



# National Confederation of Trade Unions

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## Japanese Workers' Struggle under current Economic Crisis Particularly on those of non-regular or temp employment

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### I. Introduction

At the end of 2008, "false" (or "fake") was elected as the word to symbolize Japan of the year. It is related to illegal acts like "disguised contract." It also has a relation to politics or scandals concerning Japanese corporations. Now, the alternative word "destruction" describes the reality in working circumstances. Workers suffering destruction on their employment or living keep on increasing. The number of suicides has been more than 30,000 for eleven consecutive years. In the background of that, for example, there are problems in their jobs or difficulties in making a living. In particular, suicides by young people in their thirties and so in their prime are increasing.

We are struggling to secure employment. Our struggle aims to respect the rules that secure jobs and human lives for people and to revise bad laws like the Manpower Dispatching Business Law. We cannot tolerate disguises or destruction. Struggle is rising in Japan to secure jobs (including employment and adequate wages), human and peaceful lives as well as peace. Japanese government and major companies have destroyed people's employment and living, claiming that "structural reform" or "deregulation" is needed to compete in New Liberalism and globalism. Now, I make a report on Zenroren's struggle against the policy of Japanese government and major companies.

### II. State of Japanese Workers – Mass Dismissal of Temporary and Non-Regular Workers

- 1) The government announced that 200,000 workers would be dismissed by the end of June. (*The official announcement by the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, March 19, 2009/The number is 192,061, according to the nationwide research by voluntarily interviewing business establishments.*)

- 2) The actual situation is worse. In the background of that, there are serious problems including wage suppression or dismissal of regular employees. There are 56,782,204 workers in Japan (except public employees). Contingent workers form 35.5% of that. For example, in Nara prefecture (where I'm living, its population is 1,400,000. The number of people working there is 448,720, except public employees), 1,408 contingent workers (80% of them were in the manufacturing industry) were fired. That number of dismissed workers takes 41st of all 47 prefectures. The worst is Aichi prefecture, where 32,014 contingent workers were dismissed (the number of workers in Aichi is 3,684,850 in all). The head office of TOYOTA is located, which is producing the largest number of cars in the world. Subcontractors of TOYOTA are spreading over the country. In Nara, a local city, many people came to Labor Consultation event we organized. Majority of visitors were working as contractors in manufacturing or electrical precision industry.
- 3) Many contingent workers came to us for advice about their dismissal. Zenroren has investigated the responsibilities of major companies. The companies are, in car-related industry, ISUZU, SUZUKI, MAZDA, HONDA, MITSUBISHI, and so on. In electrical precision industry, they are CANON, SONY, SHARP, NTT and others. Zenroren confronted these world-famous companies. We have obtained many good results through negotiations, rallies, advertising campaigns, filing to the Labor Bureau, and legal proceedings. Zenroren's struggle should be remarkable and recorded in labor movement's history of Japan.
- 4) Concrete instances:
  - a) ISUZU MOTORS (at factories in Tochigi and Kanagawa prefectures) took back the dismissal of fixed-term workers and paid them the full amount of money based on their contracts. The temporary workers obtained the full wages of their contracts, too. The workers won the suit totally. Utsunomiya district court (Tochigi prefecture) gave the decision that the dismissal in the middle of the contract and one-sided 60% cuts in wages were illegal, and ordered the company to pay the difference to the workers.
  - b) In Nagasaki, more than 100 full-time employees, working at SONY's factory, were selectively dismissed on the pretext of a reduction of working hours. Over 20 workers joined the local union of Zenroren. They bargained collectively with the company over and over again, while accusing the company of disguising temporary workers as contractors to Nagasaki Labor Bureau. Then the governor called the temporary staff agency's president and asked him to secure the workers their employment. The union reached a victorious settlement in consequence.
  - c) In Nara prefecture, we investigated the responsibility of a major company manufacturing automobile parts. The company had disguised temporary

workers as contractors or hired them illegally as long as 11 years. We negotiated with both executive officers of the temporary staff agency and the manufacturing company, and made the company promise to hire the workers directly.

- d) In 36 prefectures, from the end of 2008 to April 2009, 191 unions were organized and more than 1,200 workers (temporary or fixed-term workers alone) joined personally. It is a landmark in Japan's labor movement that many contingent workers joined unions within such a short period.
- 5) **Serious Social Disparity and Poverty – More People must be covered by welfare**  
In Japan, more than 30,000 people killed themselves for eleven consecutive years. Above all, those in their thirties and forties account for 30.4% of all (in 2008). According to groups classified by causes or motives, 7,404 people died from hardships of life, 2,412 from working problems, 15,153 from health problems. More than 1,140,000 households go on welfare (in 2008). In Nara prefecture, 1,400,000 people reside, the number of households on welfare is about 10,000. In particular, the dismissals forced young people to go on welfare.

### III. Zenroren's struggle and campaign against the backdrop of solidarity

From 2008 end to 2009 beginning, we held "a village for temporary workers' passing the year" at Hibiya Park, Tokyo (the park is located right in front of the Ministry of Welfare). Since then, movements like this, "counseling villages for anything" or "temporary workers' villages" spread all over the country. These actions reminded us of the importance of the bonds of humans, social solidarity, and mutual understanding, which are prone to slip from our mind in current confusion and anxiety.

- 1) **Lessons from "Temps Village"**
  - a) It succeeded to mobilize politics by confronting the bare truth of mass dismissal of non-regular workers. These brutal acts seriously affect each one of those workers.
  - b) It leads to form broad networks across Japan, getting over trade union currents, and build solidarity work with civil societies such as homeless support group or the Association for defending peoples' lives and health as well as individual volunteers.
  - c) It makes us aware on fully utilizing the public livelihood protection scheme that has not properly used. Particularly, awareness on this provision became bigger among younger generation as a means to restore their decent living.
  - d) More trade unionists realized the importance of Worker's hotline activities. And these activities have been strengthened in various levels.
  - e) It pushed the government and politicians to immediately revise the

Unemployment Insurance Scheme.

- f) It shows the urgent needs of public assistances including financial one for distressed people.
- g) It demonstrates the immediate needs to revise the Labor Dispatching Law. This also became social and political issues in the Parliament discussion.
- h) Not only to provide urgent help to dismissed workers, but also more comprehensive assistances are needed, which include social welfare, housing, educational assistance, medication, pension or small business owners' financial difficulties.

## 2) Industrial Unions and Local Unions taking a lead of dismissed workers

Many dismissed workers have been stood up by joining a union or organizing themselves. In Japan, an individual worker can join in community and individual-affiliation-based union (we call them Local Union), or even few workers can organize a union in their workplaces. Though workers are ideologically pressured by business, many of them courageously fight against their company's severe attack on them. Zenroren's industrial unions support them in unionizing, organize struggle or providing financial support, such as All Japan Metal and Information Workers' Union (JMIU). In addition to that, Zenroren's prefectural and local federations are very active organizing them into Local Unions or general unions. These unions achieved certain success like canceling dismissal or resolve and restore their difficult living standards.

## 3) Demanding responsibility of the government and big business

- a) More and more people accuses the responsibility of companies and the government in Japan, by demanding to put more regulation over the business, revise the Labor Dispatching Law, stop any more dismissals and preserve employment. From my experience in Nara prefecture, one of the managers who had recently negotiation with us confessed "During the deregulation process, many employers and companies were keen to introduce new "temp employment". Some of them made an objection against such tendency, but these objections could not be heard over loud shout for deregulation and liberalization. In addition, such thinking managers were driven into the corner or just disappeared. I also thought it was a problem, but I had no choice at that time. Since I feel sorry for many workers and I now wish to improve their working condition." The adverse revision in 2004 that allows workers to be dispatched to manufacturing industry changed the situation drastically. Japanese labor dispatching law had been strongly criticized from the beginning, because the law legalizes middle-exploitation and triangle employment. Zenroren and only few unions opposed the government proposed bill at that time.
- b) However, many unions, lawyers or opposition parties unanimously demands strengthening the regulation on worker dispatching system. We demand employment be "direct" and "term-less". Dispatching or term-contract should be regarded as exception. In line with these demands, many unions and social

movements are campaigning for revising the Law.

- 4) Campaign and Struggle against Deregulation and "Structural Reform"
  - a) Zenroren set up the Contingent Worker Action Center (CWAC), which organized a symposium for exchanging our experience in organizing non-regular workers, including international exchange. 20-member delegation of Zenroren Kinki<sup>i</sup> Regional Council visited our Korean counterpart in this March. The chief of Korean Contingent Worker Center pointed out "Korean non-regular workers' issue went before that of Japan. We cannot help taking into consideration of Japanese situation in order not to allow more deterioration in Korea. Future ban on dispatching workers to manufacturing sector in Japan should influence that of Korea. That's why we must work in solidarity." I was reaffirmed the importance in Asian level to share challenges and demands; (i) Ban on term contracts in permanent work, (ii) Prohibition of middle-exploitation, (iii) the principle of equal pay for equal work and (iiii) extending labor law coverage to workers such as independent contractor.
  - b) Japanese big business made unprecedented profit by utilizing low wage temp employment. Increasing non-regular workers created serious social disparity and poverty in Japanese society. It brought about deteriorating purchasing power, economic recession and destroy of employment, which is vigorous and downward spiral. More workers and people begin to speak out their demands; "Big companies must withdraw their internal reserve", "profit should be shared with people" or "The government should allocate more budget to social welfare and employment."
  
- 5) Recent Zenroren's struggle made us realize the importance to organize and resolve problems of dismissed workers including getting back decent working and living condition, or to network to solve their problems, with deep understanding of the state and background of working people and their issues. We are now campaigning for urgent revise of the Labor Dispatching Law, raising minimum wage, against increasing the Consumption Tax rate, deterioration of social service such as medical services in communities or to improve education for our future generation. All of these depend upon the coming general election. Our struggles have obvious connection with political struggle by demanding "total ban of the donation from a company and an organization" and "change in politics to people-centered politics and economy.

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<sup>i</sup> Osaka, Kyoto, Nara, Wakayama, Shiga, Hyogo prefectures

