

From “Production Recovery Struggle” to “Defense Struggle”
under Depression
Policy Development of Nissan Labor Union before Mass Dismissal in 1949

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Abstract : This paper deals with policy development of Nissan Heavy Industry Labor Union from 1948 to September 1949 before the labor dispute caused by mass dismissal. The union’s cooperative nature with the company is emphasized in the context of four historical facts in this paper, although some researchers have characterized the union as radical and aggressive towards the company.

Firstly, the union wanted to change the method used to calculate a standard living cost upon which the total amount of wages at Nissan was decided. Its calculation was based upon a monthly survey on real living costs of the employees. The union came to recognize that it was not able to catch up with the accelerated speed of inflation. A communist faction within the union insisted upon introducing a theoretically-based standard living cost. The union executives considered a total wage on that basis as too expensive for the company to pay although they refused the company’s proposal that it should decide to pay an amount for total wages within its ability to pay. They adopted a mixed way of calculating the standard living cost. This shows the union policy as realistic rather than radical.

Secondly, the union went on strike three times in 1948. However, its main aims were not against management, but in response to economic and labor policies of the government. It did not use the strikes as an instrument to enforce its wage hike demand at that time. Deliberately, the union hesitated to go on strike to realize its demand against the company. The strikes were used as political demonstration against the government.

Thirdly, the union decided to abandon its demand for a wage increase during the depression of 1949 in order to safeguard the company although some members of it opposed it.

Finally, as automobile production improved due to the priority production system introduced by the government in 1948, the union dealt with reducing overtime work as the target of “production recovery struggle at shop floor.” This was renamed “shop floor struggle” under “Defense struggle” under the “Dodge Line” depression in 1949, and it was also aimed at reduction of overtime work. The union complained that the management did not hesitate to pay a large amount of wages for overtime work although it refused to increase the basic wage rate, and claimed that the management should take steps to reduce overtime work to save the company without any dismissals under the depression. The union started new operations together with the management to reduce overtime work hours. Their operations succeeded in reducing overtime work from 140 thousand hours to 100 hours per month at the Yokohama works and head office.

Although the union continued to cooperate with the management in order for the company not to dismiss workers, the company announced a mass dismissal of about 2,000 employees in October 1949. It was this dismissal that would make the union policy change from being cooperative with the management to an aggressive stance against it.

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