

# Japan: Neoliberal counter-reform and militarisation

New premier adds right-wing nationalism to neoliberal mix

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After 5 years of the premiership of Japanese prime minister Jun'ichiro Koizumi, his successor Shinzo Abe won the election for the presidency of the Liberal Democratic Party and became the new prime minister of the coalition government between the LDP and Komeito [1]

Describing himself as the 'destroyer' of his own party, the LDP, former prime minister Jun'ichiro Koizumi gained widespread popularity among Japanese people who had been demoralized after a decade of depression of the Japanese capitalist economy. During the 5 years of his rule, Koizumi had accelerated harsh neo-liberal policies in the name of 'structural reform', culminating in the privatization of the postal system in 2005.

The results of the neo-liberal 'structural reform' policies are very clear. During the post-war era of economic expansion, Japanese society had been seen as one of the most equal societies among advanced capitalist countries. Now this impression has completely disappeared. While big companies such as Toyota have recorded unprecedented profits in recent years, average wages of workers have been pushed down.

Workers who have stable regular jobs have been replaced by unstable non-regular workers who earn only very low wages. Labour laws do not apply to most of these non-regular workers. Many workers are forced to accept illegal over-time work without payment. With privatization of public services, the part of the budget given over to healthcare, education and the pension system has been severely cut down. 'Economic Survey of Japan 2006' published by the OECD said the following: "Addressing the rise in inequality and relative poverty requires measures to reduce labour market dualism. Reform of the tax system should take into account its potential impact on income distribution, which has become more unequal for the working-age population in recent years.

Indeed, the Gini coefficient measure has risen significantly since the mid 1980s, from well below to slightly above the OECD average, and the rate of relative poverty is now one of the highest in the OECD area'. "The proportion of non-regular workers has risen from 19% of employees a decade ago to over 30%. Part-time workers earn on average only 40% as much as full-time workers, a gap that appears too large to be explained by productivity differences.

Although the increase in non-regular workers has been partly caused by cyclical factors, there is a risk that labour market dualism will become entrenched, given that thus far only a small proportion of non-regular workers have become regular workers ".

Given these social realities, even the conservative mass media pointed out that the results of the neo-liberal policies pursued by the Koizumi administration have created a society of class differentiation. The harsh effects of 'structural counter-reform' policies have particularly hit the young generation. Nearly 50% of youth could not find stable jobs and their income is not enough to sustain their basic needs.

They are now facing 'the race to the bottom'. Alongside the neo-liberal offensive, the Koizumi government strengthened its military commitment to the global 'anti-terrorism' war strategy headed by U.S imperialism. Unconditionally supporting Bush's wars, the Koizumi administration dispatched the Japanese 'Self Defence Force' (JSDF) to the Indian Ocean and Iraq in support of the U.S.-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. This was the first case of overseas military operations for the JSDF since the Second World War. It was a typical example of the combination of neo-liberalism and militarism.

On the one hand, the Koizumi administration followed the global U.S. military strategy, facilitated the relocation of U.S bases in Japan, and provided JSDF forces as an auxiliary force for the U.S in Asia-Pacific-wide military operations, including the Korean Peninsula, Taiwan, the Philippines and elsewhere. On the other hand, utilizing cases of the abduction of Japanese people by the criminal North Korean dictatorship, as well as the nuclear tests it carried out, the government deliberately created a climate of anti-Korean and anti-Chinese chauvinist feelings among Japanese people.

As a grandson of Shinsuke Kishi, who had been prime minister in the late 1950's, and who had also been a minister for industry in the Tojo administration during the Second World War, Abe has been famous for his far-right nationalist positions, justifying successive wars, invasions and the colonization of Taiwan and Korea by Japanese imperialism. The title of Abe's manifesto for the LDP presidential election was 'Towards a Beautiful Country', in which he stressed the importance of a respectful attitude towards Japanese traditions, cultures, and history, symbolized by the Emperor system.

In his New Year press conference on January 4<sup>th</sup> 2007, Abe claimed that his cabinet would promote a political process aimed at scrapping the existing Japanese constitution, which renounces war and all armed forces, in the name of prohibiting any renewed militarist attempts by Japan. Abe described this as a 'departure from the post-war regime'. According to a set of laws enacted last December, overseas operations have been defined as the primary missions of the Japanese Self Defence Forces.

The Defence Agency was formally renamed the Defence Ministry on Jan 9 2007, giving military officials a greater hand in the government's strategic policy-planning bodies. Defence officials hope that this will allow them to take over some of the responsibilities which have long been monopolized by the Foreign Ministry.

During his visit to European countries in early January 2007, Abe proclaimed that he will not hesitate to send Japanese troops abroad to 'contribute to international peace and stability' and vowed to strengthen cooperation with NATO. On Japan-NATO relations, he said in his speech to NATO's decision-making body on January 12<sup>th</sup>: 'Both sides should further demonstrate our abilities and work together'. This was very clear announcement that Japanese imperialism would dare to join the 'war against terrorism' on a global level.

The workers' movement and other social movements in Japan still remain very weak. Left political parties such as the Japanese Communist Party and the Social Democratic Party have only 16 seats between them (JCP-9, SDP-7), out of a total of 480 seats in the House of Representatives (Lower House) and 15 seats (JCP-9, SDP-6) out of 242 seats in the House of Councils (Upper House). The Democratic Party of Japan, the main opposition party, which is supported by Rengo (the biggest trade union confederation), is another capitalist party with a neo-liberal orientation. In this context, the anti-neo-liberal movement and the traditional peace movement have been facing a very difficult situation. At the same time, many workers and youth are recognising the disastrous outcome of the neo-liberal offensive by the capitalist class.

Small far-left political groups such as the Japan Revolutionary Communist League, which supports

the Fourth International, should meet the challenge of presenting another road, a road of anti-capitalist alternatives. The JRCL held its 20<sup>th</sup> national congress in August 2006 and began to discuss a new pluralist and democratic regroupment of left forces.

Although the JRCL has to tackle this task in a prevailing climate of scepticism among working-class and left forces, it believes that a new space will open up through the beginnings of resistance, even in a very modest way, against the accelerated 'race to the bottom' and the militarization of the Japanese imperialist state.

#### NOTES

[1] Komeito (Clean Government Party) is the political expression of a massive Buddhist cult, Sohka Gakkai, mainly based in the lower middle class. In the recent national elections it won nearly 8 million votes, which represents about 15% of total votes. on September 26<sup>th</sup> 2006.

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