Railroad Workers and World War I

Labor Hygiene and the Policies of Japanese National Railways

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Introduction

After successfully operating the first train line between Yokohama and Shinbash of Tokyo in 1873, the Japanese government built a national railroad network by working with the privately owned railroad businesses. When the Japanese National Railroad (JNR) was founded in 1907 after taking over 17 private railroad companies, an integration of railroad facilities and operation systems became a pressing issue. As a result, the number of railroad employees reached approximately 90,000, up from 30,000. And the President, Koto Shinpei, strongly advocated “JNR Familism” for all employees coming from different backgrounds. However, it could not have been possible to properly operate the nationwide railroad network if the familism – the close relationship between the railroad company and its employees – had not covered any substantive issues on a personal basis. In other words, as the day and night running of trains resulted in more complex tasks for workers, it became necessary to keep all field workers healthy and robust so that those workers could fully display their capabilities.

As railways spread disease from one region to another, the JNR was required to keep railroad cars and stations clean all the time and provide health and hygiene services to all field workers, including medical checkups, nutrition care, disaster prevention, occupational disease treatment, and social insurance. But these health and hygiene policies were not perfect from the start, and specific measures were not offered until concerns were voiced about the deterioration in health among employees. Meanwhile, the JNR was capable of building an excellent labor hygiene system, which came to be referred to as an “advanced system” by other sectors. The labor hygiene system was not limited to Japan. With the expansion of Japan’s railroad network to its colonies, the labor hygiene system was also introduced to other parts of the Japanese empire.

The purpose of this article is to elucidate the process of building a labor hygiene system by reviewing the changes in the hygienic conditions of the employees of the prewar JNR, and the subsequent actions taken by the JNR authorities. Although there have been studies of the labor hygiene systems in the spinning and mining industries before the war, little attention has been
paid to the labor hygiene of the railway industry.\(^1\) To the best of my knowledge, the 1992 article by Hazime Matsufuzi is the sole academic paper about the JR.\(^2\) However, since his study was intended only as an academic analysis on “Railway Labor Hygiology” rather than as a review of the history of “Railway Labor Hygiene,” it focuses primarily on the research conducted by hygiene research institutes before and after the war. In addition, Sōsuke Fujiwara’s 1960 article analyzed the mutual aid association and concluded that the association, as a comprehensive protection measure for labor living, laid the foundation for the development of “JNR Familism.”\(^3\) Although Fujiwara’s analysis is insightful, he does not examine the question of labor hygiene from the perspective of labor force preservation. Elsewhere, I argue that the modern labor hygiene system was based on the colonial employment structure and it was established in a manner so as to give priority to Japanese employees.\(^4\)

This chapter is divided into three parts. The first section reviews how the hygiene system was first developed in the JNR after the nationalization of railroads. Then, the next section examines the impact of the First World War on railroad workers. In the third section, I discuss the measures taken by the JNR authorities to improve the health of the workers.

**Nationalization of Railways and Establishment of its Labor Hygiene System**

During the Russo-Japanese War, the main-line railway network in Japan was operated by a dozen or more railway companies and as a result, the operation of railroad cars, communication with crew members, fare calculation and other things became extremely complicated. Accordingly, there was an urgent need for operating a state-run main-line network. For this reason, the Japanese government decided to purchase 17 private railroad companies and in March 1907, the JNR was founded. With the birth of the national railroad organization, the number of employees quadrupled from 28,878 in March 1906 to 90,491 in 1907.

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1. See, for example, Osamu Ishihara, “Female Factory Workers and Tuberculosis,” *Gazette of National Medical Association*, No. 322 (1913), 1–118.