

Japan: Foreign workers rally in Shibuya for equal rights

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JOB SECURITY, SOCIAL INSURANCE DEMANDED **Foreign workers rally in Shibuya for equal rights**

Foreign workers staged a rally in Shibuya Ward, Tokyo, on Sunday as part of their annual spring labor offensive, calling for proper and equal treatment on par with Japanese working conditions.

Hundreds of people from various countries gathered in Miyashita Park for the afternoon “March in March” event.

“Employers must begin to treat foreigners as equal as Japanese and give them job security and equality,” said Louis Carlet, deputy general secretary of the National Union of General Workers Tokyo Nambu, which jointly organized the rally with Japanese labor unions.

Carlet said before the event the major problems with foreigners’ working conditions include lack of job security and proper participation in social insurance programs, such as for pension and health care.

Many companies illegally fail to enroll foreigners in social insurance programs and give them short-term contracts. They also fire them easily because they do not expect foreigners to stay in Japan for the long term, he said.

Carlet said Japan has already become an international country and needs foreign labor. But this has nothing to do with trampling on Japanese workers, he said, because many Japanese face similar issues.

It is important to understand that “it’s not a competition between Japanese and foreign workers. In fact, we want to create a society based on cooperation and not competition.”

The event attracted many Japanese as well.

Nobuyuki Morokuma, secretary general of the Tokyo branch of the Zenrokyo labor union, said working conditions for foreigners should be improved because some of them may not even be getting the minimum wage, much less overtime pay.

Before the march, music and sports performances were staged at Miyashita Park, and keynote speeches were given by representatives from various labor unions.

Around 3 p.m., the participants, foreign and Japanese, left the park and began marching down the middle of Meiji Boulevard, chanting demands for improved working conditions and saying “no” to discrimination, including mandatory fingerprinting for foreigners upon entering Japan.

The props for the rally included not only signs and flags, but also a casket to draw attention to the failure of Nova Corp., the giant language-school chain that went bust last year, leaving thousands of

teachers jobless.

Passersby stared at the demonstrators curiously.

The labor unions began the annual march in 2005 to increase public awareness of the problems foreign workers face in Japan, Carlet said.

He said conditions for foreign workers have actually gotten worse since then, mentioning dropping wages and greater difficulty in accessing social insurance programs.

But it took the collapse of Nova last year to raise public awareness of foreign workers' issues, he said.

And some former Nova teachers joined the march this year.

"Work conditions here are not so good in general, not only for Nova teachers," said Alexandra Keller, who taught French at Nova from February 2007 until its collapse.

Keller said she was picked up by G. communication Co., which took over some of Nova's schools after the collapse. But her contract was not renewed in February because the company wanted to reduce the number of French teachers, she said.

"I love Japan. I would like to stay. But if I have no job, it's not possible," she said, adding that she will leave Japan in May.

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P.S.

* From the Japan Times, Monday, March 10, 2008:
<http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nn20080310a2.html>