

# Organizing Japan's Urban-Industrial Underclass – Homeless and Day Laborers Forge a New Anti-globalization Alliance

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In modern Japan, the urban-industrial underclass has always been at the mercy of state labor policies and market fluctuations, finding work when and where it benefits big industry, barely surviving the rest of the time. The lowest rung on this shaky social ladder is occupied by two groups. The first are day laborers, who alternate between the flophouses of impoverished working-class quarters (yoseba) and isolated construction sites, complete with temporary dormitories (hanba). The second are homeless workers, who live from hand to mouth, taking odd jobs during the day when they can and bedding down on the street at night.

Day laborers constitute a pool of surplus labor that can be freely exploited and then dismissed by employers as the need arises. Gangsters (yakuza), acting as labor brokers, hire these workers by the day, dispatching them to the most dangerous and demanding construction sites, where they remain for periods ranging from one or two days to several weeks or even months, receiving the same day-rated wage. When these workers are past their prime and no longer able to perform under such onerous conditions, they are discarded unceremoniously. The social safety net does not adequately cover unemployed day laborers; with no steady source of income, they end up living in the street, where many die lonely, miserable deaths.

Since the mid-1990s, the homeless have gravitated to parks, riverbanks, and other public spaces, where they spread blue vinyl sheets on the ground or build flimsy temporary shelters of cardboard and scrap wood. There, small communities have sprung up, the inhabitants cooperating to minimize deaths from exposure and help each other survive. In recent years, these communities have organized labor actions to win back unpaid wages. They hold demonstrations regularly, negotiate with city authorities for unemployment and welfare benefits, and struggle to defend their right to life. Advised and assisted by day laborers' organizations, these groups form the core of a nascent social movement of the urban-industrial underclass and its supporters.

As globalization, force-fed by neo-liberal policies, seeps into every sphere of national life, Japan is rapidly abandoning the social-welfare state and moving toward a stripped-down version of the free-market system where it's every man for himself and only the "fittest" can aspire to a decent standard

of living. Japan's industrial structure, its employment system, and the laws affecting blue-collar workers are undergoing a major overhaul. At the same time, there is a shift from fulltime, "permanent" employment to temporary and part-time work, the latter increasingly involving underemployed young people known as "freeters"[1]. As a consequence, the number of poorly paid workers in unsteady jobs is growing rapidly. With welfare assistance to the elderly, the disabled, and other socially vulnerable groups being reduced and sometimes eliminated, these marginalized groups must survive on tiny incomes or live off of meager life savings. Workers other than day laborers, too, are losing their jobs and their homes and apartments. Today, in this economic "superpower," more than 30,000 Japanese have been stripped of their livelihoods and thrown on the street.

The homeless- and day-laborers' movement is searching for a new, more effective way of confronting this crisis. Joining with groups opposed to globalization, it has expanded its mandate to embrace a wide array of socially excluded people, working with them to expose social injustices and find solutions. Through its participation in the World Social Forum and the International Solidarity Action of the Have-Nots, the movement has forged new alliances with the disabled, refugees, foreign workers, and other groups suffering from official neglect, mistreatment, and social discrimination, at home and abroad.

This first part of this essay provides an overview of the history of the urban-industrial underclass and looks at its current living and working conditions. The second part examines the government and citizen response to homelessness and traces the development of a new mass movement that is emerging from within the urban underclass to challenge rampant neo-liberal globalization.

## **The Urban-industrial Underclass**

Many foreigners believe that Japan has no urban slums, but that is not true. Modern capitalism, despite its sophistication and great complexity, depends ultimately on the exploitation of wage labor, and at the lowest reaches of Japan's highly stratified work force, the poor live and work in appalling conditions. The structure of this "underclass" varies widely from region to region, reflecting local realities and the specific historical conditions that brought it into being.

Like other "advanced" capitalist societies, Japan, too, has its share of poverty pockets and inner-city slums, where various marginalized groups congregate in search of work and a cheap place to live. Many such groups have their origin in pre-modern times. One example are the discriminated *buraku* people, or *hisabetsu-burakumin*, former "outcastes" whose ancestors were compelled to live in segregated communities because of their hereditary work (processing leather and animal products, etc.), which was considered ritually defiling. Another example are convicts and peasants who fled their villages to escape feudal exactions and were forced to work as miners under very primitive conditions in order to survive. And then there were the unskilled workers who gathered in the cramped urban labor exchanges (*yoseba*) where the poor and displaced traded a day's work for food and lodging.

With the creation of a modern, capitalist society after 1868, new groups joined the urban underclass, including the ethnically distinct Okinawans and other inhabitants of the Ryukyu archipelago and the indigenous Ainu of Hokkaido. These groups were absorbed into the modern Japanese state via a systematic program of forcible assimilation. Modernization also produced a militant brand of nationalism, leading to military expansion and aggression against China (Taiwan was annexed in 1895), Korea (colonized in 1910), and other Asian countries.

Koreans and Chinese who lost their land and livelihoods due to Japanese colonial policies were

compelled to immigrate to the metropolis in search of work, and during World War II, hundreds of thousands were forcibly conscripted as laborers and made to work in mines, munitions factories, and other war-related industries. Finally, in the past 20 years, migrant workers from Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America have come to Japan on short-term visas and stayed on to work. Hired for the dirtiest, toughest jobs, they are routinely exploited by unscrupulous employers and live in constant fear of the police and deportation by immigration authorities. All of these disparate groups have been incorporated willy-nilly into Japan's urban-industrial underclass by similar historical processes, and today's yoseba population has a disproportionate number of cultural and ethnic minorities.

### **The Yoseba: A Reservoir of Urban Underclass Labor**

From 1945 until recently, there have been basically two types of employment in Japan: fulltime or "permanent" work, the mainstream form of employment, and other more unstable types of work, including temporary, seasonal, and casual or day labor. Broadly, workers in the second category can be classified as members of the underclass since their status is more precarious and living conditions are more uncertain.[2]

Toward the bottom of this hierarchy are laborers who work on a daily contract basis and inhabit the nebulous zone between intermittent employment and homelessness. At the rock bottom of this lowest layer are those without shelter. Many subsist entirely outside the formal employment structure, deriving a tiny income from occasional day work, from the aluminum cans and other recyclable materials they salvage and resell, or from the odd job they manage to pick up here or there. Some homeless workers also hire out as day laborers when they can.

*Yoseba* are highly visible but informal labor markets where the most unsettled segment of the casual working population gathers to sell its labor to brokers (*tehaishi*) on the basis of a one-day contract. Nowadays, certain areas near train stations, on side streets, and in parks and open public spaces where a day's work is routinely contracted for are also referred to as yoseba. Typical day-laborers' quarters have a distinctive atmosphere, with their cluster of cheap boarding houses, restaurants, drinking establishments, and other services catering to, or preying on, casual workers living very close to the bone.

*Yoseba* are easily distinguished by their rows of run-down lodging houses, whose tiny rooms are usually rented by the day. These flophouses (*doya*) constitute the heart of the *yoseba*, whence the synonym *doya-gai*, literally, "the flophouse quarter." In the past, owners sometimes crowded as many as eight workers into a single room, stacking them like sardines in narrow bunk beds built four tiers high on each side of the room. As a rule, however, they rented out small private rooms affording about 5 square meters of space. Many *yoseba* are also located near government-run unemployment bureaus that specialize in finding work for day laborers. Well-known day-laborers' quarters include San'ya in Tokyo, Osaka's Kamagasaki, Kotobukicho in Yokohama, and Nagoya's Sasashima. At its peak, San'ya, for example, was home to 8,000 day laborers, Kamagasaki to some 20,000, but there are yoseba of varying sizes tucked away out of sight in the dark corners of almost every large city.

Another defining feature of the *yoseba* is that most of its denizens are single men. Many were once married, but hard times or other circumstances led to divorce or separation. Almost all of these men have severed ties with their families and close relatives. They include farmers who left their villages to seek seasonal work in the big cities and came to depend on day-labor jobs; others are underemployed workers drawn to the lower-class slum area by dire necessity.

The *yoseba* is a "free" labor exchange where the commodity of a day's labor is haggled over, bought

and sold. Early each morning, workers and job brokers gather to negotiate daily work contracts, the former hoping to net young, physically vigorous men, the latter determined to hold out for the least exacting work and the best daily wage. Most of the men are desperate for a job, however, and in reality few can be choosers. The work generally involves some kind construction-related or manual job, more often than not on large-scale public works projects. At these vast sites, big companies parcel out jobs to a series of smaller contractors, subcontractors, and sub-subcontractors, and day laborers often find themselves working for third- or fourth-level subcontractors at the very bottom of this pyramid. Mainly they are assigned shop-floor tasks, such as simple repair, maintenance, and clean-up work.

In general, day labor consists of “three-d” jobs that are dirty, dangerous, and difficult and therefore shunned by fulltime employees. Moreover, many small subcontractors are affiliated with organized crime syndicates, and gangsters (*yakuza*) often run the work brokerage services on which day laborers depend. Workers frequently are ordered to do hazardous tasks not stipulated in their contracts, and any show of resistance is likely to be met with violence. Unscrupulous brokers regularly withhold part of the laborer’s wages for unspecified “services,” and when a worker is injured on the job, the broker often refuses to provide for medical treatment or turn in the paperwork for accident and unemployment benefits. And, needless-to-say, there is never any guarantee of work the next day.

Reflecting the perilous nature of day labor, injuries are frequent and sometimes require hospital treatment. When a laborer is hospitalized or no longer able to work because of old age, he will end up out of pocket and sleeping rough. Chronic homelessness often invites a solitary, unpleasant death on the street—a fate that potentially awaits every day laborer. Accurate figures on the number of such fatalities are difficult to come by, but in the past, as many as 300 a year have died in San’ya’s mean streets and back alleys, often in wintertime.

The *yoseba* is a dumping ground for the unemployed from various branches of industry. Through the subcontracting system, big capital pools this labor, drawing from it efficiently according to its short-term needs and the vagaries of the business cycle. Day laborers are forced to work under adverse conditions that effectively curtail their basic rights and social protections, and when their capacity for work has lost its market value, they are simply abandoned to their own devices. In that sense, the *yoseba* reveals capitalist society in all its starkness; here, the labor-control and allocation mechanism functions flawlessly and without adornment, ruthlessly disposing of those human beings no longer “fit” to service the system.

## **The Evolution of Japan’s Postwar Industrial Structure**

Defeat in World War II left Japan’s industrial base and economy badly damaged. In the early 1950s, however, the Korean War (1950-53) provided a windfall for recovering industries in the form of U.S. military procurement orders for war-related matériel. This “gift from the gods,” as then Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru phrased it, put the economy back on its feet. From the late 1950s through the 1960s, Japan recorded unprecedented rates of economic growth. Accelerated economic expansion prompted the government to deprioritize agriculture and the primary sector, whose surplus labor force was siphoned off into urban industrial production. The state poured capital into plant and equipment, privileging the development of manufacturing and heavy and chemical industries at the expense of farming. Massive investment in infrastructure produced a sharp upturn in construction and related industries.

At the same time, the government engineered a switch from high-cost coal to cheap Middle-Eastern

oil as the nation's primary energy source. The rapid market expansion that accompanied the retooling of Japan's industrial base put the country's balance of payments in the black. This transformation represented the reorganization of Japanese monopoly capitalism, which the postwar U.S. occupation (1945-52) had linked directly to Japanese militarism and targeted for destruction. The economy once again came under the control of a small number of giant corporate groups, each organized around a central financial institution, each with its own chain of hierarchically arrayed affiliate (*keiretsu*) and associate enterprises. Many small and medium-sized firms were faced with the choice of either being absorbed by the corporate giants or going under. Thus, a handful of powerful industrial groups, despite their intense inter-group competition, came to exert oligopolistic control over the market.

Hypergrowth coupled with the reworking of the industrial structure by the state and big business also led to the reorganization of the labor market, as labor-intensive urban industries began recruiting young rural workers in large numbers. High school graduates, once the pillar of agricultural production, left their farms to look for seasonal work in Japan's major cities. Many found factory jobs in the heavy and chemical sector.

As the need for pliable young labor grew, these "golden eggs" were recruited en masse right out of high school to become the principal shop-floor labor force. Many of these migrant workers, however, drifted toward the lower strata of the working class, ending up on construction sites or working at other insecure temporary or casual jobs, where they filled labor shortages in each of the basic industries.

Near the major industrial centers, *yoseba* sprang up to absorb the unemployed, the unskilled, and those whose abilities had been made redundant. As Japan shifted from coal to oil, mine closures multiplied, and these districts also became home to out-of-work miners. Internal migrants and industrial castoffs flowed into the flophouse district, which became an immense reserve of expendable underclass labor on which big business could draw at will for the most difficult and lowest-paying jobs and then discard when no longer required. It was against this backdrop that the *yoseba* assumed its defining features.

During the early 1960s, clusters of cut-rate boarding houses came to dominate the day-laborers' quarter. The construction industry, the main source of *yoseba* employment, also came to depend at this time on the system of multitiered subcontracting with its many levels of intermediaries, each taking a cut from labor's share. Yakuza control of the *yoseba* also dates from this era, as organized crime stepped in to monopolize job-recruitment services, enforce labor discipline through violence or the threat of violence, and extend its nefarious influence to virtually every aspect of *yoseba* life.

In 1973, the oil crisis dealt Japan's economy a serious blow. The automobile, shipbuilding, and steel industries, the dynamo driving the "economic miracle," were sent reeling. As the industrial giants attempted to pass their losses down the line, a host of small and medium-sized companies went bankrupt, prompting the massive dismissal of workers dependent on temporary and day work. To meet the crisis and restore production, the government promoted efforts to shift manufacturing offshore to the cheap-labor regions of Asia while streamlining plant and equipment and intensifying labor processes at home. Unemployment soared in every sector, dramatically reducing the demand for *yoseba* labor.

As part of the retooling effort, the *yoseba* subcontracting system was reorganized and incorporated into the large *keiretsu* industrial groups. The construction industry, unable to mechanize readily or go offshore, became the exclusive employer of *yoseba* labor. The slump extended into the 1980s, and during this time, the construction industry, too, gradually mechanized, further undermining the quality of life in the *yoseba*. Day laborers became the sacrificial victims of state-led industrial

restructuring, paying the heaviest price in terms of unemployment and pauperization.

In the mid-1980s, Japan suffered a severe recession caused by the drastic appreciation of the yen vis-à-vis the dollar, but even after the economy recovered from the aftereffects of the strong yen, the government continued to pursue a cheap-money policy. This enabled large corporations to expand productive capacity through low-interest borrowing and boost investment in plant replacement and the refurbishing of old buildings, finally creating new jobs in the construction industry. In the late 1980s, this inaugurated an era of asset inflation divorced from economic basics that became known as the “bubble economy.” The spurt of speculative investment activity increased the demand for domestic labor, particularly in construction, and the *yoseba* seemed to acquire a fresh lease on life.

### **The Collapse of the *Yoseba* and the Rise of Homelessness**

Around 1992, the speculative bubble burst, plunging the *yoseba* into renewed uncertainty. There was an abrupt decline in day labor jobs, and the construction industry changed its recruitment tactics. Brokers now placed help-wanted ads in newspapers and weekly magazines, bypassing the *yoseba*, which began to lose its preeminent function as a labor exchange. Recruiters were then in a position to hand pick the youngest, most productive applicants. As the *yoseba* dried up, only a handful of construction workers able to afford a room, welfare recipients, and the homeless remained. Once the choice of last resort for the out-of-work, the *yoseba* today is in a state of collapse. Day laborers chronically out of work are not eligible to receive unemployment benefits; nor, without a fixed abode, can they apply for welfare assistance, which requires recipients to maintain a permanent address. With nowhere to turn, they find themselves on the street. The decline of the *yoseba* is a major contributing factor to the rapid growth of homelessness over the last decade.

As the *yoseba* labor market was being dismantled, job recruiters set up shop at railway stations and in parks, where many homeless sought refuge, and began hiring workers without shelter, a practice that continues today. In the sense that these workers are still recruited from the lowest reaches of the urban-industrial underclass for construction work and cleaning jobs, nothing much has really changed. But there is a difference: while homeless day laborers are still sent to construction sites, unlike in the past, they are no longer paid when there is no work that day, a not-uncommon occurrence. Nevertheless, while on site, they are charged for meals and a bed in the company bunkhouse. Thus, such workers may spend a week, say, at a particular work site only to find that at the end of the contract most or all of their wages have been deducted as living expenses. In the end, they leave the job penniless having worked, in effect, for free. Preferring to work gratuitously rather than bed down in the street, many homeless feel they have no choice but to accept such employment.

Two incidents illustrate the abusive conditions that reign on construction sites. In May 2001, a fire broke out in Yotsukaido, Chiba Prefecture, at a site controlled by the Kikuchi Group, a small local subcontractor. The foreman had locked the doors to the dormitory from the outside to keep the workers from walking off the job at night, and when the fire broke out, four day laborers died in the flames. Only those who managed to smash a hole in the walls of the prefabricated shack escaped with their lives. [3]

The second incident came to light in October 2004 at a camp site run by Asahi Construction in Tsuru City, Yamanashi Prefecture, when the decomposed bodies of three workers were discovered in a hastily dug grave. Asahi Construction is infamous for its refusal to honor wage agreements and file workers compensation and accident claims, and for its ready recourse to violence. Although no one

knows for sure, the three men presumably were killed for insisting on their rights.

Violent incidents rarely come to the public's attention, and such employers are by no means exceptional. Many homeless workers must put up with constant surveillance, physical confinement, and, occasionally, violence meted out to keep would-be "troublemakers" in line. According to government statistics, there are some 8,000 construction camps with temporary living quarters (*hanba*) in Japan, housing an estimated 300,000 workers. Smaller companies, however, often fail to register their sites, and the total number of *hanba* and workers living there is anyone's guess.

Following the collapse of the over-heated bubble economy in the early 1990s, the demand for new buildings and plant infrastructure dropped off sharply. Predatory investment in real-estate acquisition during the boom years had failed to generate the projected commercial development schemes, forcing big speculators to default on loans. The upsurge in bad loans further undermined the construction industry, which now experienced a major shakedown. The post-bubble recession forced building firms to submit the lowest possible bids in order to obtain work orders, and this, in turn, exerted enormous pressures on subcontractors to slash production costs down the line. The phenomenon of homeless day laborers being compelled to work for nothing is not a passing anomaly: in order to survive, the construction industry had structurally integrated poorly paid and unpaid labor into its day-to-day operations.

### **Living and Working Conditions**

It is important to examine in some detail the living and working conditions of the homeless. Estimates place the number of homeless workers living in city parks, along riverbanks, near train stations, and on other public land at about 30,000 (in 2002, the government released a figure of 25,296). Roughly 60% are thought to be former day laborers, and 40% are said to be other workers with no experience of the *yoseba*; the latter category is increasing steadily.

There are two defining features of homelessness in Japan. First, most people living without shelter are male and single; second, they tend to be older, the average age according to government sources being 55.9. Unemployment is the single greatest cause of homelessness, and since men still form the bulk of the industrial labor force, it is not surprising that unemployed men account for a majority of the homeless. In addition to former day laborers, the homeless include men who held live-in positions in bars, restaurants, or pinball parlors or worked for small companies. Insecure to begin with, these jobs were simply eliminated with the business closures and bankruptcies that have multiplied with industrial restructuring. Relatively few women are found on the street because of the obvious dangers they face there. Nonetheless, as globalization accelerates the shift toward service-oriented industries, an increasing number of women and young people are living in the open.

Those without shelter may be divided roughly into two categories. The first consists of people with a relatively fixed place of abode and minimal cover, such as the vinyl sheets and cardboard shacks that dot many parks and riverside areas. The inhabitants of these small communities collect discarded aluminum cans, magazines, and cardboard and sell them for a pittance to scrap dealers. Or they work as scalpers outside ticket offices, buying up batches of tickets prior to sporting events and reselling them at a slight profit. They also engage in a host of odd jobs around the city. None of this menial work pays enough to get the homeless off the street. If individuals cannot hope for a "normal" life, however, the community itself provides a degree of protection; its members patrol the area and generally look out for each other. But life is made doubly difficult by the constant threat of expulsion by municipal authorities, friction with local residents, and the occasional violent, and sometimes fatal, attacks by young hooligans.

A second category of homeless are those without fixed abode who carry their scant possessions around with them during the day and then repair to shopping areas and train stations to pass the night. Labor brokers working the city's stations and parks often target these itinerants, since many will accept any kind of job. When they return after a few days or weeks, penniless if they have been coerced into working for free, or with only small change in their pockets, they go right back on the street. These unsheltered workers will never earn enough money to break out of this vicious circle. They forage for leftovers in garbage cans at city restaurants and convenience stores or subsist on meals prepared several times a week by support groups; many are malnourished and suffer from chronic illnesses.

#### Official Policy and the Rise of the Homeless Support Movement

In the 1990s, the national and local governments began expelling the homeless from downtown areas, placing some in segregated, temporary shelters far from the public eye. In areas with large numbers of homeless, local residents and merchants have worked hand-in-hand with local authorities to facilitate these removals. This policy differs little in essence from the forcible relocation of paupers to the fringes of rapidly expanding urban areas during early modernization, or from the eviction of the urban poor and homeless from Japan's big cities at the end of World War II.

In recent years, led by citizens' support groups and homeless associations, people without shelter have mounted a campaign of organized resistance to this policy. A prominent example is the fierce response to Metropolitan Tokyo's 1996 mass eviction of residents from their "cardboard village" in the underground mall at Shinjuku Station's West Exit. The stage for a bitter confrontation was set in 1991, when the Tokyo Metropolitan Government moved its central offices to a towering skyscraper near the West Exit and dubbed it the "Gateway to Tokyo." By the early 1990s, more than 200 homeless had set up cardboard shacks and created a tightly knit, self-policed community in the underground area there. In early 1996, using as a pretext the installation of a mechanized sidewalk in precisely that space, the city government mobilized some 600 riot police, guardsmen, and municipal employees to tear down the flimsy cardboard structures and expel the inhabitants.

The metropolitan government's threat to dismantle the community prompted an immediate response from the homeless, community organizers in the day-laborer movement, young activists, and artists across the country. As the expulsion deadline neared, the artists converged on Shinjuku to decorate the cardboard houses with bright, attractive designs, and passersby contributed 200,000 (about \$18,000) daily to the community's campaign chest.

The eviction was carried out in the dead of winter, despite strong resistance from the homeless and their allies, including day laborers and activists bused in from Yokohama (Kotobukicho), Osaka (Kamagasaki), Nagoya (Sasashima), and as far away as Fukuoka in Kyushu. After their removal, the homeless regrouped in a nearby underground plaza. There, supporters prepared daily meals, provided medical care, and helped community members thwart the daily attempts of municipal authorities and police to expel them again. Similar attempts at eviction also took place in cities such as Osaka and Nagoya, but there, the homeless and their supporters were more successful in frustrating these efforts.

Until 1996, opposition to forcible relocation had been sporadic and localized, but with the Shinjuku struggle, organized and sustained resistance by the homeless and their allies led to the formation of a national network. With unemployment on the rise and the ranks of the homeless swelling to unprecedented proportions, ordinary citizens began to take note of the problem. Sympathy for the homeless grew, and the city's heavy-handed approach and lack of a coherent policy came under increasing public scrutiny and criticism. Homelessness, now perceived as a pressing national issue, was even raised in the Diet (Parliament).

Local governments, too, began to realize that forcibly expelling the homeless from their makeshift communities was not a viable solution to the problem. Under intense pressure from support groups, they initiated programs designed to help the shelterless become more independent. In Tokyo and Osaka, “self-reliance support projects” now relocate the homeless and house them in special shelters for short periods of time during which they are required to actively seek work from government-run job centers.

The central government, too, explored the possibility of providing financial support to municipalities introducing such programs. The influential Japanese Federation of Economic Organizations (Keidanren, now the Japan Business Federation) and other industry groups, ignoring their own responsibility for the situation and having no remedy of their own, also urged the government to address this problem. These projects have been hailed as a step in the right direction, but in fact, they have failed to make a dent in the number of homeless or meet the needs of older workers, who are simply dumped back on the street when their time at the shelter is up.

For a long time, the national government simply dismissed the issue. With no agency assigned to deal with homelessness, no policy proposals were forthcoming. In 2002, however, the concerted efforts of support groups and progressive lawmakers finally forced the central authorities to act. That year, the Diet passed the Act for Special Measures in Support of Self-Reliance for the Homeless. Under the act, the Cabinet and the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare have orchestrated an inter-ministerial effort to reduce homelessness. The legislation highlighted the responsibility of central and local authorities and local residents in dealing with the problem, and it required the national government to draft a set of concrete countermeasures.

But the special support act also legitimized the expulsion of the homeless from public lands and facilities and has been criticized roundly by the homeless and their supporters. Moreover, instead of using existing welfare and assistance programs to help the unsheltered, the law, in effect, has decreed them a special case requiring a one-off solution. The underlying assumption is that the homeless are largely to blame for their plight and must therefore prove themselves worth of receiving assistance.

In August 2003, the central government unveiled a set of basic guidelines for assisting the homeless. The guidelines, however, were merely a carbon copy of measures already in force in Tokyo, Osaka, Nagoya, and other cities. Basically, they call for a continuation of the earlier self-reliance support projects, whereby the homeless are given temporary shelter and then thrown back on the private labor market. The unsheltered elderly, however, rejected by that market because of their age, find it virtually impossible to find new employment, and efforts to assist them have not been successful. Central authorities have consistently refused to guarantee the homeless any sort of public-sector work, insisting that it is up to the private sector to reabsorb them. As a result, the new measures condemn older workers—those most vulnerable to market contractions—to an endless cycle of prolonged bouts of homelessness punctuated by periodic short-term reprieves.

Very recently, Tokyo has initiated a “homeless relocation support program” designed to find low-rent quarters for people living in the city’s public parks. The relocation program, however, is restricted to park dwellers, its real aim being to rid these public spaces of the homeless and their shelters, which local residents find offensive. Once resettled, individuals still require some source of income to survive, but the city’s public assistance program is woefully inadequate. Support groups point out that those who have been relocated, in effect, are forced to subsist at a level below that of public welfare recipients. The program, they say, represents a disguised bottom-tier addition to the public assistance system.

## **Homeless Support Organizations: Problems and Perspectives**

Since the 1990s, with the rapid increase in homelessness and rising public concern, support groups have formed nationwide to help people on the street formulate their grievances and become more self-reliant. Associations of the homeless and their supporters are active everywhere, and in the late 1990s some 30 such organizations joined to inaugurate a national network. Many groups prepare meals, hold medical consultations, and negotiate directly with local governments on their members' behalf. In 1998 and 1999, the network sponsored a national rally and demonstration by the homeless in front of the Diet, which was attended by representatives from across Japan.

At the same time, labor unions and day laborers' organizations, traditionally drawing support from the National Council of Day-Laborers' Unions and other progressive labor federations, have offered the shelterless advice and support in organizing a more effective movement. While strengthening their own mutual support networks, the homeless have welcomed such assistance, and together they have confronted brokers who withhold back wages or attempt to dodge their accident and unemployment obligations. Homeless associations have also lodged protests against local governments, demanding job opportunities, welfare assistance, and the right to a decent life while on the street.

Labor and other activists refuse to treat the homeless as wards in need of protection. The unsheltered are encouraged to build healthy social relationships inside their own communities and overcome the legacy of social exclusion: feelings of rejection, uselessness, and alienation. At the same time, they are learning to fight in an organized way for their right to a decent existence. In this way, they gradually redirect their lives, confronting the capitalist system in an effort to end to their victimization.[4]

At present, however, as the numbers of homeless and those dying on the street soar, Japan remains a long way from a fundamental solution to this problem. Today, many groups have applied for NPO status under the Law to Promote Specified Nonprofit Activities in a bid to manage local government programs in support of the shelterless. Once certified, some NPOs have created local councils bringing together municipal officials and local residents concerned about the issue.

These organizations, however, find the scope of their activities limited by the need to maintain good relations with city authorities and act within the parameters set by local government. Recently, many organizations have established NPOs or social welfare corporations under the Social Welfare Services Law[5] in order to provide lodging and other services to those without shelter—but for a profit. Often, these organizations are run by organized crime groups anxious to reassert control over the homeless population. Local authorities often find it more expedient to rely such dubious intermediaries than make proper use of their own welfare resources.

Support groups have insisted that the central and local governments provide adequate shelter facilities to get the homeless off of the streets, and improve their living conditions, and a movement “to expand the safety net” is gathering steam. This trend is particularly pronounced in the case of NPOs entrusted with administering local support programs. They assert that the homeless are a unique case requiring special treatment and facilities. In order to secure official backing and funding for their projects, however, they refrain from criticizing the government's on-going campaign to privatize public services, weaken labor-law guarantees, and eviscerate the social welfare system. In short, they avoid political issues that do not directly affect the wellbeing of the homeless.

Other organizations, including our own, the San'ya Day Laborers' Welfare Center Action Committee, believe that this particular approach raises serious questions. When the Law to Promote Specified

Nonprofit Activities was enacted in 1998, it was hoped that NPO activities would go beyond traditional anti-establishment positions and elaborate new alternatives, pointing the way to a more just society. This aspiration was expressed in the movement slogan “From Anti- to Alternatives.” Government certification is required to launch an NPO, however, and this has tended to restrict NPO policy objectives to the relatively narrow bounds imposed by the political, social, and industrial status quo. It is very difficult for such organizations to formulate what the World Social Forum calls “an alternative,” that is, “another world”—one substantially different from the existing capitalist system.

Japan’s homeless population constitutes the substratum of the urban-industrial underclass; it is the inevitable product of an “advanced” economy globalizing along neo-liberal principles. For that reason, it is imperative that a direct and unambiguous response to globalization be formulated from within the ranks of the homeless themselves. It is in this perspective that we are attempting to challenge not only Japan’s economic and industrial course but the basic assumptions and modalities of neo-liberal globalization.

## **The Homeless Response to Globalization: the International Solidarity Movement**

Recently, the Action Committee of the San’ya Day Laborers’ Welfare Center and allied groups have begun to tackle the issue of globalization head-on. In 2004, we set up an organizing committee to coordinate our efforts, the Day- and Homeless-Laborers’ Committee for Addressing Neo-liberal Globalization. As part of our program, we advise and support unsheltered workers, day laborers, and foreign migrants in labor disputes and maintain close relations with a wide variety of anti-globalization movements around the world. Among these are the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions; the Association for the Taxation of Financial Transactions for the Aid of Citizens (ATTAC); Agir ensemble contre le Chomage! (AC!); the independent French labor union, Solidaires, Unitaires et Démocratiques; and Brazil’s landless farm-worker movement, Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra. With the assistance of the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights, we are also in regular contact with homeless support organizations in the Republic of Korea (ROK) and Hong Kong.

The year 2003 signaled a turning point in our movement. In January, we participated in the first World Meeting of Those Without Voices, held during the third World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil. The Brazilian homeless association, Movimento Nacional De Luta Pela Moradia, proposed the event, and the French group, Droit au Logement, helped organize it. The objective was to provide a transnational space where the have-nots and the voiceless—the homeless, the out-of-work, slum dwellers, migrant and undocumented workers, and others at the bottom of society who bear the brunt of globalization—could meet, exchange experiences and views, and hammer out common objectives and demands. Several Japanese, including AKIMOTO Yoko of ATTAC, Japan, attended.

The meeting issued a closing statement, the Declaration of Those Without Voices, which noted that even at the World Social Forum, some of the most prominent NGOs represented middle-class interests, their claims drowning out the voices of the world’s poorest people, whose concerns were not being heard. The Declaration proposed that participants strengthen the worldwide network of those without voices, to be called No-Vox; participate actively in world and regional social forums of the have-nots; and, each October, organize international solidarity actions.

On October 11, we answered this call, sponsoring the International Solidarity Action of the Have-Nots, complete with a rally and demonstration in Tokyo. We reached beyond the homeless movement, joining with ATTAC, Japan, and Anti-Capitalist Action (ACA) to bring together some 100

activists representing a broad spectrum of have-nots, including the shelterless, the unemployed, young part-timers (freeters), and migrant workers. Christophe Aguiton, an activist with the French group AC!, addressed the gathering. Though this event, we were able to broaden our outlook to encompass not only the homeless but all friends who are socially excluded. We also gained a new appreciation for the importance of international solidarity work.

In January 2004, three of our members (OHNISHI Yutaka, Rayna Rusenko, and Nasubi) joined other Japanese antiwar, peace, and labor activists, in Mumbai, India, for the fourth World Social Forum. We attended a workshop organized by groups fighting for the right of abode and engaged in other forms of community action, marched in a rally held by the Dalit community (India's "untouchables"), and participated in the second No-Vox meeting.

At the No-Vox forum, we listened to country situation reports detailing the role of Japanese global enterprises and banks in dispossessing some of the poorest people in Asia. Specifically, we learned that land reclamation projects funded by the Japanese Bank for International Cooperation and the Asian Development Bank have resulted in the forcible eviction of urban slum dwellers in the Philippines and India and that many contractors are not local firms but Japanese companies. Moreover, Japanese and Taiwanese financial institutions are using this redeveloped land to build business complexes and condominiums for their own employees. Our next task in linking homeless support to the international solidarity movement will involve confronting these Japanese companies at home. At the No-Vox meeting, we also strengthened our ties with members of the International Solidarity Action of the Have-Nots.

In June 2004, a joint protest against the proposed Japan-Korea free-trade agreement was held in Seoul to coincide with a general meeting of Asian social movements. During the general meeting, we created an organizing committee, the Day- and Homeless-Laborers' Committee for Addressing Neo-Liberal Globalization, and held a workshop on the poor and homeless. Lending their support, and co-hosting the workshop, were the Korean Council of Religious and Citizens' Movements for the Homeless and related groups. Seven delegates from Japan, including two homeless people from Tokyo and Osaka, participated in these activities. During our stay in Seoul, we visited a number of homeless support groups, including the National Federation of Street Vendors of Korea, with which we held in-depth discussions.

In October 2004, at the invitation of the French No-Vox movement, we sent KANAZU Masanori to London for the third European Social Forum (ESF). There, he met activists representing the unemployed, immigrants, applicants for refugee status, and people with disabilities. He delivered a report on the current situation of the homeless in Japan and exchanged information with activists from the squatters' and antiwar movements. With other No-Vox members, he also attended the gathering "Beyond the ESF." This was organized by the White Overalls Movement for Building Libertarian Effective Struggles (WOMBLES), which works with squatters groups, migrant workers, and the antiwar movement. Critical of the ESF for its failure to address the concerns of the have-nots, "Beyond the ESF" attempted to create an alternative space at the London meeting where such issues could be aired freely and joint actions and solutions considered.

## **New Directions**

On November 3, 2004, for the second year in a row, we and other groups sponsored a rally and demonstration in Tokyo to dramatize the plight of people without voices—The International Solidarity Action of the Have-Nots to Resist Social Exclusion, War, and Globalization. Some 250 activists joined the event, bringing to the fore new categories of socially excluded people, such as

applicants for refugee status, those with “mental” disabilities, supporters of prison inmates, sex-industry workers, and workers contesting arbitrary dismissals. The action featured analyses of the diverse processes of social exclusion that isolate and oppress the have-nots and reaffirmed the need for collective action to combat common problems.

Delegates from several overseas groups attended the event, each delivering country reports and messages of solidarity. Those present included 20 activists from Korea, among them members of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions who were in Japan to oppose the Japan-Korea FTA; a delegate from the French union, Solidaires, Unitaires et Démocratiques POSTE et FRANCE TELECOM; and an activist attending on behalf of four Thai groups (Human Settlement Foundation, Forum of the Poor, Four Regions Slum Network, and Campaign for Popular Democracy).

Coinciding with our action, the French No-Vox group held a demonstration in front of the Japanese Embassy in Paris as a gesture of solidarity. About 20 protesters chanted “Solidarity with the ‘have-nots’ in Tokyo and Osaka! Employment and lodging: in Paris and Tokyo, one struggle!” and asked for an audience with the ambassador. Japanese officials, although aware of France’s growing mass movement of the poor, apparently were caught off-guard by the protest. The Embassy’s confused response angered the demonstrators. The riot police were summoned and protesters were told that the ambassador and first secretary were busy. The Embassy finally consented to allow a lower level consular official to meet with a representative of the group but insisted that the audience take place on the street, not on embassy premises. Officials also demanded a formal letter of request. No-Vox protested this treatment, expressing the anger that is shared by the socially excluded everywhere and reaffirming our mutual goals.

In the early stages of the movement, we considered two orientations for solidarity work. This discussion was directly related to an internal debate on how the homeless movement should relate to the anti-globalization struggle. The first approach stressed the need to build inter-linkages with movements of the poor and homeless throughout Asia and engage in annual solidarity actions. The Mumbai World Social Forum had impressed upon us the necessity of this course. We realized that Japanese-led globalization affects the poor not only at home but also in Asia and other regions of the world. Moreover, it was clear that in Asia, in particular, Japan had replaced the United States as the primary oppressor. The pauperization produced by Japan’s globalizing economy can only be properly identified and confronted in an organized way by considering both its domestic and transnational dimensions.

A second vector for action consisted in strengthening ties with a broader segment of the have-nots, eschewing an overly narrow focus on the homeless and the poor. By creating a wider movement capable of confronting globalization directly, the homeless movement could broaden its appeal and impact, opening a new stage in the struggle. This was the route we opted to take, and the International Solidarity Action of November 3 was a first step in that direction. Although that event was modest in scale, reflecting our limited capabilities, the messages of solidarity from abroad and the carefully coordinated No-Vox demonstration in Paris enabled us to situate our movement in a wider geopolitical framework and demonstrate the importance of international solidarity.

On December 28, 2004, as a follow-up activity to November’s protest, we organized a rally and discussion focusing on three basic questions. First, who are the “have-nots?” What makes us part of the have-nots? Second, what does globalization really mean to us? How does it manifest itself in the various problems we are confronting? Finally, what is the most effective way of contesting globalization?

A broad spectrum of have-nots were present, and the discussion was wide-ranging, reflecting differences in awareness and varying degrees of social exclusion. Briefings by different groups on

specific problems did not lead to a unified position or set of conclusions, but the ensuing exchanges allowed us to deepen our understanding of the underlying structure of globalization, reposition ourselves in that on-going process, and consider practical and theoretical perspectives for developing specific action plans.

Thus, since 2003, the homeless movement has gradually clarified its role in the anti-globalization struggle, participating with other Japanese social movements in the World Social Forum and the International Solidarity Action of the Have-Nots. We are now in the process of building multiple, interlocking ties with the global solidarity network.

One of our most pressing problems is how to secure the meaningful participation of the homeless themselves in this emerging anti-globalization front. We do not believe it is productive to confine our activities to the homeless movement alone and so are working hard to develop ties with other organizations, both domestic and international. It is a fact, however, that activists are at the forefront of this effort and that direct participation by the homeless remains minimal. Those on the street find it difficult to relate the difficult conditions of their everyday lives to such seemingly vague concepts as globalization and international solidarity; indeed, most have a hard time just scraping together a meal.

As we study and publicize the problems of homelessness, we are keenly aware of the need to materially assist homeless activists in their struggle to be effective. Until the advantages of joining the have-nots movement become evident on the street, it will be difficult to mobilize the unsheltered for broader solidarity actions. This problem must be recognized honestly and addressed if ideologically oriented activists engaged in international solidarity work are not to become complacent and self-congratulatory.

#### The Emerging Mass Movement of the Urban-Industrial Underclass

With the start of the new century, workers in the urban underclass have encountered sweeping changes in their life condition. Since the collapse of the "bubble" economy in the early 1990s, Japan's once vaunted permanent employment system has been undermined, and as globalization proceeds, the number of workers subsisting on minimal wages and divested of basic labor rights has increased dramatically.

In the name of deregulation, the government has "relaxed" many of the restrictions that once protected workers, allowing since 2004, for instance, manpower placement and dispatching services to operate in the manufacturing sector, where such activities were once prohibited. Spreading rapidly is a new employment system called "business contracting." Under it, the dispatch agency contracts with a company for an entire work module and sends in a registered work crew to do the job. In this case, those who do the actual work are not legally in the hire of the company contracting for their labor. This practice is quickly replacing traditional temporary employment. It effectively deprives the workers of normal shop-floor rights and protections. Worse still, many such placement firms treat the laborers registered with them as self-employed, independent contractors and not as workers entitled to the full protection of the labor laws.

Moreover, there are an estimated 4 million freeters (2.17 million according to a 2003 government survey), who eschew fulltime employment, taking instead unsteady, low-paying jobs, mainly in the service sector. Unable to survive on their meager wages, many live with their parents or depend on them for financial help (the so-called parasite singles). Freeters, too, are often recruited by job-placement agencies.

In every occupation, the trend now is to rely increasingly on these insecure forms of employment in order to streamline production and lower production costs. Consequently, the labor market is

undergoing a major transition from fulltime to temporary and part-time work. These new forms of employment differ from the former subcontracting system. In fact, they represent a brand new mechanism for allocating the labor resources of the urban-industrial underclass. This sea change effectively vitiates the concept of the living wage, once the principle governing Japan's "lifetime" employment regime. It not only makes the interests of management paramount but erodes the worker protection clauses in Japan's labor laws. With the dramatic increase in unstable, part-time labor, a fresh wave of workers, particularly young people, are sinking into homelessness, constituting a new addition to the urban underclass.

Japan's labor movement, built around single enterprise unions and run by fulltime employees, has been slow to recognize the problems of low-wage workers in low-grade jobs. Indeed, we do not even have a very clear picture of this insecure substratum and its living and working conditions. These circumstances call for a new kind of labor movement, one rooted in a broad-based initiative by workers in substandard jobs, the homeless, and the unemployed, united in their determination to defend their right to a decent living. A new mass movement organized along these lines would enable us to challenge the abuses of globalization and make common cause with similar movements around the world.

At present, however, Japan has nothing comparable to Thailand's Assembly of the Poor or the French organizations of the out-of-work. Building a genuine grass-roots movement here is the task not only of the working underclass and the dispossessed but of Japanese workers as a whole. Indeed, such a movement could even revitalize Japan's moribund labor federations and unions, which have lost their combativeness and vision. The general indifference of working people for the political process and issues of social justice makes it difficult to motivate the rank and file, working against the development of a mass-based movement.

We believe that by strengthening solidarity work with the have-nots, we can help revive the labor movement and mobilize a wide array of social groups in a broader struggle against globalization. Although it has only just begun to develop its theoretical and practical work, the nascent anti-globalization movement is committed to formulating a new and dynamic vision of the just society, one that can unite homeless workers, day laborers, and other excluded members of the urban-industrial underclass, giving voice to their aspirations for a better world.

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### **Endnote**

[1]: The term "freeter" came into use in the late 1980s, when high school and college graduates began to opt for part-time or temporary employment rather than fulltime work. Housewives and students with part-time jobs are not included in this category. The word "freeter" is a neologism derived from the English "free" and the German "*arbeit*," whose Japanese variant (*arubaito*) denotes a part-time job. Referring to underemployed people between the ages of 14 and 35, the term has overtones of the English "freelance" or "freelancer."

[2]: In general, first-tier and relatively large second-tier enterprises, with their complement of fulltime workers, have used temporary, seasonal, and day labor to regulate the labor market in times of industrial expansion and contraction. Many smaller firms rely primarily on family members and

relatives or independent, non-unionized workers. Others are small subcontractors hiring only a few employees. Both are highly vulnerable to market fluctuations. Such workers are nominally classified as fulltime employees, although they may be subject to dismissal when the economy slows and recession sets in. Thus, it is difficult to accurately qualify the workforce in these enterprises as either fulltime or part-time. Moreover, live-in cooks at restaurants, who receive room and board as part of their pay, and other employees in eating and drinking establishments and similar service jobs are considered fulltime workers, but in fact, they change jobs frequently, as bars and restaurants go bankrupt or replace staff, and many find themselves periodically unemployed. Such workers are effectively part of the urban-industrial underclass, and many will end up in the yoseba working at day jobs or sleeping on city streets.

[3]: The company president and his family also perished in the fire.

[4]: After 1910, when Japan colonized Korea, large numbers of unskilled Korean workers flowed into the metropolis, constituting an internal colony. During the Great Depression of 1929-30, Korean construction workers and their unemployed comrades waged bitter labor disputes with brokers and employers who withheld wages, refused to feed them, or dismissed them arbitrarily. These struggles became the starting point for the postwar day-laborers' movement. During World War II, Koreans and Chinese rounded up for forced labor, rebelled against slave-like living and working conditions, and large numbers were killed. The system developed to utilize these workers laid the groundwork for the labor-control and allocation system that exists today in the construction industry. The practice of discarding workers who have passed their prime has the same roots.

[5]: NPOs are accredited under the 1998 Law to Promote Specified Nonprofit Activities. With the exception of employees' salaries and other overhead expenses, NPOs, as non-profit organizations, are not allowed to pay dividends or invest their earnings. The Social Welfare Services Law of 1951 allows profit-generating activities and accredits two kinds of corporate persons. The first are public welfare institutions that care for people requiring 24-hour assistance; the second are homecare and daycare services for people requiring less than fulltime assistance.

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## **P.S.**

\* From Japonesia website. Translated by Robert Ricketts.

\* Nasubi is from San'ya Day Laborers' Welfare Center.