

Precariat workers are starting to fight for a little stability

Friday 17 August 2007, by [TOSHIHIKO Ueno](#) (Date first published: 21 June 2007).

The new rallying cry of nonregular workers may become “Precariats of the world, unite!”

“Precariat” is a new Japanese word combining the English words “precarious,” referring to the insecurity of part-time and contract work, and “proletariat.”

Part-time workers dubbed “freeters” and nonregular contract employees, who together accounted for about a third of the overall workforce of some 51 million in 2006, are increasingly standing in open rebellion against the wide-spread claim in the “self-responsibility” debate that the youth of today prefer an unsettled life.

On a beautiful sunny day in late May, about 100 young “costume players” dressed up as “anime” (animation) characters marched down a main street in Fukuoka, chanting “the recent business recovery was possible because of freeters.”

Many of the demonstrators were people classified as “working poor,” who get by on a monthly wage of around 100,000 yen.

The rally was staged under the sponsorship of the Freeter Union of Fukuoka, a union set up last June for nonregular workers. Among those joining in was Karin Amamiya, a 32-year-old writer.

“Corporations cajoled young people into working for them for low pay. Businesses tossed them aside after getting all they could out of them,” she shouted to passersby.

Toshihiko Ono, 32, leader of the Fukuoka union, said: “It is not fair that corporations have a glut of money while freeters and temp staff cannot even earn enough to scrape together a living. Who is the ‘leading character’ in this labor market?”

Companies have focused on cutting personnel costs since the collapse of the asset-inflated bubble economy by hiring more temp workers while reducing the number of full-time employees.

The proportion of nonregular workers in the total labor force doubled to 33 percent in 2006 from 15 percent in 1984.

“Management has had everything its own way. Employers have failed to comply with the labor standard law and pay overtime,” said Makoto Kawazoe, 42, secretary general of the Tokyo Metropolitan Union, a cross-company labor union launched in 2000 for freeters. “In the past, nonregular workers were given opportunities to become workers on a life-employment track if their work experience accumulated. But nowadays, they have no such prospects.”

A labor dispute at Sukiya, a chain of 846 restaurants serving beef-and-rice dishes, was one of nearly 40 cases that were resolved in favor of workers due to collective bargaining by the union.

Zensho Co., the Tokyo-based parent company listed on the Tokyo Stock Exchange’s first section, had

about 600 regular workers and some 6,000 nonregular workers as of the end of March 2006.

Six part-time employees at one of the outlets were suddenly given the boot because of a weeklong renovation project last July.

The Tokyo union presided over talks between the employer and the sacked part-timers. The firm finally agreed to rescind the dismissal notices and make good on unpaid overtime.

Another win for nonregular workers came at Hino Motors Ltd.

In October, a group of contract workers dispatched by manpower agency Nikken Sogyo Co. to Hino, a major truck maker in western Tokyo, helped establish the Gatenkei Rentai labor union for workers being sent to manufacturing sites on a temporary basis.

"We risk our neck to work on truck assembly lines. But employers do not treat us like human beings," said Ikkei Ikeda, 27, a representative of Gatenkei Rentai who works at a Hino factory under a contract with Nikken Sogyo.

About half of the some 3,000 workers at Hino's flagship plant are nonregular workers.

Ikeda and his colleagues in the union held a series of labor talks with the truck company last October, resulting in an improvement in labor conditions.

"Both manpower dispatch agencies and companies accepting workers being sent by such agencies have come to understand that any further lowering of their labor conditions would make manufacturing impossible," Ikeda said. "The situation surrounding contract workers has changed significantly. What is important for such workers is to get vocal."

Like those at Sukiya and Hino, nonregular workers across Japan have begun to speak out about their labor conditions.

A union formed by some of them in Osaka has even joined forces with the homeless.

On April 30, the eve of May Day, about 150 part-time workers, university students and others staged a rally in Nagai Park in Osaka in a bid to get the voices of nonregular workers heard.

The rally was sponsored by Union Botiboti, a union set up in December 2005 for nonregular workers in the Kansai region.

Ken Nakamura, 23, set up the union after he was sacked while working part time at a convenience store in fall 2005. His campaign against the dismissal led his employer to withdraw the decision.

"The largest number of calls we receive are from (nonregular) workers who have been abruptly fired. Homeless people in their 30s and 40s are on the rise, and many of them have found themselves homeless while working on a temporary basis," said Nakamura, who chairs the union of some 30 members.

Takeo Kinoshita, 62, a professor of social welfare at Showa Women's University in Tokyo, said the creation of unions by nonregular workers across Japan "reminds me of how the labor movement started."

"Youths who have no rights have started to rise up to mount movements aimed at pursuing universal justice, dismissing the behavior of corporations seeking their own interests. The movements are

small but have big potential.”

Satoshi Kamata, a 69-year-old investigative reporter who wrote “Jidosha-Zetsubo-Kojo” (“Despair of Automobile Factory”) based on his own experience as a seasonal worker at a major automaker, raps the companies, saying they are responsible for the plight of young part-time workers.

“Employers blocked the way for youths to become full-time workers. It’s unfair to argue that youths should be ‘self-responsible,’ ” Kamata said. “Movements by nonregular workers will likely gather momentum in pursuit of achieving a more humane life. A political solution is necessary.”

P.S.

* From The Japan Times:

<http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nn20070621f2.html>

* TOSHIHIKO UENO is from Kyodo News.