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Close-Up: Satoshi Kamata – Rebel spirit writ large. Japanese freelance journalist from casual industry workers to Fukushima

Thursday 6 October 2011, by [ARITA Eriko](#), [KAMATA Satoshi](#) (Date first published: 2 October 2011).

Monday, Sept. 19, was Respect for the Aged Day in Japan. But on that sweltering national holiday, it wasn't the heat that drew tens of thousands of people to Meiji Park in central Tokyo, but their concerns for all the nation's citizens, and others, who may face a threat from nuclear power.

Addressing that huge and peaceful gathering, the renowned freelance journalist Satoshi Kamata typically pulled no punches when he stepped up to the microphone on stage and declared: "Human beings cannot live with nuclear power. This fact has been proved in Hiroshima, Nagasaki and Fukushima. Can we allow more people to become victims of nuclear power?"

When he followed his own question with a resounding "No!" the shouts and applause from the more than 60,000 demonstrators estimated to be there rang out like a clarion call for the abolition of nuclear power. But it was a call tinged with anger about the ongoing crisis 200 km to the north at the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant that was crippled after the Great East Japan Earthquake on March 11.

The event, whose massive turnout was virtually unprecedented in passive present-day Japan, came about following months of preparation by its organizers, who included author and Nobel laureate Kenzaburo Oe, musician Ryuichi Sakamoto, economist Katsuto Uchihashi, novelist Hisae Sawachi and Kamata himself, who had been giving lectures around the country since April to increase people's awareness of the nuclear power industry.

Besides reporting on nuclear matters since 1970, though, Kamata is also well known for his dogged coverage of labor issues, the U.S. military bases in Okinawa and education issues affecting Japan's socially disadvantaged.

But this son of an acupuncturist in his native Hirosaki in northerly Aomori Prefecture is no mere talking head. In fact, after graduating from high school he moved to Tokyo and started working as a laborer in a factory making 8-mm movie cameras before moving to a print factory that used mimeographs - stencil-duplicators that predated photocopying. Faced with awful working conditions there, Kamata formed a labor union, but even after he and the other union members were fired as a result they continued to protest by staying at their jobs.

It was that labor struggle that motivated him to write about his experiences, and at age 22 in 1960 he entered Waseda University to prepare himself for a career shift. So, after graduating he got a job as a staff writer with *Tekko Shimbun* (Japan Metals Daily) before moving on to become editor of the now-defunct magazine, *Shinpyo* (New Analysis).

At age 30, however, Kamata left the security of a steady salary behind to become a freelance writer. Since then he has pursued that career actively, several times going undercover as a casual worker at

major companies' factories. One result of this was his acclaimed 1973 book "Jidosha Zetsubo Kojo" ("Despair Automobile Factory"), which was translated into English in 1982 as "Japan in the Passing Lane."

As well, Kamata has reported on all 54 nuclear reactors at power plants around Japan and has published several books on nuclear issues, including "Nihon no Genpatsu Kiken Chitai" ("Nuclear Power Dangerous Zones in Japan") in 1982 and "Rokkasho Mura no Kiroku" ("The Record of a Village of Rokkasho") in 1991. That 1991 book - which brought to light the protests of farmers in the Aomori Prefecture village of Rokkasho against the construction of a nuclear fuel reprocessing plant there - won him the prestigious Mainichi Shuppan Bunka Sho (Mainichi Publications Culture Prize).

Among many other honors for the more than 120 books he has written, Kamata also won 1990's Nitta Jiro Award for nonfiction for "Hankotsu" ("Rebel Spirit"), his book about Tomin Suzuki (1895-1979), a journalist who campaigned against the authorities before, during and after World War II.

Despite a full schedule of lectures, reporting and meeting deadlines for his regular columns in newspapers and magazines, the 73-year-old journalist found time for this interview in Tokyo in mid September.

Eriko Arita - What was your first book as a freelance writer?

Satoshi Kamata - It was about contamination from cadmium mining, which was the cause of *itai-itai byo*- (pain-pain disease) that afflicted many people who lived near the Jintsu River in Toyama Prefecture, and the public came to know about in the 1950s. Sufferers then appeared on Tsushima Island in Nagasaki Prefecture, which also had a cadmium mine, so I went and stayed there for two months to report. I wrote a book on the issue titled "Kakusareta Kogai" ("Hidden Pollution").

Actually though, I couldn't reveal the core of the problem because the mining company refused to talk about the health problems - and so did the residents, because there was, as there still is, a public prejudice against victims of pollution.

However, after publishing the book, I received a letter from a whistle-blower. It said that health ministry officials had gone there and found the pollution was both downstream and upstream along the river where the mine had discharged its waste. The letter said that was because waste from the plant had been secretly carried upriver to be dumped at night. I wondered whether I should write about it because the whistle-blower might be caught. But I did.

For which outlets did you write that story?

It was for a magazine, but then a reporter with the *Asahi Shimbun* (a national newspaper) read my article and put the problem on the front page. Kyodo News (Japan's leading news agency) then picked up the story and it was run in local newspapers. The issue was later discussed at the Diet and eventually the president of the mining company resigned.

For my second book, I worked undercover in the Yahata steelworks operated by Nippon Steel Corp. in Kitakyushu.

Did you work there as a day-laborer?

Actually, a gangster group hired me. Gangsters used to go up to jobless men in the street, or ones walking aimlessly in parks after losing all their money gambling, and say, "Hey, brother, I have a good job for you."

Then the men would be taken to an apartment, and the next day they would be taken to the factory. And every night, a gang member would sit outside the apartment to make sure the men couldn't get away.

It sounds like forced labor or slavery.

Yes - and it actually still exists; some gangster groups are organizing laborers' dormitories up in the Tohoku region and dispatching the men to the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear plant. There they are the lowest in a hierarchy that has staff of the operator, Tokyo Electric Power Co. (Tepco), on top, then subcontractors and sub-subcontractors beneath them. Usually, the nuclear power industry has six ranks in the hierarchy.

When I was hired by gangsters and worked at the steel factory in 1968, I lived in a six-tatami-mat room (about 9 sq. meters) with six other laborers. Two men had to share a futon mattress. One man slept in a closet. When we returned to the apartment after work, gang members handed us ¥300 out of our day's pay of ¥700. We used that for drinking and eating and the gangsters saved the ¥400 to get us through days when there was no work. But many of the laborers spent all their money on booze and they could never break out of that situation. I wrote about all that in my book titled "Shinitaeta Fukei" ("Dead Scene").

Why did you base your third book, "Jidosha Zetsubo Kojo" ("Japan in the Passing Lane"), on your experience at Toyota Motor Corp.?

I had heard the labor conditions at Toyota factories were bad, so I worked in one for six months as a contract laborer. Later, a freelance writer named Kunio Horie imitated my reporting method and did undercover reporting at a nuclear power plant, which led to his 1979 book, "Genpatsu Jipushi" ("Nuclear Power Plant Gypsy").

In the 1970s, newspaper staff writers were among the intelligentsia and they were not willing to report undercover as laborers. But I am not like that, and I started out as a factory laborer, so nobody at Toyota noticed I was a reporter.

In your book, you wrote about labor conditions at the Toyota factory, such as not being allowed to go to the toilet. How could that have been allowed?

It's not a question of allowing it or not, and actually I believe not much has changed at factories with production lines.

So, when you want to go to the toilet, you have to ask the leader of your work group to stand in and do your work while you are away. But those people aren't keen to do that, so you often cannot go to the toilet.

You wrote that some laborers were injured or died due to accidents at the factory. What happened in particular?

Well, recently, a Toyota worker who had died was recognized by a court as having lost his life due to overwork. There were also some people who suffered from mental disorders due to work.

After working at Toyota, I went to an Asahi Glass Co. factory producing cathode-ray tubes for televisions. My job was to grind the tubes with a power brush hanging from the ceiling. But the powder from the grinding made my asthma worse, so I gave up the job after two months.

Nonetheless, during that period I believe that three laborers there died due to overwork, though no

court ever ruled that was the cause of death.

Up at the Fukushima nuclear plant, there will most likely be a lot of workers exposed to radiation who will develop diseases. But they will never be able to sue Tepco because they are day-laborers brought in from elsewhere and have no money to hire lawyers.

Through working at factories run by Nippon Steel, Toyota and Asahi Glass, I learned that the labor practices at many big companies are premodern. At some plants 60 percent of the laborers came through subcontractors.

Is the percentage of temporary workers the same now?

It's the same or even higher because nowadays there are many temporary staff being dispatched from agent companies. In heavy industry and the chemicals sector, only 40 percent of laborers are formal employees. At nuclear plants, most of the laborers are not working for the operating company directly, but for subcontractors or sub-subcontractors - and many of them migrate from one nuclear plant to another.

Such laborers are subject to a limit of radiation exposure, and they are meant to carry dosimeters with them. When the dosimeters show their exposure has exceeded the limit, they can't work - so, to continue working, they often don't carry dosimeters or change their names.

After the crisis started at the Fukushima No. 1 plant in March, there were media reports that many laborers there didn't have dosimeters. Tepco explained that the company didn't have enough dosimeters for the influx of workers, but they should have been able to collect dosimeters from other plants. This strongly suggests that, before the crisis, Tepco had not insisted on nuclear plant laborers carrying dosimeters.

When did you start reporting on the nuclear power industry?

In 1970, I went to the village of Rokkasho in Aomori Prefecture (where a uranium enrichment facility opened in 1992, and a nuclear fuel reprocessing plant is scheduled to open this month). At that time, no plans for any of that had been announced, but I already knew from an interview I'd done with an official at an organization affiliated with the Ministry of International Trade and Industry. He had told me that a group in charge of locating industries had compiled a report that included a plan of the reprocessing plant. That report was not officially made public until 1984.

However, although I have been writing about such matters for so many years, until the present nuclear crisis the public has been largely unaware of any problems with the nuclear power industry.

In 1954, for example, Diet member Yasuhiro Nakasone (who was prime minister from 1982-87) helped prepare a ¥235 million budget proposal for nuclear power research. He actually admitted in a book that he decided on that figure because it appeared in the name of the element uranium 235, which was in the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima nine years before. I had written about his comment, but not many people paid attention.

Another thing is that in Mutsu City in Aomori Prefecture - which has a temporary facility for storing spent nuclear fuel - the City Hall building is a former shopping center. It was reported just yesterday that the city bought that building and then renovated it at a total cost of ¥2.8 billion - but actually, ¥1.2 billion of that was from Tepco, who operate the storage facility.

So newspapers have finally begun to report the reality of the nuclear industry. But why didn't they do so before? Well, that was because reporters were effectively paralyzed because whenever they

wrote articles about such issues, their newspapers declined to publish them.

Why weren't the articles published?

I am not completely sure. However, they derived a huge amount of advertising income from the power companies and the government. For instance, each local newspaper in prefectures that were hosting nuclear power plants or other nuclear power facilities would carry dozens of electricity ads – often full- or half-page ones – every month.

From way back though, when Matsutaro Shoriki (a former owner of the *Yomiuri Shimbun*, the nation's top-selling daily newspaper) returned from a trip to the United States in the early 1950s, he began to enthusiastically promote nuclear power in the media he controlled. As well, Shoriki – who was reportedly cozy with the CIA – organized many events promoting nuclear power.

Although the *Yomiuri Shimbun* was initially the main promoter of nuclear power in Japan, its rival the *Asahi Shimbun* gradually followed suit and began to run the power companies' ads promoting nuclear power as well.

Other newspapers then jumped on the bandwagon as well – and all those advertising costs were added to the electricity bills.

Interestingly, I once asked a staff writer at the *Asahi Shimbun* why he or his colleagues didn't write articles on nuclear issues.

He said: "Yes (our paper is aware of problems), but . . ."

You have been to all the nuclear power plants in Japan. What kind of things do people and officials in areas hosting those plants tell you?

Local government officials never wanted to talk about nuclear plants, though I think that may have changed since the Fukushima crisis.

I used to ask them how much property tax they got from the plant operators, or what percentage of their total tax income came from power companies. But they'd always refuse to give the data, saying "it is private information." When I visited the City Hall in Tsuruga, Fukui Prefecture, I met a section chief of the city government and asked him about the Monju fast-breeder nuclear reactor that the city hosts. He refused to give me any information, and just handed me a pamphlet about the (unrelated) Genkai nuclear power plant (in Kyushu).

Did the official explain why he wouldn't give you any information?

He said: "I cannot say anything because I don't know what kind of stance you have on nuclear power." I was totally upset. But other local governments also responded in similar ways.

The national government maintains that Japan's nuclear power policy is "democratic, independent and open." In fact those words first appeared in the Atomic Energy Basic Law that future Prime Minister Nakasone helped to push through in 1955 when he was a mere lawmaker in the Diet. It is said that he had to include those words because many scientists were afraid Japan would not just use nuclear power for peaceful purposes.

Do those three words reflect the reality?

No. I believe that nuclear policy is not "democratic, independent and open," but is undemocratic,

dependent and secret. And that's the truth.

I have met many mayors of places hosting nuclear power plants and asked them: "Isn't the nuclear power plant in your town dangerous?" And they answered: "It is safe because the national government says so."

Have you talked to the farmers or fishermen in such areas?

Yes. But only people opposing nuclear plants spoke to me. Those who had once opposed them but who had changed their stance to supporting the plants didn't talk. Even people supporting nuclear plants and many ordinary citizens often wouldn't speak because they had something to gain from the power companies.

In your books on nuclear power, you have termed it a Sword of Damocles. What do you mean by that?

The original myth is about the status of a king (Dionysius of Sicily) not being as secure as it may appear. I think that is a fitting comparison to the apparently prosperous lifestyle in Japan which actually exists with a sword, which is radiation, hanging over it by a thread.

Why do you think the Fukushima nuclear crisis happened?

The government and Tepco have been fostering enormous contradictions. They have repeatedly said that nuclear power is safe - even though scientists opposed to nuclear power have long pointed out that if an earthquake and tsunami hit a nuclear plant, it could run out of reactor cooling water if its power supply was interrupted.

By ERIKO ARITA, Japan Times Staff writer, October 2, 2011
<http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/fl20111002x1.html>

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