

Relations industrielles Industrial Relations



Norma J. CHALMERS : *Industrial Relations in Japan. The Peripheral Workforce*. New York, Routledge, Chapman & Hall, 1989, 283 pp., ISBN 0-415-00008-4

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Volume 45, numéro 3, 1990

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/050616ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/050616ar>

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Éditeur(s)

Département des relations industrielles de l'Université Laval

ISSN

0034-379X (imprimé)

1703-8138 (numérique)

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Citer ce compte rendu

Jain, H. C. (1990). Compte rendu de [Norma J. CHALMERS : *Industrial Relations in Japan. The Peripheral Workforce*. New York, Routledge, Chapman & Hall, 1989, 283 pp., ISBN 0-415-00008-4]. *Relations industrielles / Industrial Relations*, 45(3), 631–632. <https://doi.org/10.7202/050616ar>

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Industrial Relations in Japan. The Peripheral Workforce, by Norma J. Chalmers, New York, Routledge, Chapman & Hall, 1989, 283 pp., ISBN 0-415-00008-4

This book is unique because it addresses a much neglected area in Japanese industrial relations, i.e. the role of the peripheral workforce in Japanese economy. The term peripheral workforce is defined by the author as «those workers who are employed in small and medium firms or those who work on a non-regular basis, such as seasonal workers, part-time, temporary and day laborers, industrial home workers and agro-industrial workers».

In analyzing the relations between labour and management in her study of the peripheral workforce, the author uses exclusively the «Anglo-American» industrial relations model of «power relationship». As we will see later, this is a major weakness of the study.

The book is divided into seven chapters. Chapter 1 argues that most of the Western and Japanese literature on industrial relations in Japan is biased and depicts the merits of the industrial relations system in large Japanese enterprises but ignores the importance of the peripheral workforce in Japanese industrial relations. The next three chapters discuss the wages, benefits paid and the level of productivity of the peripheral workers. More than 88% of all non-agricultural workers in Japan work in small and medium size firms. The larger the size of the firm, the higher is the wage level in general. Bonuses in small and medium size firms average 33% less than those paid in larger enterprises. The author concludes that the productivity level declines with the level of wages and benefits, and therefore with the size of the firm. One of the factors contributing to lower productivity in the small and medium size firms is the relative old age of workers, the majority being female workers, and lower level of education of the peripheral workforce. The fact that workers work longer hours but are paid less than those employed by larger firms, presents a contradiction. Part of the explanation is that many large firms establish plants outside the major urban centres and make use of the local labour market. The labour costs are much less than those in large firms located in urban centres.

In Chapter 5 the author chooses two case studies in the Japanese manufacturing and construction industry which highlight the vulnerability of the peripheral worker. Seventy-four percent of the employees in manufacturing and 95% in the construction industry are peripheral workers. Also the use of sub-contractors and contract labour is prevalent in both these industries and their work practices affect the peripheral workforce. These two case studies reveal the dependency of the peripheral workers and the control of sub-contractors by large patron (parent) firms. The case studies further indicate that «production control of the core (parent) firms was extended to encompass control over industrial behaviour in small firms. In short, the process is one that moves from the core firms to small firms and from smaller firms to smaller firms and from minute firms to self-employed contract labour».

The last two chapters discuss the problems of conflict and communications. Problems of potential conflict of peripheral labour are left to be resolved by managers and workers in segregated sites that are non-unionized and relatively non-regulated. Unionism is virtually confined to the large private enterprise. Only regular employees are eligible for membership in enterprise union. Seventy-seven percent of those working in firms, having less than 100 employees operate in a sector where unionization is negligible. Major criticism of the enterprise union system in Japan is that union members can be easily manipulated by management and the union strongly identifies with the interest of the enterprise. Except for worker involvement in quality control production circles, joint consultation between labour and management was minimal in small firms. Peripheral workers in small firms are at the mercy of their employers. If they complain about lower wages and unsafe work conditions, the employers' response is «take it or leave it». Usually, dissatisfied workers don't bother to complain about their situation to the Labour Commission, they prefer to look for another job.

These case studies provide very useful insights into the working environment of the peripheral workforce. One can accept the factual information given in these two case studies but the premise that labour management relationships in the peripheral sector is based solely on the «Anglo-American» industrial relations model of «power relationship» is highly debatable and questionable.

The author fails to analyze the impact of particular characteristics in Japanese industrial relations which can only be understood in the context of Japan's historical and cultural background, economic structure and growth, and government policies. Japan's late development as a modern economy and political state carried forward strong feudal elements. Japan's modernization was largely achieved under the direction of a highly centralized government. Many of the features of pre-industrial society persisted alongside modern industrialization. The one manifestation was Japan's dual labour market. Millions of traditional small businesses which employ the majority of labour force in Japan exist side-by-side with large scale enterprises. One consequence is that employees in larger organizations are members of enterprise union and are the beneficiary of the permanent employment system. They enjoy a relatively privileged position in society. Those who work in the secondary labour market are mostly women, old workers, temporary and part-time workers. These people are employed by small and medium size organizations. They are non-unionized and have no formal job guarantee and are not entitled to the same compensation and benefits enjoyed by their counterparts in large companies. Another consequence of enterprise-based unions is the failure of the labour movement to organize large proportions of workers outside the large firms. This failure is attributed to 1) family-like relationship in small firms, 2) high labour turnover, 3) environmental constraints such as low profits and wage competition in the secondary labour market.

Another factor to be considered is the close liaison between government and big business. Government policy assists in the transfer of excess labour force from declining to expanding companies, encourages the regulation of temporary and seasonal workers, provides employment adjustment benefits to workers who are transferred. However, there are Japanese scholars who are critical of government policies and asking the question whether one-third of the workforce employed by large companies which is predominantly male, should enjoy a privileged position at the expense of two-thirds of the labour force.

In spite of the weakness of the analysis of the industrial relations system in the peripheral labour sector in Japan, this book is well written and easy to read. It provides useful insights into the working conditions of the majority of employees in the Japanese labour force and their contribution to Japanese economy prosperity.

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Santé et sécurité du travail, par Micheline Plasse, Montréal, Agence d'Arc inc., 1988, 155 pp., ISBN: 2-89022-138-5

Ce livre est le résultat d'une thèse de doctorat en science politique. On ne sera donc pas surpris de constater que l'auteure utilise un cadre de référence inspiré de l'analyse des politiques pour examiner la *Loi sur la santé et la sécurité du travail*, loi qui modifie en profondeur les règles du jeu qui prévalaient en ce domaine jusqu'en 1979. C'est que pour atteindre les objectifs prévus, cette loi mise sur la participation des employeurs, des travailleurs et travailleuses et de leurs associations, sur la parité patronale-syndicale, sur la concertation de tous les