

# Japan: A look at the Sanrizuka Peasant's Struggle Against the Narita International Airport

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**One of our intrepid editors recently returned, with a running nose and a battered camera, from a weekend at Sanrizuka. There he took part in a support demonstration for the local farmers, and this is what he saw and heard.**

## Libero International

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In the rolling hills of Narita, cabbages and burdock grow where once blossomed molotov cocktails. Yet the struggle of the people of Sanrizuka for the right to live and die and be buried in the sod they love has not diminished. Only, a new stage has been reached. Their unity was manifest in the twin iron towers poised above the rain-soaked land that Sunday.

That Sunday was October 11, 1975, the day of a solid solidarity-happening with the peasant defenders of Sanrizuka. 6000 people snaked between the desolation of "civilization" on both sides from Narita to the main tower.

Three bus-loads of people attended the demonstration from the Kobe-Osaka-Kyoto area, where a parallel struggle is being waged against construction of a new and equally superfluous Kansai International Airport. Other buses came from as faraway as Kyushu, 700 miles to the west. Cerebral palsy victims were wheeled along the route of the march, while students and young workers with flags and helmets of many colors zig-zagged and clashed with the riot police, who are always spoiling for a fight.

## Behind the Sanrizuka struggle

Sanrizuka, some 70 kilometers east of Tokyo, is the site of the so-far abortive 'New Tokyo Int'l Airport.' The airport "is one of the main pillars of a redevelopment plan for [Japan's] entire economic structure." (AMPO 9-10.)

The peasants of Narita (the name of the city in which Sanrizuka stands) are fighting on two fronts at once. The first is economic - for the right to continue living on land granted to them by the government after World War II "for eternity." The government's redevelopment plan, however,

would, among other things, involve the re-routing of all the rivers in the area to serve new industrial requirements: in other words, the DEATH of the farmland which is the peasants' birthright. As for the farmers, they would be forced to leave the land to seek work in the cities, there to swell the reserve labor force so necessary to capitalism to keep profits high and wages low. Already, almost every major Japanese city has its own ghetto comprised of farmers forced off the land, some of whom cannot even afford the fare to return home, but must endure life as semi-employed day-laborers until they die of fatigue or cold.

The other front is political, for the airport, though innocently billed as part of the inevitable industrial progress of the "new Japan," is tightly bound up with the provisions (many of them secret) of the U.S.-Japan Joint Security Treaty (Ampo). Ampo gives the U.S. military free access to all Japanese civil airports. At the height of the Vietnam War, Haneda, the present Tokyo airport, was used extensively by U.S. charter flights ferrying people and supplies to and from Vietnam. When Haneda got over-crowded, the Japanese government claimed it needed a new airport. Since the military privilege will naturally extend to the new airport, the peasants of Sanrizuka say they don't want to help the U.S. fight other Asians. They have sworn to fight "to the death" for their land, and have often compared their struggle to that of their brothers and sisters in Vietnam.

A further problem is the "Blue 14" air route, reserved under Ampo for sole use by the U.S. military, which makes it impossible to build a new airport west of Tokyo where Yokota airbase takes up land and airspace. Suggestions that Yokota itself, only one of numerous U.S. air bases in Japan, be given to the government for development as a civil airport have been brushed aside with excuses. The farmers of Sanrizuka, therefore, are not only fighting on two fronts: on one of those sides, they must fight a double enemy - their own government and the U.S. military.

### **Origins of the farmers' movement**

The Sanrizuka struggle began in a rainstorm on June 28, 1966, when 1000 farmers resolved to fight the government's decision to build the new airport here in utter contempt for their homes and family graves. Having already been forced by the strong resistance of local farmers to abandon plans to build the airport at its first choice, Tomisato, however, the government was determined not to lose face again. Sanrizuka had an added advantage in that one-third of the land to be requisitioned was part of the imperial estate - which of course offered no resistance. Of the land owned by the farmers, much had been occupied only since the end of the war, and so, thought the government, community resistance would be weaker than in areas like Tomisato, which had a long tradition of peasant resistance behind it. Now as their struggle approaches its decennium, the smoke of war and the fumes of tear-gas have dispersed. Many farmers have accepted the government's compensation offers and left the area. More remain, to protect the future. In another rain storm, the October 12 meeting drew several thousand members of the Opposition League (Hantai Dōmei) and its supporters.

Political support for the Sanrizuka struggle has fluctuated. When the parliamentary opposition parties made it clear their support was conditional upon the issue's usefulness for their own petty politics, the farmers realized that only their own strength would prevent the building of the new airport. For a time, the Sanrizuka struggle provided a focus for the "non-sect" anti-establishment student movement of the late 60s, until this too drifted into realms of obscurity far from the practical fight for life and the land. Today, the farmers of Sanrizuka have themselves become the forefront of the people's struggle in Japan, a source of imagination for those who believe in the need to oppose state violence, and the most important obstacle to the Japanese government's plans to obliterate an archipelago.

Credit for the successful delaying tactics which have taken the Sanrizuka struggle towards its tenth anniversary is due to the stand taken by the Opposition League. Since 1966 it has maintained its solidarity before the bland promises of airport corporation officials, who have offered big cash payments in return for a sell-out. It has also led a series of struggles, sit-ins, and demonstrations to oppose the surveyors sent to draw up plans for the airport, and even more, with the riot police detailed to protect them. The farmers employed a simple but devastating weapon: human shit, liquefied for use as fertilizer. It sure was powerful stuff Sanrizuka has inspired a succession of popular struggles all over the country.

### **New stage in the struggle**

The October 12 demonstration came just one day after a decision by the local establishment which sent the Sanrizuka epic into a new stage. The government's plans to ship jet fuel to the airport by rail had long been opposed by citizens of two towns along the proposed route. On October 11, however, the local assembly of Kamisu Town in Ibaraki prefecture withdrew its opposition, and the other town is expected to follow suit. Sure enough, the Kamisu officials had been bought off: promises by the government to extend a Japan National Railways line into the town and to improve the town's transportation system were the bait, calculated to appeal to the officials' desire for re-election, and while the assembly took the necessary steps to make its decision binding, 600 riot police provided "security" against 200 irate local citizens reluctant to see the lethal cargo passing through the midst of their homes.

Rail transportation of the fuel was first put forward by the New Tokyo International Airport Corporation three years ago, when earlier plans to build a pipeline through Chiba City to the east were abandoned in the face of similar local opposition. The townspeople refused to give their land to these transports of death, fearing accidents, and voiced their solidarity with their neighbors in Sanrizuka.

The corporation claims that the rail plan is a stop-gap measure until a pipe-line is built from, Chiba Bay according to the original plan - doubtless expecting to buy off the citizens' "representatives" with hollow promises in the usual fashion of Japanese money politics. The citizens themselves, though, remain steadfastly opposed to the plan, and the rail link is likely to remain for some time to come. Meanwhile, the railwaymen expressed their own opposition to their management's collusion with the government by turning out in strength at the demonstration. They received applause from all the people gathered there.

The airport was originally scheduled to open in April 1971. Now, after 4% years of dashed predictions, the Transport Ministry has given up making guesses when the airport will be opened. Instead, they confirm that it will not be opened before the end of 1976,- still an optimistic opinion in the minds of many, especially the Sanrizuka farmers themselves.

Sanrizuka farmers are angry - angry because, whatever this land is today, they made it, from reclaimed wasteland where once feudal daimyo lords exercised their war ponies; angry because of the government's blatant reneging on its promises, such as its plan to develop a silk industry in the area, launched in 1964, and scuttled in 1966 by the airport plan, after farmers had gone deeply into debt converting their farmland over to mulberry leaves.

## **The iron towers and international support**

Today, 'New Tokyo International Airport' stands an empty, rusting skeleton, testimony to the will of Sanrizuka to resist. In hangers built for Jumbo jets, and confidently emblazoned with the letters JAL (Japan Air Lines), buses stand in rows. The only people manning the ghost-like structure are the security and main tenance staff. It has already become too small to take the overflow from Haneda, and is quickly becoming obsolete. Cracks have appeared in the one completed run, way. Upkeep is costing 25 million yen a day, and the total cost has already topped 300 billion yen!

The one completed runway, moreover, is unusable. The farmers and their supporters have erected an iron tower on Opposition League land at a height which prevents the take-off or landing of modem jets. The tower is strong, 62 meters high with foundations sunk deep into the soil that symbolize the steadfast will of the Sanrizuka farmers. Surrounded by friendly fields, gleaming emerald that day in the ram, the tower exuded strength. Its steel girders, meshing and intermeshing like the joined arms of its defenders, wield an uncanny power of attraction. A tower of power indeed! As if the secret forces of the earth had come together at this point to replenish the struggle of those pledged to defend it, against those who would spread the pall of death.

The second and third runways remain on the drawing-board. The detemination of the last 24 families to stay on the land required for building these, promises more bloody struggles for the future. "In the name of Japanese peasants, we reject land confiscation!" - the slogan which has inspired the struggle for almost 10 years, resounds still. More than once in the past, the Sanrizuka farmers likened their fight to that of the Vietnamese people against similar forces of darkness and destruction. Another tower, 32 meters high, has also been built as a second line of defense. The Airport Corporation has conducted flight checks, and confirmed that the airport cannot be used until the two towers are removed. To do this, heavy cranes and earth-moving equipment will be necessary. Although the Corporation has begun to build a road from the airport down towards the towers, it has come to a full stop at the point where the land owned by Opposition League farmers begins. Meanwhile, the farmers continue to till their land, in the shadow of these twin sentinels.

The land surrounding the main tower is farmed collectively with the cooperation of work brigades from radical labor and student organizations. A small group of supporters has guarded the tower 24 hours a day while living in a bus parked at its base; more recently, a platform-residence was built part-way up the tower to house families who have made the tower their home.

The towers, symbols both, stand as proud reminders of a heroic past, and as defiant obstacles to an unsolicited future. The defence of Sanrizuka is rooted in these two towers. The Opposition League has appealed to the people of Japan to buy shares in the ownership of the towers as an act of solidarity with the farmers of Sanrizuka. (The farmers were originally taken to court by the Airport Corporation over the towers, but under traditional Japanese law it is illegal to buy agricultural land and change its use without the. consent of the owner. The judge upheld the farmers' ownership rights. He also announced that he would order the towers' removal two months before the opening of the airport as they would constitute a public safety safety hazard.) Unfortunately, it takes a minimum of four months to give pilots simulator training for new flight paths, and simulator programs cannot be made without the real airport to fly into! The future of the airport hangs on these two towers.

Already many shares have been sold. Now the Opposition League asks foreign friends to join in this movement, to add their strength to the popular resistance to the Japanese government bulldozer. Sanrizuka will become a battleground again. It is important that new support be gathered from all quarters. The farmers' struggle for their lives will gain new strength from your contribution to the

share movement. One may buy as many shares as s/he wants, at 100 yen (15p/50c) each. When we receive money, we will send you share-holders' forms, together with instructions for filling them in (the forms are in Japanese). Money sent to us will be sent on to the International Support Group for Sanrizuka in Kobe. Money is also needed for the Medical Aid Fund.

But it is not just the money that counts. Supporters overseas can play a vital obstructionist role: if the government is to take possession of the towers it must first obtain permission from all the shareholders, contacting each and every one of them by mail. The more shareholders there are, and the further-flung they are, the bigger the hassles for the government (can't say its our fault - we didn't make the laws!)

*Tell your friends, don't delay!  
Help bankrupt a gov't today!!*

*For further reading material on Sanrizuka, see AMPO Magazine, especially the early issues. AMPO: Box 5250, Tokyo International, Japan.*

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## **P.S.**

\* Libero International No.3. Original title: "Sanrizuka". Posted on libcom.org Feb 2 2011 10:33:  
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