japan.

With an increasing number of women joining the workforce in recent years, WUT attempts to improve their working conditions by providing job consultations, lobbying and legal assistance. The author further investigates through in-depth interviews and on-site observations of WUT's structural and operational problems. She suggests that its model of service union and individual membership leads to problems such as a high dropout rate, low participation of new and young members, and lack of financial resources. A small group of experienced members at the top do all the work, from answering phones and negotiating with employers of members to fundraising, while the much bigger group of young members at the lower tier tend to drop out from WUT once their cases have been resolved.

All these factors encouraged the author to use her expertise to help two exhausted founders reform the WUT by looking for financial and training support from the United States. She strongly believes that the US experience in organising female labour could be used as an example by the Japanese activists, though local context has to be considered as well.

The second part of the book records how labour activists from Japan and the United States worked together to organise three international workshops under this Japan–US project. Instead of documenting the progress in a plain way, Zacharias-Walsh uses her journalist background to add her thoughts and emotions in order to tell the story of how the project was organised and of the conflicts in the workshops. It does help readers feel as if they are involved in the project. They can immerse themselves into what the project is aiming for, what the organisers are struggling for, and what the participants are experiencing.

This engrossing style of writing reconstructs what happened in the second joint workshop of US and Japanese female workers. The atmosphere in the first workshop in Detroit seemed to be

positive, and scholars and labour activists from both countries got to know each other. The historical background of the US women's labour movement and various US and Japanese women's organisations were introduced. WUT members presented the results of the organisation's self-evaluation in order to discuss strategies for improvement and determine the themes of the next two workshops. However, in the second workshop in Tokyo, the cultural differences between participants created crises and conflicts. "Carol's [speaker of the organising workshop] entire presentation struck them [the Japanese participants] as an attack on the very concept of individual unionism" (p. 118). The Japanese women's unions care for the different needs of individual women who are always asked to sacrifice themselves in their male-dominated society. This is completely different from the US experience where unions have to organise all women for the same goal, to effectively fight against capital. The Japanese participants felt attacked by the US speaker and believed that their individualities and capabilities of effective organising were not respected.

Readers can deeply feel their anger through Zacharias-Walsh's alluring writing. More significantly, the book draws readers' attention to the fact that there are still huge cultural differences among different societies, though the world is more globalised than at any previous time. The author does not question the eagerness and determination of the Japanese participants to enhance their organising skills. However, she notes that they never leave their very first goal of setting up the union, whose immediate aim was to save those fragile women from unfair treatment at work. Not wanting to leave behind where they started, the Japanese participants tried to force the US speaker to change the programme or even leave the workshop.

Besides simply putting into writing what she witnessed, Zacharias-Walsh also carefully reflects on how she herself organised the workshop, and she suggests reasons for such conflicts. Although the author keeps reminding the Japanese organisers of the application of US experience in the Japanese context, the outcomes are not what she expected. "The organizing workshop also uncovered a subtle but profound difference between our organisations that only became visible once we got down to the nitty-gritty level of developing actual practices" (p. 127). While the US speaker stresses the importance of collectivism for organising labour in order to maintain a sustained labour movement, the Japanese participants did not agree. They believed that empowerment of individuals was more vital to immediately save women from terrible working conditions. Moreover, the Japanese participants were not familiar with the speaker: "First, we drink tea" is considered by the Japanese as an important social norm, and necessary to build up a mutual working relationship. In short, the author concludes that different local cultures do affect how an organisation is structured and how it operates. Furthermore, the author continues to argue that the promotion of individualism insisted on by the Japanese participants is beneficial to organising women in the long run.

Finally, the second workshop serves as a practical guide for other activists in how to organise transnational movements in the future. The author demonstrates her skills in crisis management to successfully alleviate the dissatisfaction of the Japanese women towards the second workshop. She talked to the Japanese participants, sought help from other organisers and modified the workshop programme to identify their anger.

The author aims to build a long-term relationship between Japanese and US women's organisations through this project. But in the end the Japanese participants decided to work with other Asian groups. Zacharias-Walsh is uncertain about this decision and insists on the benefits of cross-border collaboration in order to share practices and experiences in order to fight against capitalism on a global scale. At the same time, she also completely understands that there is an enormous cultural gap between Japan and the United States. The priority of the Japanese activists is to organise female labour on a national scale and to improve their working conditions in the

country. They can profit from the experiences in other Asian countries in a more effective way because of similar cultural contexts.

Zacharias-Walsh puts considerable effort into evaluating if this project brought transformation to the women's labour movement. Educational activities to train other women were enhanced, and a national network was set up to connect women and labour groups. People in the women's union can now see the future of their hard work. The author began to accept the Japanese choice of an individual-membership structure through this project and gained a more profound understanding of Japanese culture. She sincerely suggests these Japanese women's unions think of the bigger picture – to criticise capitalism in order to improve working conditions of labour in general – and to take a more active approach to organising women. She believes these Japanese activists have the passion and capability to achieve all these goals. In fact, not only Japanese female labour but all labour around the world should ponder how capitalism has been depriving them of their rights, and that all of us must work together to fight against capitalism.

Overall, this book not only provides an insider perspective to learn how the project and workshops were organised to help Japanese women's unions revamp and become empowered, but it also reflects the cultural differences between Japan and the United States. The book is particularly useful in order to learn about the working culture and gender issues in Japan and Asia. It also serves as a handbook for activists to work with Japanese activists in the future in order to understand their styles of working and meeting. Meanwhile, the accessible language and engaging narrative do help readers from various fields to enjoy this book. Without any doubt, it would be complementary if there could be another book written by the Japanese activists to describe what they learned from the project and to evaluate if it could help their future work. More importantly, it is essential to discuss if such cross-border collaboration has been beneficial to their organising drive, which the author insists on in the book.

## **BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**

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