

To address this problem, the Government introduced a new system of Local Labour Counseling Services, which serves as a starting point for individual labour dispute solution programs at the prefectural level. With the "Law on Encouraging Resolution of Individual Labour Disputes" becoming effective, 730,000 workers asked prefectural labour offices for counseling services in FY2003. Due to the growing importance of individual labour relations as a result of more frequent job changes, increasing numbers of unorganized workers and the declining importance of intra-company dispute solutions, Japan has also been experiencing a sharp rise in individual labour disputes. In this context, policymakers launched the Industrial Tribunal System in April 2006.

To conclude my speech, I would like to emphasize that the most important issue is the tripartite structure that characterizes LRC's. Commissions consist of tripartite members representing public, labour and employer. Labour members are appointed in accordance with the most representative union organizations in more or less the same way as the ILO representative. Just as at the ILO, there emerged serious doubts as to whether such labour members could really represent the interests of the now fast growing unorganized workers that include the part-time, non-regular or temporary workforce. Thus, lawmakers should consider the possibility of introducing a system to include employee representatives within the dispute settlement mechanism and to reflect the voices of unorganized workers in the future.

In spite of the general trend of declining union density and the role of unions in many industrialized countries, some countries in Western Europe including Sweden enjoy a relatively higher trade union membership ratio for non-regular workers. On the other hand, I am afraid that those unions in Japan that are now represented in the LRCs basically organize only regular employees who are mostly from larger enterprises and enjoy higher wages, generous working conditions and strong employment security, while neglecting the interests of non-regular workers for whom there is an increasing number of disputes. In this sense, the dominance of such established unions in the present Japanese labour policy-making and the dispute settlement system based on the traditional tripartite principle are facing really serious problems. This is a great challenge for all the stakeholders in the field of Japanese labour today.

