Nuclear Energy Debates within the Japanese Labor Movement and Its Response to the Fukushima Nuclear Disaster: Politicization or Continued Compromise-based Depoliticizatin?

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Introduction

National confederations of trade unions represent the diversity of interests of their affiliated unions. The diversity of interests derives partly from affiliated unions’ locations in the national economy, e.g., whether the unions represent workers in export-oriented or domestic-oriented industries. It also derives from the division among affiliated unions over politically controversial issues, whose contents vary in different countries. Nuclear energy is one of such controversial issues. Previous studies showed that nuclear power has been the issue over which the positions of affiliated unions diverged in the national confederations in Germany (DGB), Canada (CLC), Sweden (LO and TCO), and, to a lesser extent, the United States (AFL-CIO) (Logan and Nelkin 1980; Siegmann 1985; Jahn 1988; Savage and Soron 2011ab). In Japan, the unions affiliated with Rengo (Japanese Trade Union Confederation), the dominant national confederation, have had different positions over the issue of nuclear energy even before the accident at Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant caused by tsunami of the Great East Japan Earthquake (Suzuki 2009). Previous studies also showed that when controversies involved issues of “jobs versus the environment,” as in the case of the nuclear energy controversy, those unions with direct economic stakes in affected industries (e.g., nuclear-related industries) tended to have stronger say in the process of policy-making of the confederation than those unions without direct economic stake but concerned with environmental consequences on society as a whole (see Savage and Soron 2011ab for the cases of Canada and the US).
This paper examines the development of Rengo’s policies on nuclear energy since its establishment in 1989, and how the confederation has mediated different positions on this issue among its affiliates. It shows that, until the Fukushima Daiichi Accident in March 2011, those affiliates with economic stakes in nuclear industries, especially Denryoku Soren (the Federation of Electric Power Related Industry Worker's Unions of Japan, a federation of enterprise unions of electric companies such as TEPCO [Tokyo Electric Power Company]), had had strong influence in policy formation on nuclear energy and steered policy debates in the direction of further expansion of nuclear energy including the reprocessing of spent fuels for FBR (fast breeder reactors) and the use of MOX (mixed uranium-oxide) fuels. Other Rengo affiliates, particularly Jichiro (the All-Japan Prefectural and Municipal Workers Union) have taken a critical stance against nuclear energy. These unions, while accepting the operation of the existing nuclear power plants based on the condition that safety measures were strictly observed, opposed the further construction of nuclear reactors in the existing or new sites, the reprocessing of spent fuels, and the use of plutonium.

The focus of the paper is on how Rengo worked out compromises among its affiliates with different positions on nuclear energy when the confederation made annual or bi-annual “institutional and policy demands” (seisaku seido yokyu). The section on energy policies was one of important components of these policy documents. Despite its compromise-orientation, Rengo’s policies on nuclear energy have moved over the years closer to the position of the pro-nuclear affiliates, away from the position of the affiliates critical of nuclear energy. It is ironic that Rengo adopted the most explicit pro-nuclear policy in 2011, just before the Fukushima Daiichi Accident, in which the confederation actively advocated the building of new nuclear reactors and the use of MOX fuels that used the plutonium produced by the reprocessing of spent fuels.

The paper examines what factors, internal and external to Rengo, promoted (and sometimes hindered) the confederation’s move toward the increasingly pro-nuclear positions, and how the Fukushima Daiichi Accident had an impact on its nuclear power policies. The paper argues that one of the important internal factors for Rengo’s relative success in mediating the diverse views on the nuclear power issue was that the confederation made sure that the internal debates about the issue be shaped by the “monological” frame based on economic benefits and interests, rather than by the “dialogical” frame. The latter frame defines the interests of union members not only by their economic interests but by their long-term social and political interests, which are often based on values that envision the transformation of a social and political system (see Jahn 1988: 321, 337; Savage and Soron 2011a: 24-25). The paper also
argues that Rengo’s policy-making style has not changed much even after the Fukushima Daiichi Accident, and that the confederation’s organizational inertia prevented the confederation from making clear its own stance on the nuclear energy issue, resulting in the increased distance between the Rengo-led union movement and civil society in Japan where citizens are increasingly involved in the denuclearization (datu genpatsu) movement.

The formation of Rengo and its nuclear energy policies in the 1990s

Rengo (Japanese Trade Union Confederation) was formed in 1989 as the dominant confederation of the Japanese labor movement (it represented about 62 percent of organized labor in 1990). Until then, the Japanese labor movement had been divided between four confederations, and the division between two major confederations, Sohyo (General Council of Trade Unions) and Domei (the Japanese Confederation of Labor), had been pronounced due to their differences regarding unions’ policy orientations (militant unionism versus moderate unionism), the political parties they supported (the Japan Socialist Party [the JSP] and the Democratic Socialist Party [the DSP], respectively), and their opposed positions on political issues (the Constitution of Japan, the legal status of the Self Defense Forces [the SDF], the Japan-US Security Treaty, and nuclear energy). Sohyo called for the protection of the current “peace constitution,” took critical stances toward the SDF and the Japan-US Security Treaty, and opposed nuclear energy. Domei advocated the revision of the constitution, recognized the legal status of the SDF, supported the Japan-US Security Treaty and promoted nuclear energy.

Despite the differences on the political issues, from the mid-1970s to the late 1980s, moderate private-sector unions led the effort to form a dominant confederation in order to consolidate the divided labor movement. One of the factors that promoted the consolidation effort was that the differences in unions’ policy orientations became less pronounced between the two major confederations, because many unions affiliated with Sohyo began to take moderate lines from the mid-1970s, moving toward the policy lines of the unions affiliated with Domei. In 1987, all national-level union confederations, except Sohyo, were dissolved, and Minkan Rengo (the Japan Private Sector Trade Union Confederation) was formed as a formal confederation consisting of sixty-two industry-level private-sector union federations. Sohyo continued to exist mainly as a confederation of public-sector unions, but was dissolved in 1989 when these unions joined Rengo.1

1 The creation of Rengo, however, did not completely unify the labor movement. A minority of
Even after the formation of Rengo in 1989, the differences among its affiliates regarding the political issues remained. Regarding the issue of nuclear energy, major Rengo affiliates with the critical attitudes toward nuclear energy were public-sector unions such as Jichiro (the All-Japan Prefectural and Municipal Workers Union) and Nikkyoso (Japan Teachers' Union). Shitetsu Soren (General Federation of Private Railway & Bus Workers' Union Japan) also took a critical attitude toward nuclear energy.² Major Rengo affiliates with the pro-nuclear energy policy included the three industry-level union federations in the nuclear-related industries (Denryoku Roren [the Federation of Electric Power Workers' Unions of Japan], Denki Roren [the Japanese Electrical, Electronic, and Information Union], and Zosen Juki Roren [the Japan Confederation of Shipbuilding and Engineering Workers’ Unions]) as well as Tekko Roren (the Japan Federation of Steelworkers’ Unions). These pro-nuclear affiliates were the industry-level federations of enterprise unions of large private-sector firms with strong orientations toward labor-management cooperation.

Despite the differences in the affiliates’ attitudes toward nuclear energy, Rengo’s first institutional and policy demands (dated June 1990), in its section of policies on natural resources and energy, took a basically pro-nuclear energy stance. The policy document stated that “nuclear energy has advantages in terms of stable supply and economic costs, and has already become one of the most important sources of energy in Japan.” However, it acknowledged that many people were concerned about the safety of nuclear power plants due to the Chernobyl nuclear power plant accident, and stressed the importance of gaining the understanding and acceptance of nuclear energy among people by strictly enforcing safety measures and by disclosing information on nuclear power plants. It also should be noted that the policy document was ambiguous about the future of nuclear energy, i.e., whether Rengo supported further expansion of this source of energy or not (Rengo 1990: 174-175).³

Rengo’s nuclear energy policies from 1991 to 1993 (as stated in its annual institutional and policy demands) continued to take the stance similar to the 1990 policy.

² All these unions were former affiliates of Sohyo.
³ Minkan Rengo (the private-sector predecessor of Rengo) stated in its institutional and policy demands (dated May 1989) that nuclear energy would increase its “status” in electric power generation due to its economic advantage, indicating expansion of nuclear power generation in the future (Minkan Rengo 1989: 171). The 1989 statement did not mention an increase in people’s concern about the safety of nuclear power plants due to the Chernobyl accident, as the 1990 statement did. It seemed that Rengo “toned down” the pro-nuclear energy position by taking into consideration the critical stance toward nuclear energy of public sector unions such Jichiro.
That is, they recognized the status quo of nuclear power generation and acknowledged people’s concern about the safety of nuclear power plants and the necessity of gaining the understanding of this source of energy among people through strict enforcement of safety measures and information disclosure. But they did not clearly state the future direction of nuclear power generation (see e.g., Rodosho 1991, 1993; Rengo 1992).

From the 1994 policy statement, Rengo started to discuss the future direction of nuclear power generation. The 1994 policy mentioned that Rengo would consider its stance of the future use of plutonium by taking various factors into consideration. The proposal for the 1995 policy on nuclear energy went one step further by stating that “the use of plutonium is a next step of nuclear power generation,” and that “Rengo regards the use of plutonium as having a significant meaning from the standpoint of stable supply of energy” (Rengo 1994; Rengo 1995). This proposed policy brought about strong opposition from Jichiro and other unions, and the disagreement among Rengo’s affiliates came to the surface. In the meeting to discuss the 1995 institutional and policy demands (held in May 1995), representatives of Jichiro criticized the policy proposal by arguing that nuclear energy should be eventually phased out, and that it was very problematic to accord “a significant meaning” to the use of plutonium while the government could not decide where to locate a final disposal site for high level radioactive waste. Because of the controversy, Rengo leadership decided to revise the policy by dropping the phrase “significant meaning.” The revised, toned-down, version stated as follows: “Concerning the use of plutonium which is a next step of nuclear power generation, Rengo considers it important for concerned parties to continue to do research on technologies without haste and from the standpoint of stable supply of energy” (Rodosho 1995: 589-590; Rengo 1995; Tsubasa 1995.6.26).

Rengo’s nuclear energy policies since 1996 came to be based on the following three principles, largely based on the monological frame. These principles are: (1) the recognition of the status quo of nuclear power generation (nuclear energy is an important source of energy and contributes to the reduction of carbon dioxide emissions; efforts should be made to ensure the safety of nuclear power plants; it is important to establish a system of spent fuel disposal; and information on nuclear energy should be widely disclosed to people), (2) the cautious attitude to nuclear fuel cycle including the use of plutonium (the research on it should be based on “the nation’s people’s consent” [kokumin no goi] and proceed cautiously and without hurry), and (3) the use of MOX (mixed uranium-oxide) fuels based on the understanding of people (detailed explanation of its technological contents and safety features should be provided in order to gain the understanding of this technology not only among people
near nuclear power plants but the nation’s people as a whole) (see Rodosho, Kosei Rodosho various year). It should be noted that Rengo’s nuclear energy policies were vaguely-worded so that both the pro-nuclear unions and the unions with the critical attitudes can interpret them to their own advantage.

Why did Rengo manage to build a certain level of consensus among its affiliates in its nuclear energy policy? I argue that there are four factors: two are internal to the labor movement, the other two are external to it. First, Denryoku Roren made every effort to influence the decision making process of institutional and policy demands and engaged in “communication activities” with other Rengo affiliates so that they would gain a better understanding of nuclear energy. For example, Denryoku Soren (a confederation of Denryku Roren and union federations of industries related to power generation) sent its representatives to Rengo’s policy committee (where institutional and policy demands were drafted) and to its 12 subcommittees. It also set up the committee to discuss their own policy demands in 1992 so that their opinions would be better reflected in Rengo’s policy demands (Denryoku Roren Geppo 1992: 203-204; Denryoku Roren 1989.6.25). In 1993, Denryoku Roren and two other union federations of industries related to power generation were dissolved to form the unified federation, (the new) Denryoku Soren (the Federation of Electric Power Related Industry Worker's Unions of Japan). In the1995 convention, Kiyoshi Sasamori, the president of Denroku Soren, remarked that Rengo’s 1995 energy policy went one step further in its consideration of the future use of plutonium and attributed this (what he saw as) positive move to the increased understanding of Rengo affiliates on the issue of nuclear energy as a result of the efforts of Denryoku Soren to communicate with them (Tsubasa 1995.10.20).

The second factor is changes in Jichiro’s policies on nuclear energy. Jichiro, until it joined Rengo in 1989, had regarded its anti-nuclear energy stance as a part of its political struggles against any use of nuclear power (either for weapons or for power generation) and for peace and the protection of the Constitution of Japan. Concerning nuclear energy, Jichiro not only opposed the operation of nuclear power reactors under construction or planned by the power companies, but also called for the stop or “freeze” of currently-operating nuclear power reactors. Jichiro stated that it would promote the anti-nuclear energy movement in cooperation with grass-roots citizens’ movements which had become active after the Chernobyl accident (see Jichiro 1988 and 1989). After it became affiliated with Rengo, Jichiro “re-framed” its anti-nuclear energy policy. In the policy proposal for the 1991 convention, Jichiro separated the anti-nuclear energy agenda from the anti-war and peace movements and framed the agenda as a part of
global solidarity activities for world peace, human rights protection, and environmental protection (Jichiro 1991). Furthermore, in its policy proposal for the 1992 convention, Jichiro accepted the operation of the existing nuclear power plants on the conditions of strict enforcement of safety measures and the information disclosure to residents in the surrounding regions of the plants, while continuing to oppose a further increase in nuclear power plants/reactors (Jichiro 1992). Jichiro also demanded that workers of local governments near nuclear power plants be given education and training in disaster prevention in its policy proposal for the 1994 convention. These changes in Jichiro policies indicate that the federation of local government workers not only moderated its stance against nuclear power plants, but also de-politicized the nuclear energy issue. In other words, the premise of its policies on nuclear power changed from the “dialogical” frame that placed the nuclear energy issue in the context of the broad political movement to the “monological” frame based on the practical acceptance of nuclear energy, which made it possible for Jichiro to exchanges opinions with the pro-nuclear energy unions in the decision-making process of Rengo’s policies.

The third factor was that changes in basic policies of the Japan Socialist Party (the JSP). The JSP formed a coalition government with the conservative Liberal Democratic Party (the LDP) and the relatively liberal New Party Sakigake in 1994, and Tomiichi Murayama, the chair of the JSP became the prime minister of the coalition government. This change in the political party alignment forced the JSP to drop its leftist-oriented policy lines and to adopt “realistic” policy lines such as the acceptance of the Japan-US Security Treaty, the Self Defense Forces, and the operation of nuclear power plants (OISR 1999: 497; Honda 2005: 245-246). This change in the JSP’s basic policies may be seen as a factor promoting the moderation of the stance on nuclear energy taken by the trade unions closely associated with the JSP, such as Jichiro.

The forth factor was the start of the operation of the prototype fast-breeder reactor Monju in August 1995 and the sodium leakage accident of Monju in December in the same year. The start of the operation of the controversial FBR and a subsequent accident “severely damaged” “the image of the nuclear industry in Japan” (Pickett 2002: 1342). This development of the prototype FBR, the type of reactor that used plutonium as its fuel, can be seen as the factor that hindered, rather than promoted, a consensus among the Rengo-affiliated unions on nuclear energy policies. As seen above, representatives of affiliated unions went into an open debate over the use of plutonium in the meeting to discuss the 1995 institutional and policy demands of Rengo. The leakage accident at Monju seemed to have the effect of restraining the pro-nuclear unions from aggressively pushing for the use of plutonium in the discussions of Rengo’s
nuclear energy policies in subsequent years. As seen below, this “restraining effect” continued well into the 2000s, when the nuclear industry suffered from corporate scandals and accidents.

**Rengo’s nuclear energy policies in the 2000s: policy stalemate and a radical turn to the pro-nuclear position toward the end of the decade**

From the late 1990s to the first half of the 2000s, the public perception of nuclear energy became unfavorable, as two fatal accidents occurred in 1999 (the JCO criticality accidents resulting in the death of two workers exposed to radiation) and in 2004 (the Mihama nuclear plant accident caused by the rupture of the hot- and high-pressurized water pipe that resulted in the death of five workers). The unfavorable public perception was also due to the revelation in 2002 that TEPCO and other power companies had intentionally falsified inspection records and concealed troubles of nuclear reactors in the 1980s and 90s. The TEPCO’s scandal was serious enough for the prefectural governments of Fukushima and Niigata (where its three nuclear power plants were located) to express strong distrust of the power company and to request it to suspend the operation of all plants until their safety was verified. As a result, all 17 nuclear power plants stopped operations by April 2003 (Yoshioka 2011: 321-323).

Rengo’s policies on nuclear energy in the 2000s did not change much from the policies adopted in the mid-1990 (see above), although their contents became more detailed since 2001 as Rengo started to make institutional and policy demands bi-annually. The continued cautious attitude of Rengo’s policies seemed to reflect the unfavorable public perception due to the scandals and accidents related to nuclear power plants (Honda 2012: 92). The confederation’s institutional and policy demands in 2004-2005 and 2006-2007 referred to the TEPCO scandal of falsifying inspection records and the fatal accident at the Mihama nuclear power plant, respectively, and stated that these scandal and accident damaged people’s trust in nuclear energy. The nuclear energy policies of these documents added a clause “efforts should be made to restore and retain people’s trust” as conditions for the use of nuclear energy (Rengo 2003, 2005).

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4 In addition to these accidents and scandals, a big earthquake (magnitude 6.8) occurred near TEPCO’s Kashiwazaki nuclear power plant in July 2007. The earthquake did not cause any major accident, except for a fire at the transformer of one of the reactors and leaks of small amount of radioactive water and substance. However, since the peak ground acceleration of the earthquake was larger than the maximum acceleration expected by the power company, the operation of the seven reactors had to be suspended and thoroughly inspected. Three out of the seven reactors were still under inspection as of July 2011 (Yoshioka 2011: 347-348).
Because of the unfavorable public perception, Denryoku Soren kept a low profile on discussions about Rengo’s policies on nuclear energy. The union federation, however, did not change its position to promote the use of nuclear energy including fuel cycle. For example, after the sodium leakage accident of the FBR (Monju), the federation’s official in charge of industrial policies stated that the Monju accident would not change the federation’s position on nuclear fuel cycle in Rengo’s policy discussions, arguing that the nuclear fuel cycle project had to be carried out by all means because Japan was poor in natural resources (Tsubasa 1996.4.12). Denryoku Soren, in its policy proposal to the 2003 convention, acknowledged “unfavorable conditions for nuclear energy due to the scandals related to nuclear power generation” and stressed the necessity to “restore the trust of Japanese people and regional communities (near nuclear power plants) based on the establishment of business ethic.” Denryoku Soren, however, called for the promotion of “rational energy policies,” whose main components were the use of MOX fuels and nuclear fuel cycle, and proposed to hold seminars to gain the understanding of “the rational energy policies” among other affiliates of Rengo (Denryoku Soren 2003).

Rengo’s policies on nuclear energy began to change toward the end of the 2000s. In November 2008, its policy committee decided to set up an “energy issue project team” to discuss various policy issues related to energy and to propose future directions of Rengo’s policies (Rengo 2008). The project team submitted its report to the policy committee in August 2009. The report broke with the nuclear energy policies that Rengo had been taking since the mid-1990s on three points. First, it proposed the construction of 13 new nuclear power reactors currently under the plan, because the new reactors were needed to replace the aged reactors which would be decommissioned around 2030. Second, it clearly placed nuclear fuel reprocessing as an integral part of the nuclear energy policy, stating that the reprocessing would make the repeated use of nuclear fuels possible and thus make nuclear energy a “semi-domestic” (jun kokusan) source of energy. And third, the report called for the steady progress of the development of the FBR (Rengo 2009). Based on the report, a subcommittee on economic policies attached to the policy committee prepared a document “Rengo’s views on energy policies,” which in most part adopted the project team’s proposals on nuclear energy. Rengo’s policy committee in August 2010 approved the document (Rengo 2010). The nuclear energy policies of Rengo’s

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5 Denryoku Soren tried to influence the discussion of the project team to its advantage in close communication with the Rengo officials who had been dispatched by Denryoku Soren and with two members of House of Councilors (the upper house) of the Diet who represented the interests of the industrial federation (Tsubasa 2009.2.27)
institutional and policy demands in 2012-2013 were based on the “Rengo’s views on energy policies,” and its central executive committee approved the institutional and policy demands on March 11, 2011, on the very day when the Great East Japan Earthquake and the Fukushima Daiichi Accident occurred (Honda 2012: 93).

Why did Rengo take a “radical turn” to the pro-nuclear energy position toward the end of the 2000s? Two related factors, one external and the other internal, seem to explain the change in Rengo’s policy. First, the Democratic Party of Japan (the DPJ), the political party that Rengo supported, won the upper house election in 2007, and the chance that the DPJ would become the ruling party in the next lower house (general) election increased (the DPJ became the ruling party in the general election in August 2009). If the DPJ-led government was established, Rengo, as one of its main supporting organizations, would become deeply involved in the policy-making process of the government. This change in the political context put pressure on Rengo to formulate a clear stance on its nuclear energy policy (Honda 2012: 93). Second, and related to the first factor, this external political pressure encouraged the pro-nuclear energy unions such as Denryoku Soren to become more assertive in the promotion of nuclear energy (Honda 2012: 93). For example, Denryoku Soren, in its policy proposal to the convention in 2008, stated that nuclear energy was one of the promising solutions to the issue of global environmental problems” and that the federation should play a role in the promotion of nuclear power generation including nuclear fuel cycle and the use of MOX fuels, not only for the power-generation-related industries, but for social development (Denryoku Soren 2008).

One question remains. What position did Jichiro take in the decision-making process of Rengo’s new pro-nuclear energy policy? As seen above, Jichiro accepted the operation of the existing nuclear plants on the condition of strict safety but opposed the construction of new nuclear reactors, nuclear fuel cycle, and the use of MOX fuels. Jichiro maintained these positions in its policy proposal for 2010-2011 submitted to its convention in 2009. Despite the continuation of the stance critical of nuclear energy, it was suspected that its top leaders gave a tacit consent to the new energy policy of Rengo. In Jichiro’s 2010 convention, delegates called for Jichiro’s continued

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6 The 2008 policy proposal of Denryoku Soren contrasted with its 2007 policy proposal whose stance on nuclear energy was relatively restrained. The 2007 proposals mentioned the reprocessing of spent fuels and the use of MOX fuels, but regarded them as “important (unsolved) issues piled up in our workplaces,” rather than the objects of promotion (Denryoku Soren 2007).

7 What made the 2010-2011 policy proposal different from the proposals in previous years was that it no longer treated the policy on nuclear energy as an independent policy item and relegated it to a sub-category of the policy item “the realization of environmentally sustainable society” (Jichiro 2009).
commitment to the “denuclearization” (datsu genpatsu) movement and asked top leaders to make clear Jichiro’s position in relation to the pro-nuclear energy policy of Rengo (Jichiro 2011.9.1/11). In response to these questions, Hideaki Tokunaga, the union’s chair who also served as the deputy chair of Rengo, gave a somewhat ambiguous answer to the effect that when the Rengo’s top decision-making organs approved the document “Rengo’s views on energy policies,” it was agreed that Jichiro’s position for denuclearization did not necessarily contradict the Rengo’s new energy policy (Jichiro no date). The fact that his statement provoked angry reactions in the convention floor indicated that many delegates took this statement as his virtual recognition of Rengo’s pro-nuclear policy (see Igarashi 2011.5.21).

The Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Plant Accident and the “Suspension” of discussions about nuclear energy within Rengo

After the Great East Japan Earthquake and the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Plant Accident, the contexts of Rengo’s nuclear energy policy have radically changed. As shown above, Rengo’s central executive committee approved the policy to actively promote nuclear energy in its institutional and policy demands in 2012-2013 on March 11, 2011. Given the scale and devastating consequences of the nuclear plant accident, and given the total incapacity of the government and TEPCO to effectively respond to the accident, it was obvious that Rengo’s affiliates would not approve the institutional and policy demands. Rengo’s central executive committee held on April 20 decided to “suspend” discussions about the energy policy in the 2012-2013 institutional and policy demands. This decision was to prevent the escalation of debates over nuclear energy between the affiliated unions from undermining the Rengo’s organizational unity (Rengo Tsushin 2011.4.23; Rengo 2011a). In Rengo 12th convention held October 2011, Nobuaki Koga (President of Rengo) sated in an opening remark that “we should reduce our dependence on nuclear energy in the medium- and long-term and should eventually realize a society that does not rely on nuclear energy.” Although his remark was widely taken as Rengo’s turn-around from the pro-nuclear energy policy to the policy for denuclearization, the tone of Koga’s remark was more nuanced, and Rengo affiliates, both those for nuclear energy and those critical of it, took his remark as affirming their respective positions. (Rengo Tsushin 2011. 10.8a; see Table 1 for a detailed analysis of Koga’s remark). 8 The Rengo convention also decided to

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8 For example, the president of Denki Rengo (Japanese Electrical Electronic and Information Union), one of the major pro-nuclear Rengo affiliate, argued that Koga’s remark in the Rengo
“re-examine and re-evaluate” Rengo’s energy policy in response to the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Plant Accident, and its central executive committee in the late October decided to set up the project team to re-examine and re-evaluate Rengo’s energy policy (Rengo 2011b).

Table 1: The nuanced remark of Rengo’s President in the 2011 Convention

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Basic stance</th>
<th>In re-examining and re-evaluating Rengo’s energy policies, we should avoid the dichotomous discussions of either “denuclearization” and “promotion of nuclear energy.”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Short-term agenda</td>
<td>We have to ensure the stable supply of energy. Concerning the nuclear power plants (other than the plants affected by tsunami and the earthquake) which stopped operation due to regular inspection, the resumption of their operation should be considered on the following conditions: the consent of local governments and residents to the resumption, the establishment of improved safety measures, and the government taking full responsibility for the resumption of operation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium- and long-term agenda</td>
<td>It is necessary to secure alternative sources of energy to nuclear energy. The reduced dependency on nuclear energy should be based on the development of renewable energy and reduced energy consumption. Through these mid-term measures, we should eventually realize a society not dependent on nuclear energy.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(= the table made based on Rengo Tsushin 2011.10.8a)

While delegates to the Rengo convention did not engage in heated debates over nuclear energy thank to the effort of its leaders to “suspend” the discussion on this issue,9 Rengo-affiliated unions expressed more openly their own views in their annual conventions. The positions of Rengo’s major affiliates were summarized in Table 2 below (the table presents the five unions with polar opposite positions and does not necessarily represent the variety of positions on nuclear energy taken by other Rengo affiliates). We note the range of discussions about nuclear energy, particularly those of the pro-nuclear unions, became narrow. While their nuclear policies had discussed a broad range of issues including nuclear fuel reprocessing and the use of MOX fuels until their 2010 conventions, the central issue in their policies in the 2011 conventions became whether nuclear reactors other than those affected by the earthquake and accident should be re-started or not. We also note that Jichiro went one step further in the direction of the anti-nuclear energy position by calling for the decommissioning of the existing nuclear reactors. It is also worth noting that the special resolution of the

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9 It did not mean that delegates did not discuss the issue of nuclear energy at all. About a half of the delegates who spoke at the convention mentioned the hardships experienced by union members in Fukushima Prefecture due to the nuclear plant accidents. In reply to these remarks, General Secretary of Rengo made a bureaucratic remark to the effect that he or Rengo could not comment on them until Rengo came up with a new nuclear energy policy based on the re-examination/evaluation of the current policy (Rengo Tsushin 2011.10.8b; Ashida 2011).
Nikkyoso (Japan Teachers' Union) made a value-laden argument against nuclear energy and took a position opposite from the argument made for nuclear energy by Denki Rengo and Kikan Roren (Japan Federation of Basic Industry Workers’ Unions) for the sake of the sustained development of Japanese economy. It can be argued that Nikkyoso’s position against nuclear energy was shaped by the “dialogical” frame based on values that envision a transformation of economy and society, while the pro-nuclear positions Denki Rengo and Kikan Roren were shaped by the “monological” frame based on economic benefits and interests.

Table 2: Positions taken by the five major Rengo’s affiliates after the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Plant Accident (from remarks, resolutions, and documents of the 2011 conventions of these affiliates)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rengo’s federations</th>
<th>Basic position</th>
<th>Positions on nuclear energy after the Fukushima Accident</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Denryoku Soren (the Federation of Electric Power Related Industry Worker's Unions of Japan)</td>
<td>Pro-nuclear energy (1) Japan should aim at the best mix of various energy sources. At present, however, nuclear energy is the base load source throughout a year. (2) Solar and wind power generation cannot become the base load sources of energy in a short period of time due to varying weather conditions and to high development costs. (3) Those nuclear reactors currently under regular inspection should resume operation if the government verifies the safety and if residents near the plants accept the resumption of operation. (from the opening remark of the president of the federation)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denki Rengo (Japanese Electrical Electronic and Information Union)</td>
<td>Pro-nuclear energy (1) While the Fukushima Accident forced us to fundamentally re-think the assumption that “nuclear power plants are absolutely safe,” we need to re-start the operation of existing nuclear power reactors by taking countermeasures against earthquakes and tsunami and by gaining the understanding of residents near the nuclear plants. (2) We need to make a cool judgment on the nuclear energy issue by taking into consideration the influence of changes in the nation’s energy policies on people’s livelihood and the national economy. (3) Denki Rengo will start discussions about new energy policies by taking into consideration safety, environment, stable supply, cost calculation, and the sustainable development of Japanese economy. (from the opening remark of the president of the federation)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kikan Roren (Japan Federation of Basic Industry Workers’ Unions) 10</td>
<td>Pro-nuclear energy (1) Nuclear energy, accounting for one third of power generation, is an indispensable source of energy from the view point of stable supply of energy. (2) The government should present concrete safety standards, and those nuclear reactors that meet these standards should resume operation, with the government taking full responsibility. (3) If all nuclear plants stop operation, the unstable supply of electricity and the increase in energy costs will force manufacturing companies to relocate their plants abroad, worsening conditions of domestic labor markets. (from a document “how Kikan Roren thinks about the energy issue” that summarized a remark of the federation’s general secretary)</td>
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10 Kikan Roren was established in 2003 by the merger of Zosen Juki Roren (the Japan Confederation of Shipbuilding and Engineering Workers’ Unions), Tekko Roren (the Japan Federation of Steelworkers’ Unions), and Hitetsu Rengo (Japanese Metal Mine Workers’ Union).
| Jichiro (the All-Japan Prefectural and Municipal Workers Union) | Critical of nuclear energy | (1) Jichiro calls for the fundamental re-evaluation of the government’s pro-nuclear energy policy. Jichiro also makes efforts so that Jichiro’s position will be reflected in Rengo’s nuclear energy policy.  
(2) Jichiro will make a plan for gradual decommissioning of the existing nuclear reactors based on experts’ opinions. The plan also considers disaster prevention measures until the decommissioning of the reactors and the development of renewable alternative sources of energy to maintain the stable supply of energy.  
(3) The following positions were the same as those in the previous policies: opposition to the construction of new nuclear reactors, to nuclear fuel reprocessing including the use of MOX fuels, and to the operation of the FBR (Monju). |
| Nikkyoso (Japan Teachers’ Union) | Critical of nuclear energy | We are now facing the threat of nuclear energy that endangers the existence of human race itself. The “safety myth” of nuclear power plants was completely dispelled. The Fukushima Nuclear Plant Accident was not an accident that happened under the “unexpected” circumstances, but was a human-made disaster caused by those who had promoted the nuclear-centered energy policies. This accident called into question our lifestyles, our social and economic systems, our assumption about environment, and our educational system. The earth does not belong only to those people who are living at present, and we should not leave the negative legacy of nuclear radiation to future generations. We need to seek to develop renewable energy and to re-evaluate our lifestyles so that we will spend less energy. In Japan, people are raising their voice against nuclear energy to an unprecedented extent, and we need to make the government change its nuclear-centered energy policy. Nikkyoso will reconfirm its belief that “nuclear power and human beings cannot coexist,” and will seek a nuclear-free, sustainable, and peaceful society in solidarity with a wide range of people. |

Rengo’s project team to re-examine and re-evaluate its energy policy consisted of 30 representatives of the affiliated unions, held the first meeting on October 22, 2011. Since then, 16 meetings were held by the end of June 2012. We only have sketchy information about the contents of discussion, but articles of the news paper of Hokkaido Electric Power Union reported the contents of some of the meetings from the view point of Denryoku Soren. According to these articles, members of the project teams engaged in heated debates over the resumption of nuclear reactors under regular inspection, nuclear fuel cycle, and the construction of new nuclear reactors to replace the aging reactors. And the pro-nuclear energy unions and those critical of nuclear energy were sharply divided on these issues. Representatives of Denryoku Soren argued in these meetings that members of the project team should realize what negative impact the indefinite suspension of nuclear power plants would have on industries, regional economies, and employment situations, that the government policy of nuclear fuel cycle was the very core of Japan’s energy security policy and could not be easily abandoned, and that unless critics presented realistic and rational alternatives to nuclear energy...
energy, their call for “a society free of nuclear energy” remained just an emotional slogan (Hokuden Yunion 2012.6.1; 2012.7.1). Despite the heated debates and the sharp divide of opinions, the project team presented a draft report on nuclear energy policies on June 28, 2012. However, the report was written in such a way that the views of the two sides were skillfully incorporated (Rengo 2012). The report touched on the hotly-debated issues in the project team, but the discussions of these issues were vaguely-worded, and often left a responsibility of making a final decision to the government. 

Rengo’s preoccupation with the compromise-based consensus, however, made the confederation inward-looking and considerably weakened its presence in the post-March 11 civil society in which grass-roots denuclearization movement among citizens became increasingly active. The denuclearization movement started in the late March and spread all over Japan like a wildfire. The “Good-bye to nuclear energy rally” held in Tokyo on September 19 was attended by 60,000 people and was the largest denuclearization rally since the start of the movement in March. On this day, similar mass rallies were held in other big cities in Japan. In addition to Zenroren and Zenrokyo (two leftist national confederations), some Rengo affiliates such as Jichiro, Nikkyoso, and Shitetsu Soren (General Federation of Private Railway & Bus Workers’ Union Japan) participated in the mass rally. Rengo, however, did not officially endorse the rally. A woman from a citizen group was reported to have commented that she was puzzled that she could not find the flag of Rengo which was supposedly the largest labor organization, while participants of the rally were holding the flags of many other trade unions (Tokairin 2012: 49).

Even bigger “Good-bye to nuclear energy rally” was held in Tokyo on July 16, 2012. It was reported that 170,000 people participated in the rally, the largest turnout in the post-March 11 denuclearization movement. The very large turnout was due to the fact that the government forced the restart of the number three reactor of Oi Nuclear Power Plant in Fukui Prefecture on July 1 despite the widespread opposition to the restart of the reactor. Among Rengo affiliates, Jichiro, Nikkyoso, Shitetsusoren, and some other federations attended the rally. An article of Akahata, the news paper of the Japan Communist Party (the JCP) commented that, in addition to those of the unions affiliated with Zenroren and Zenrokyo, many members of the unions affiliated with Rengo attended the largest rally for denuclearization, and that a majority of organized labor was now against nuclear energy. It also commented that the pro-nuclear energy Rengo

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11 At the point of writing of this paper (mid-July 2012), it is not clear whether Rengo’s central executive committee approved the report of the project team or not.
affiliates consisting of enterprise unions of large private-sector firms were isolated and became a minority of organized labor (Shinbun Akahata 2012.7.17). Rengo’s ambiguous position on nuclear energy and inactions with regard to the denuclearization movement will widen the gap between the union confederation and the more dynamic denuclearization movements participated by a wide range of citizens.

Conclusion: Will the debate over nuclear energy be politicized within Rengo?

Until the Fukushima Accident, Rengo has made a progress in making a consensus on the issue of nuclear energy in favor of the pro-nuclear energy unions, thanks to the Jicho’s practical acceptance of the existing reactor, to the efforts of Denryoku Soren to gain the understanding of its pro-nuclear energy position among Rengo affiliates, and to the changes in external political contexts. However, the accidents of nuclear-related facilities and scandals of power companies from the late 1990s to the first half of the 2000s had restraining effects on the consensus-building toward the unambiguously pro-nuclear energy position. In the late 2000s, Rengo made a big stride toward such an unambiguous position, but the “victory” of the pro-nuclear energy unions in Rengo’s policy-making was short-lived.

Fukushima Nuclear Plant Accident, whose scale was unprecedented, severely undermined the credibility of the Rengo’s pro-nuclear energy policies, and forced its president to announce a moratorium on discussions about its nuclear policies. The Fukushima Accident also brought about the intense debates, not in the public arena of the convention floor, but in the closed room of the meetings of the project team to re-examine and re-evaluate Rengo’s energy policy, and revealed the fault lines in the opinions of Rengo affiliates that had remained latent. Rengo’s leadership, however, seemed to be determined not to let the nuclear energy issue be turned into open debates and thus politicized and resorted to making a compromise-based consensus, as exemplified by the June report drafted by the energy policy project team.

I argue that Rengo’s effort to depoliticize the nuclear energy issue will not be very successful in the future, because the unions with direct interests in nuclear power generation or nuclear energy in general are no longer limited to those unions which manufacture and operate nuclear reactors. In discussing “the institutional culture of AFL-CIO,” Larry Savage and Dennis Soron pointed out that:

“This culture)…allows the Building and Construction Trades, and other unions with a direct employment interests in the nuclear industry…to own the issue of nuclear energy on behalf of the U.S. labor movement,
effectively marginalizing and silencing those critical voices within its ranks who appear to have no immediate material stake in debates over this particular sector” (Savage and Soron 2011b: 48).

Until the Fukushima Accident, Rengo seems to have had a similar institutional culture to that of AFL-CIO. Although Denryoku Roren (later Denryoku Soren), Denki Roren (later Denki Rengo), and Zosen Juki Roren (later Kikan Roren), the three pro-nuclear energy unions “with a direct employment interests in the nuclear industry,” did not monopolize the ownership of “the issue of nuclear energy on behalf of” Rengo, these unions exercised the strong influence on discussions about Rengo’s nuclear energy policies. The influence of those unions critical of nuclear energy but with “no immediate material stake” in the industry, such as Jichiro and Nikkyoso, tended to be marginalized. After the Fukushima Accident, however, the claim on the ownership of the nuclear energy issue by the latter unions seemed to have become stronger because the working conditions and occupational health and safety of their members were affected by the consequences of the nuclear plant accident. For example, workers of local governments (i.e., members of Jichiro) near Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Plant had to carry out the evacuation order of residents in extremely chaotic situations and had to work under extremely hard working conditions. Even after the evacuation, they had to go into the highly irradiated areas to do maintenance of infrastructures and other works such as capturing domestic animals left behind by evacuees (see e.g., Utsumi 2011). Moreover, local government workers and school teachers (members of Nikkyoso) not only in Fukushima Prefecture but also in the neighboring prefectures had to be concerned about the long-term public health consequences of low-level radiation on themselves as well as on their clients (residents and school children).

If the voice of union members affected by the radiation due to the nuclear plant accident in one way or another becomes stronger within the rank of Jichiro and Nikkyoso, these unions will take a clearly anti-nuclear energy stance framed by the dialogical thinking that envisions a denuclearized society and will openly criticize the pro-nuclear energy unions in the public venues, thus politicizing the nuclear energy policies of Rengo.

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Hokuden Yunion (2012.7.1) “We are now in a crucial stage of making ‘innovative energy and environmental strategies!’” (in Japanese).

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