

# Japan - Neoliberal Spell is Broken: Some Signs of Change and Hope

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## Contents

- [Unraveling](#)
- [New Labor Action by Precariat](#)
- [Just-In-Time in Employment](#)
- [Changing Tide — Equality, \(...\)](#)

The year 2008 has seen a subtle but tangible change in the political and ideological climate of Japanese society, a positive change that has broken the spell cast by the neoliberal and rightist forces on the minds of the people. By the same token, we have witnessed the emergence of a new generation of social movements, their ranks increasingly filled by the young, addressing the real problems of neoliberal package the government and big capital have imposed on the people. My premonition, maybe slightly over-optimistic, is that a sea change is in store in the Japanese political culture which has been foul and stale for too long.

The neoliberal spell remained effective for at least a decade, keeping people's imaginations entrapped and their activism stifled. Only a few years ago, most Japanese people were excited by Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro's now-or-never agitation to hard-sell his neoliberal package. In September 2005, in a snap Lower House election called by Koizumi to defeat his intra-party opponents, voters gave an overwhelming support to his core "reform" program, postal service privatization, allowing the LDP-Komei ruling coalition to secure a greater than two thirds Lower House majority.

Already then, the destructive consequences of Koizumi's neoliberal reform were felt everywhere. Grumbling was widespread, but most people dared not speak up against the "reform" itself, which Koizumi craftily presented as a bitter medicine people would have to take to help cure the ailing body of the economy. Besides, the neoliberal package had a powerful ideological component that told the battered people that they suffered simply because they were not competitive enough.

Another stifling factor at work was the mainstreaming of the rightist language and rampancy of the political and ideological forces promoting it. Intensified since the mid-1990s, their campaign glorifying Japan's imperial past escalated under Koizumi's reign, with agents planted in high government positions using their power to legitimize their discourse in the mass media. On the ground level their storm troopers were at large harassing social activists on topics they did not favor, like "comfort women" and "gender equality." In this suffocating climate, the media-manipulated center of public opinion moved visibly rightward. Though the majority did not positively favor their views, the rightists (*uyoku*) largely inhibited people's thinking and action.

More alarming was the magnetic power statist *uyoku* ideology began to wield over young generations in the second half of the 1990s. The *uyoku* view of history captured many young people's imagination. The most effective vehicle of the *uyoku* campaign was cartoonist Kobayashi Yoshinori's series of cartoon books dealing with war. His message was that the postwar pacifist,

democratic values were self interest-oriented and mean, and that peace is tedious while self-sacrifice for the “public”(state), like volunteering for “suicide attacks” is heroic and dignified. Kobayashi’s cartoon books sold in the millions. For about ten years, *uyoku* language influenced quite a few young people, students in particular, and it became fashionable among them to talk scornfully about *sayoku* (the left). Socially conscious youngsters would join development NGOs at best but not *sayoku* social movements.

This rightward swing culminated in 2006 in the ascendance of Abe Shinzo, the “prince” of the *uyoku*, to the top position of the state. As Abe was pledged to carry out his predecessor’s neoliberal program, the two schemes, neoliberal and *uyoku*, were mixed in him into a new cocktail, called a “beautiful Japan,” which turned out to be horrible to taste.

It was there and then that a large majority of the people became dehypnotized and began to see things as they stood. After less than a year, in the 2007 July Upper House election, they delivered a shattering blow to Abe and the ruling coalition. The situation began to unravel, and rapidly.

## Unraveling

The unraveling process is characterized by (1) the rise to the surface of acute social issues hitherto covered up, such as subhuman labor conditions imposed on non-regular workers in precarious employment statuses and social injustices caused by neoliberal privatization and drastic cuts in public social services, (2) decline of the *uyoku* discourse in society in the official and media language, (3) a cultural and political shift of the youth away from the neoliberal and *uyoku* influence, and (4) emergence of new action networks of socio-cultural movement groups, with the potential to join the global justice movement.

All these features may still appear fugitive and reversible but my reading is that they are early signs of a global deep-sea undercurrent oriented toward “another world” surfacing in Japan.

To avoid wishful thinking, however, we need to keep in mind that all this is occurring at a time when the neoliberal programs, if slightly modified, have never been abandoned, the *uyoku* forces are still there occupying commanding positions of state and society, and the U.S.-Japan military buildup programs are being implemented as usual. Nevertheless, changes can be seen.

A symbolic sign of the turn of the tide may be *Kanikosen* (the *Factory Ship*) boom that began early in 2008. *Kanikosen* is a novel written 80 years ago by Kobayashi Takiji, a left novelist and leading activist of the prewar underground Communist Party, who was arrested and tortured to death by the thought police in 1933 at the age of 29. *Kanikosen*, one of his best read novels, is a story of workers recruited from different parts of the country to work aboard a crab catching and canning factory ship operating in the rough Kamchatka waters. The workers are super-exploited, subjected to harsh working conditions, and suffer from the superintendent’s violence, but finally decide to fight back by organizing and going on a strike. But the imperial navy intervenes and their leaders are arrested.

This is one of the classics of the proletarian literature that flourished in the 1930s, but was almost forgotten in recent years. All of a sudden this classic began to sell like mad in January 2008, its publishers repeating reprints. It is reported that more than half a million copies have been sold in just a few months. A cartoon edition has also been produced and is selling extremely well. The readers are mostly working people, 30 percent of them in their teens and twenties and 45 percent in their 30s and 40s, according to a bookstore survey.

One may wonder why this novel depicting slave-like working conditions of the prewar period has

fresh appeal to the present working generation. But the fact is it does appeal, according to comments sent back by its new readers. Today's working poor identify with their super-exploited predecessors of the 1930s finding that they too are treated as expendables for the company. The final part of the novel where workers decide to unite and fight back, according to young readers, is most moving as it shows a way out.

This boom makes an interesting contrast with the earlier Kobayashi Yoshinori boom. Superficially, the two booms are symmetrically opposed: the enthusiastic embrace of Kobayashi representing a swing to the right and the *Kanikosen* boom a swing to the left of the popular mind, of the young in particular. But it is important to note that at a closer look the swings are not symmetrical. In the Kobayashi boom, the *uyoku* addressed the youth only at the level of their opinion, but the *Kanikosen* boom involves the material, guts-level situations which they are involved in, that call for actual solutions.

### **New Labor Action by Precariat**

In fact we now witness the emergence of new types of social movement springing up from, and addressing, gut-level realities. We do not yet know, however, what they are growing into. Are they to be a new labor movement, or a new youth culture movement, or a more comprehensive basis for a moment of movements linked with the global justice movement? It is premature to decide, but we do witness the emergence of something new, probably showing all or some of the above-mentioned features of unraveling.

Take, for example, this year's alternative May Day demonstration, dubbed Indies May Day. In Tokyo, it was an extremely colorful, sonorous, and cheerful action staged on May 3 through the bustling streets of Shinjuku, the largest amusement and night life district of Tokyo. It was organized jointly by a very diverse slate of labor groups, most of them small and medium sized groups launched by workers in precarious employment statuses. Titled "action for freedom and survival," it was organized independently from established unions. The main streamer read: "*precariat groups proliferate and join together!*" ("precariat," a coinage from Italy, landed here a few years ago and is coming into use as the working poor's appropriate self-description). Heading the march was a sound truck with a DJ blaring out music and appeals. Masks, songs, dances, and paper mache's abounded. The whole action was also a cultural presentation, dominantly of youth. It did not look at all like a labor demonstration of the traditional unions. The issues raised in placards were wide-ranging, from jobs, wages, inhuman treatment, and unpaid overtime to social security for non-regulars, taxes from the rich, empty buildings for the homeless, and abolition of the rake off system.

I did not join this action myself but my young colleagues who did all told me with excitement that it was fun and liberating to participate in. As the march passed through extremely congested areas, crowds of passers-by lined the street, watching. "*They looked sympathetic; some joined us from the sidewalk,*" one of my colleagues said. "*We felt our message condemning poverty and inequality as vice was surely getting across to the sidewalk watchers.*" This was something new. For years demonstrators in the street were met by indifference or even enmity from passers-by. Now the atmosphere surrounding the action was friendly, I was told. In fact, as they marched on, the columns swelled by spontaneous joiners and the number doubled to well over 1,000 by the time they arrived at the destination. From the end of April through early May, similar precariat actions were staged in Nagoya, Kumamoto, Sapporo, Kyoto, Fukuoka, Hiroshima, and Sendai. Scattered moves and initiatives are now linking together.

## **Just-In-Time in Employment**

The rise of the precariat movement is not an isolated phenomenon. It has occurred in the context of spreading poverty, which is now perceived as one of the acutest social issues that need to be addressed. In a country where the overwhelming majority used to consider themselves “middle class,” poverty spread very fast as a result of the government’s neoliberal curtailment of public welfare and other public services, in tandem with a drastic shift of strategy by big business in the middle of the 1990s. The all-powerful business lobby Nippon Keidanren (Japan Business Federation), in its new 1995 strategy, set itself the task of abolishing the much lauded Japanese style labor management based on “life-time” employment and replacing it with a new style of labor management. The new strategy boiled down to the slogan, “make available exactly the number of workers we need with the quality we need at the time we need.” This was an extension of Toyota’s “just-in-time” no inventory system into the employment practice.

With this strategy thoroughly carried out without encountering any substantive resistance from the already atrophied big trade union bureaucracy, Japanese society was remade into a paradise of capital where the bulk of workers were turned into non-regulars of ramified categories — dispatch workers, contract workers, day contract workers, part-timers, just-in-time employees, all subjected to arbitrary dismissals as well as low wages and substandard working conditions. The weight of non-regulars in the Japanese work force has rapidly increased. Now, they number over 15 million, and make up close to one third of the total of employees. Gender-wise, 18 percent of male employees and 53.1 percent of female employees are non-regulars as of June 2008.

The worker dispatch system is at the core of just-in-time hiring system. Introduced in 1986 for specific professional jobs, this scheme has grown into a monster, placing under its control wider and wider business areas each time it was amended. Finally, in 2004 the human trafficking system became applicable to practically all businesses including the manufacturing. The number of dispatch workers has leaped year after year to reach 3.2 million and the sales of dispatch agencies — sheer rake-off from workers’ wages — amounted to a staggering 5.4 trillion yen in 2007.

A large number of working people, especially relatively young ones who finished school in the stagnant 1990s, are doomed to permanent “working poor” statuses of various categories, moving from job to job, extremely underpaid, forced to live hand-to-mouth life, having no opportunities to obtain professional work skills, and having no future prospects. These workers are often called “freeters,” free as birds but birds shorn of wings. They are treated like things, as many of them say. In January 2007, Nihon T.V. broadcast a program titled, “netcafe refugees — drifting poor people,” reporting on day-hired dispatch workers who have no home but pass nights in Internet cafes, waiting for a cell phone call from the hiring agency. This program’s precise use of the word refugee sent a shockwave to the public as it brought home the fact that a large segment of young population has been deracinated inside their own country.

It is important to note that the major companies operating in Japan now depend heavily on dispatch workers and other kinds of non-regulars. Canon, a world-famous camera and copying machine manufacturer, for example, has 39,000 non-regulars including 21,500 dispatched workers, accounting for 43 percent of its 50,000 employees. In 2006, Canon was accused of illegally using “disguised contract workers” in order to evade responsibility for the workers’ safety and social security. Facing this accusation, Chairman Mitarai Fujio dumfounded the public by declaring, “If it is illegal, change the law.” Mitarai is incumbent president of Nippon Keidanren, which in 2005 proposed the so-called “white collar exemption” formula — no overtime pay for employees with 4 million yen or more in annual salaries.

## **Changing Tide — Equality, not Competition**

At the moment, people's activities and movements in capacity are not anything that can shake this state-business center of power to its foundation, but the tide is steadily coming in to inundate the citadel's surroundings to isolate it. As an indicator of the flux, we now note an important change occurring in social values held by the public. For instance, an opinion survey in March 2008 showed that for the first time in five years people preferring "equality" as the most desirable feature of society (43 percent) outnumbered those preferring "competition" (31 percent). This poll, which has been conducted by a subsidiary polling agency of the Ministry of Labor and Welfare since 1999, asks respondents what type of society they desire. Until 2007, the most frequent response was "society where people can freely engage in competition using their respective desires and capacities," consistently outranking the responses favoring "an egalitarian society with a smaller gap between the rich and the poor" (*J-CAST news*, March 25, 2008).

This shift of public preference is important because for many years people, especially youth, were averse to the idea of equality as an imposition of uniformity and favored competition as a factor propelling things forward and celebrating diversity. The new style of labor management in fact was presented by dispatch agencies as a system that offered young people multiple choices about their mode of working, instead of life-time loyalty to one company. Such enticing messages worked for some years but now everybody knows that the recruiters are only interested to hire underpaid freeters. The change of value preference in favor of equality seems to indicate that the people are now becoming free from the neoliberal cult of competition and thinking seriously about social justice and solidarity.

The change in values is also discernible in public political perception. The *Yomiuri Shimbun*, the daily paper with the largest circulation, known for its advocacy of a new *uyoku*-leaning constitution, reported that its annual opinion poll in March 2008 showed more people thought that the constitution should not be revised than those who thought it should be revised. The *Yomiuri* began the annual survey in 1981, and from 1993 on, the share of those supporting revision of the constitution was always larger than that of those opposing it. In 2008, the ratio reversed for the first time in 15 years to 42.5 percent for revision to 43.1 percent against revision. The share of those favoring revision dropped 3.7 points from the previous year.

Reflecting this shift, the Global Article 9 Conference to Abolish War, held in May 2008, attracted an unexpected 30,000 participants, many of them young and new to the movement. Action to defend Article 9 struck them as "cool," according to the organizers. To new generations, the long-sustained campaign against the revision of the constitution once appeared only as hackneyed old left pursuit. Of course it was anything but "cool." Now, somehow, their aesthetic perception of political action seems to be changing.

Last but not least, we must confront an important question. Are the actions and movement networks activated in Japan joining the global justice moment? It is true that Japanese activists were there in the World Social Forum and other occasions of global mobilization, but their presence did not necessarily mean that the movements back home identified with the GJM. We believed that the G8 summit held in Hokkaido in July, as a focus of global mobilization, would provide us with a good opportunity to get united with various wings of GJM. Koshida Kiyokazu, one of the central organizers of the series of multiple events and actions in Hokkaido, sketches how things went on. While there were gains, it seems premature to say that GJM has successfully landed and settled on the Japanese soil. All will depend on the follow-up.

On the whole, things are on the move.

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**P.S.**

\* From Japonesia website:

<http://www.ppjaponesia.org/modules/tinycontent/index.php?id=5>

\* Muto Ichiyo: An activist/writer on political and social affairs, national and global; born in 1931 in Tokyo, he joined student movement and peace movement in the 1950s; active in the anti-Vietnam War movement in the 1960s; founded the English journal AMPO(1969) and the Pacific-Asia Resources Center (1973), initiated the People's Plan 21 in the 1980s, and founded the People's Plan Study Group (PPSG); taught at the sociology department of State University of New York at Binghamton in the 1980s-90s.