

Popular struggles in Japan: A retrospective look and today's solidarity

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The translation of this article into English has allowed Yohichi Sakai - an old Japanese friend of mine - to read it. He has kindly made a first set of precisions and corrections which have been introduced in this edited version. Sentences between [...] need, he feels, to be reworked further, which will be done as soon as possible. It will of course mean that the length of the article will be a bit greater than what was initially asked for by the CADTM for its bulletin, but it is no more a problem for an Internet edition...

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Faced with the consequences of the earthquake and the tsunami that struck the North-East of the archipelago on March 11, Japan has experienced a multifaceted crisis. The Fukushima nuclear disaster puts in question the energy model of development. The impotence of the Government confirms the failure of the attempts at reform of a sclerotic political system. The economic consequences are still difficult to assess, but they will be heavy (debt and so on). As for social attacks, they promise to be severe: the privileged will do everything to ensure that this crisis - like others — will be paid for by those at the bottom; they will take the pretext of the emergency to further attacks on the rights of workers and the poor.

Since the 1980s, the Japanese social movement (taken here as a set of activist movements) has been fragmented, sectorialised, often rooted in local realities, but without any ability for national action. Will the current crisis allow a new convergence of multifaceted resistance and the rebirth of a combative struggle for alternatives across the archipelago as was the case for the last time in the years from the mid-1950s to the mid-1970? It is a vital question.!

Historical background

While Japan emerged as the first non-Western imperialist power and was for a long time the second biggest economy in the world (today the third biggest, behind the United States and China), following its defeat in the Second World War, it was integrated in a subordinate position into the geostrategic schema of the United States in East Asia.

From 1945, the labour movement was propelled by the Sanbetsu (Congress of Industrial Unions of

Japan), linked to the Japanese Communist Party (JCP), but social radicalization was blocked as early as 1947 with an aborted general strike. With the beginning of the Cold War, anti-Communist repression and the Korean conflict, it was in the early 1950s that the socialist Sohyo union federation (General Council of Trade Unions of Japan) became dominant in the trade union movement. [A decade later, a new wave of radicalization took shape, this time around the military escalation of the United States in Indochina. But it was again defeated in the second half of the 1970s.]

The legacy of the 1960s

Radicalism and defeat profoundly marked the social movements emerging from this period.

Trade unions. The Sohyo federation was especially strong in the public sector while the pro-management, intra-enterprise were generally the only ones able to operate in the large private companies. At the end of the 1980s, the Sohyo and another right-wing federation of Domei (Japanese Confederation of Labor) gave way to a single federation, Rengo (Japanese Trade Union Confederation, JTUC), with the membership of about 8,000,000 (6,830,000 in 2009). This merge was carried out for the benefit of the right. The unions related to the JCP formed Zenroren (National Confederation of Trade Unions, NCTU) with the membership of about 1,400,000 (880,000 in 2009) and the socialist left and the far left formed their own national body, Zenrokyo (National Trade Union Council, NTUC) with the membership of some 300.000 (140,000 in 2009) respectively in 1989.

Politics. During the Sino-Soviet conflict, the JCP declared itself pro-Peking and then “neutral”, which delayed the formation of Maoist organizations. Thus in the early 1960s, the new left were mostly anti-Stalinist spontaneists, Trotskyites or self-styled Luxemburgists. Very combative, the Japanese radical left was regarded as one of the glories of the anti-imperialist wave of youth around the world in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Unfortunately, while weakened by the decline of struggles and subjected to constant police harassment, it saw some of its main organizations engage in wars (“*uchigeba*” = internal or mutual violence) in the early 1970s. [Japanese social democracy has never offered a consistent alternative to the reign of the right. As for the JCP, it mainly has a local implantation.] The political left has had only a marginal influence in the Japan of recent decades.

Peasants. Japanese agriculture consists largely of small farms and the bourgeois right has always sought an electoral clientele here. Nevertheless, one of the main struggles of the period was conducted with farmers, from 1966 to 1978, against the construction of the international airport at Narita, north of Tokyo. Resistance to the dispossession of the peasantry, rejection of the authoritarian development model, denunciation of the role played by the Japan in the air war in Indochina, all combined in the spectacular and repeated confrontations of the radical movements with the forces of repression at Sanrizuka.

[Women. To a large extent, formal equality of rights was recognized for women in the Constitution of 1947, inspired by the US occupier. Nevertheless, the “second wave” of feminism was asserted enough early in Japan, during the student radicalization, focusing particularly on fighting for realization of these rights in the world of work (in connection with the far left) or in support of women in the home (“housewife feminism”), giving rise to varied traditions: socialist feminist, eco-feminist and so on, but not to a broad autonomous and unitary movement of women.]

[Anti-war. Rejecting the previous militarism, pacifism found a real cultural background in Japan after the Second World War. It gave birth in [the 1950s and early 1970s] to a popular anti-imperialist movement against the Japanese-US security pact (AMPO). With the decline of national mobilization,

resistance continued around the large American bases, particularly in the south of the archipelago, in Okinawa (90,000 demonstrators on April 25, 2010).]

Environmental. The importance of the ecological question was notably asserted during the 1960s and 1970s through public health issues, in the context of poisoning caused by wildcat capitalist development. The best known example is that of “Minamata disease”, from the name of the coastal region of the Ariake-kai gulf, Kyushu, fatally polluted by a chemical plant (Chisso) discharging mercury into the sea, against which a long popular struggle was conducted.

In a context of globalization

Japan is probably one of the countries where the cut-off between the activist generation of the 1960-70s (the “years of fire”) and today is the deepest. The continuity of the resistance occurred primarily locally and on varied issues: American bases, nuclear plants, social solidarity networks, inter-union networks in industrial areas, environmental protection, lifestyles and so on. However, those movements are scattered and fractionalized.

Neo-liberalism. The labour movement proved unable to cope with the neoliberal offensive of the 1990s. [Today, the risk is great that the big employers will seize the opportunity of the crisis opened by the tsunami of March 11 and the Fukushima disaster to challenge social rights even more. However, during the period of decline, the radical unions have accumulated a varied experience of organization on a local level whether with citizen’s movements or in the leadership of areas abandoned by the dominant unionism (immigrants, small firms).]

Similarly, the peasantry is threatened with virtual disappearance by the opening of borders to free trade in agricultural products. This threat has facilitated closer relations between the Japanese movement Noumiren and Via Campesina at the international level.

International. Other elements of the movement for global justice like People’s Plan Japonia or Attac have emerged, without taking on the same scale as in other countries. Japan has been the activist host of counter-summits, as at the Hokkaido G8 in July 2008. Japanese organizations participate in global forums as well as Asian networks, but this participation is limited by the general weakness of those movements and the language barrier (although young people speak Western languages more than their parents).

Japanese movements play no less a pivotal role in solidarity in Northeast Asia. In defense of Taiwanese or Korean workers for example (the former colonies). Or in the development of a conception of international security from the point of view of peoples and non-rulers, as at the G8 in Okinawa in 2000.

In a context of humanitarian disasters

Japan is at the meeting point of four tectonic plates and lives in expectation of the great earthquake which will destroy the Tokyo metropolitan area and the Tokai region (Pacific coastal area of central Japan). The force 9 earthquake of March 11, 2011, was followed by an exceptional tsunami and the nuclear disaster in Fukushima. The tsunami devastated the Pacific coasts of Eastern Japan and the population is facing a nuclear disaster comparable to that of Chernobyl in Belorussia/Ukraine (1986).

Nuclear power. Despite the memory of Hiroshima-Nagasaki - the biggest of war crimes, committed

by the United States - Japan is like France one of the countries where the (civil) “nuclear consensus” of the elites weighs like lead on society, stifling any challenge. Chernobyl caused a temporary resurgence of the anti-nuclear movement, which has resumed today. This occurs above all locally, including through the resistance of people to the reactivation of closed down reactors, but through citizen protests also, as on April 10 of this year (17,500 demonstrators in Tokyo).

Social. The social consequences of the tsunami (a natural disaster) and Fukushima (a man-made disaster) are devastating: the evacuees are counted in the hundreds of thousands and experiencing precariousness; a number of employees may find themselves without jobs, their businesses have been destroyed or are in the area threatened by radioactivity; farmers and fishers in contaminated localities can no longer produce anything and we do not know to what extent the nuclear crisis will get worse and the radioactivity will spread.

Social movements have learned to act in disaster situations, like the unions of the NTUC during the Kobe earthquake in 1995. But it is the first time since the war that they have had to deal with a situation of crisis of such magnitude. They need our help.

Internationalism. We have known many humanitarian disasters in the world in recent years. After New Orleans in the United States (2005), the Japanese experience today shows that solidarity remains necessary, even when the countries affected are economic powers. Inequalities are magnified in times of crisis and if social movements do not have the means to defend them, it will be the poor who will pay the bill for a disaster for which they are not responsible

We must be able to promote our own concept of humanitarian aid, independent of that of the governments, assistance that responds to the emergency both by sending relief directly to the poor and by raising broader and more sustainable social issues, strengthening organisations which are on the ground, defending the rights of the poorest. Militant solidarity, from social movements to social movements, is indeed for us an internationalist duty.

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P.S.

* Translation International Viewpoint.