

War is the Only Solution. A 31-year-old freeter explains the plight and future of Japan's Marginal Workers

Mori Tatsuya, Akagi Tomohiro, Okuhara Noriharu, Fukushima Mizuho

War is the Only Solution. A 31-year-old freeter explains the plight and future of Japan's Marginal Workers

Akagi Tomohiro

Selected Responses by Fukushima Mizuho, Mori Tatsuya, and Okuhara Noriharu

Translated by Kyoko Selden

What could one mean by peace?

I have been thinking about this sort of thing often.

On a Sunday morning, after my night work, before coming home to sleep, I go out to a nearby shopping center and find a father who is about my age, who seems to be enjoying shopping with his wife and child. With men past age thirty, a marriage rush seems to begin like an angry wave. My friends from the past are deciding to marry one by one.

On the other hand, I am far from marrying, but live as a parasite with my parents. I have been forced for over a dozen years into a situation in which I cannot even support myself. For me, at thirty-one, the present situation as a freeter who lacks regular full-time employment is unendurable humiliation. On the news, I sometimes encounter direct criticism of freeters. For example, "Freeters are pushing down the GDP." "We install cameras on the streets to watch suspicious people for the security and safety of children." Hearing an announcer read this sentence, I feel depressed, thinking perhaps that suspicious people means

grownup men like me who are hanging around during daytime on a weekday.

Still, society is peaceful.

There are things like the North Korean nuclear threat, but most people don't expect nuclear war to start tomorrow. Nor are the majority of company workers afraid of restructuring any time soon. In other words, "the present lifestyle continues without any changes at all." If many people can continue to maintain their lifestyle, then it follows that for them this is a "peaceful society."

Such a "peaceful society", in my view, is nothing much.

I go to work late at night, work eight hours with no rest, come home at dawn, put on the TV, surf the net while drinking alcohol, go to sleep around noon, wake up in the evening, watch TV and go to work again. It's a repetition of this.

My monthly salary is a little over 100,000 yen. Because I live in my parents' house in northern Kanto, I can make ends meet. In fact, I don't wish to live in my parents' house. I don't get along well with them. And I don't like living where one can't live properly without a car. I feel confined at home. I would like to live alone, renting a cheap apartment in Tokyo or elsewhere. But, I can't do that given my present economic situation. A man in his thirties can't even determine on his own where to live. Moreover, I don't know how long this miserable situation can last. When my aged father is no longer able to work there is no

guarantee that a living will be possible.

“So why don’t you get a job and work,” people say. But where is the foothold for that? In modern society, in which becoming a regular employee after graduation is viewed as the proper path, only newly minted graduates are accepted by decent employers. The want ads in “Hello Work” (the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare’s job service) call for such things as service work (haken) for physical labor or temporary office jobs. These are far from stable occupations. The Abe administration talks about such things as “second challenge”, but what we want is stable work, not a gamble that is called a challenge or something.

What is harder than anything else is that society has no understanding of our adversity. Society nods whenever people complain that work is hard, but the same society scorns our complaint that we can’t get proper jobs. “That’s because you don’t try hard enough,” it scornfully responds. Not knowing what we can do, we are pressed to do something. But however much we move our limbs, there is little probability that the situation will improve. In this situation, who will be able to live with hope?

We entered society after the collapse of the bubble. I call this the post-bubble generation. Many of us will continue to live in the face of humiliation. By contrast, many of those of the “economic growth age generation” will continue to live comfortably. This after all is the meaning of “a peaceful society.”

What the NHK Special “The Working Poor” Overlooked

In viewing the NHK special “The Working Poor: no matter how hard one works, one cannot become rich,” which was broadcast in July 2006, I felt a sense of malaise. [1] The program introduced as the working poor those who cannot obtain pay commensurate with their

work, and who cannot overcome poverty.

A man in his thirties became homeless after coming to Tokyo from the countryside to look for a job, after being dispatched from place to place on assignment. Another example: a former salary man, who is working at odd jobs to support his family. A third example: a farm family, which just barely manages to live by combining the incomes of all family members because growing strawberries simply adds to debt. Also, a former tailor, who was once the town’s top tailor employing others, now has only small repair jobs. His pension disappeared to the hospital where his wife is hospitalized. Even if he wishes to get welfare, his savings of one million yen, which he has not touched in order to provide for his wife’s funeral, is an obstacle.

It is clear that a society in which people work hard yet cannot make ends meet is not in good shape. We should construct a society in which ordinary people who work in ordinary ways can lead ordinary lives. I was ruminating on this common sense thought, when something came to mind that I can’t understand. There’s something funny about this way of grouping people as the working poor. When I push this sense of unease further, I realize that the NHK program overlooks a great difference between the former salary man, the strawberry farmer, the tailor, and others who belonged to the economic growth generation, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, a youth in his thirties whose only prospect is to become homeless, a freeter of the post-bubble generation.

While the former group is comprised of people who had families and obtained independence as human beings, the latter entered society after the collapse of the bubble. They could do nothing from the very beginning. The former group at least had chances. But by the time the latter entered society, labor was already constrained and chances did not exist. Somehow, I can’t understand the view that

simply groups both of them equally as the weak.

In particular, concerning the tailor's inability to get welfare because of the savings held for his wife's funeral, a learned person stated that it that the wish to take care of the expenses for his wife's funeral represents human dignity. The problem lies in the fact that he cannot get welfare unless he abandons this. If that is dignity, then where is the dignity of us freeters, for whom marrying and having a family, or saving one million yen are a shadow of a dream.

Those who advocate overcoming social gaps stress the need for the elderly to maintain an affluent living standard to support their families, while for we young people all they demand of the administration is job training. Hardly any more than that. Both groups are regarded equally as the weak. Yet it seems to me that there is a great gap between the relief levels that they target.

Why is this kind of inequality accepted? I think it is because the theory of the working poor is based upon "maintaining a peaceful society." In order to maintain a peaceful, stable society, each person's living standard becomes the highest goal. Therefore, looking at the equally weak, you seek to guarantee the livelihood of elders who have already consumed much, while it is fine to leave young people, who have consumed little, in poverty.

Right after the recession began there was talk of "work sharing", but this was never achieved. The reason is that nobody gives jobs to young people, and no one even lets others share jobs with young people. If one tries to share jobs with young people, then someone's living level has to drop, but that comes with great difficulty. To a family living comfortably in its own home, one can't say, please sell your house, please divorce. On the other hand, it is simple to pay inadequate wages to a young

person who is, from the start, living single in an apartment, not allowing such a person to marry and get a house. Society therefore accepts this.

Pushed Toward the Post-Bubble Generation

We have been pressed down by this kind of logic. Right after the collapse of the bubble, both enterprises and workers were thinking only about how to escape the collapse. Companies planned to reduce personnel and labor unions dropped their base-up demands and prioritized restructuring. Both agreed that it was necessary to reduce to the minimum the hiring of new workers. Enterprises cut new hires and tried avoid hiring regular employees. They did so by using agency workers, part-timers and arbeiterers.

Society sympathized with middle aged and older workers who were spared restructuring and ignored freeters who could not get regular jobs and were pushed to low-wage work. Because they were not employed from the start, staying unemployed was not considered a problem.

Even now, more than a dozen years on, the situation has not changed at all. According to the spring 2006 Keidanren survey of top management, just 1.6% of enterprises were positively considering employing freeters as regular employees. People say things like freeters and NEETs (not in employment, education or training) don't want to work. But if you look at the survey results, the enterprises don't provide work for freeters and NEETs. This is the source of our hardship. In passing, 64.0% of enterprises say that they hire freeters and NEETs depending on their experience and abilities. But freeters are precisely those who were robbed of the opportunity for job training due to the recession. So, saying that we will hire freeters and NEETs on the basis of their experiences and abilities is the same as saying that we will not employ them. On the other

hand, 97.3% of enterprises say that they will introduce some kind of continued employment system for elders who have received ample job training and wages. The one-sidedness is obvious.

As long as there is a limit to the personnel budget for enterprises, reemployment of elderly employees means that young people like us who cannot get jobs will be excluded. However, I hear no voices that look at this as a problem. This too represents the approach of differentiating the employment situation of the economic growth generation from that of the post-bubble generation.

To stop this it is necessary not only to look at the present situation but to go back to the past and rectify the disadvantage forced on the post-bubble generation. Only in this way can the gap be overcome between the economic growth generation and the post-bubble generation.

War happens, then society mobilizes

The slogan, which appears moderate and conscientious, “strive for a peaceful society”, seems to me to speak only to the economic growth generation while shifting the warping of society to the post-bubble generation. As a result of an accumulated sense of inequity about which nothing can be done, the weak of the post-bubble generation, the youth, appear to be moving to the right. In the November 2006 Ronza, Kang Sangjung writes “Young people, discontented with the present situation, have victim consciousness. However, they don’t know how to express it. They neither think of launching social movements nor know how to do so. In this situation, opposing China, opposing North Korea, opposing South Korea, as some media agitate, serves to unify them.”

This view of young people seems to be common among intellectuals, whether left or right. But young people are not at all the fragile existences that they imagine them to be. They

say that young people don’t think of launching social movements and don’t know how to. But in fact, facing pressure from young people, society is moving to the right.

The social movement of Netto Uyoku (Net Rightwingers), through their blogs that are popular enough to sometimes top the search engines and through the introduction of their voices by the media, is inconspicuously pervading society like water whose color changes only slightly when ink is mixed. That probably means that it functions as an effective social movement. This has to be recognized.

Again, if young people have discontents and victim consciousness, why doesn’t left power extend its hand to them? From the viewpoint of young people, the object of their criticism is the very workers who are protected by the left. Therefore, young people look to the neoliberal government to go to the extent of robbing regular workers of their rights and sharing them with young people. Former Prime Minister Koizumi won the support of young people by shouting: “What reforms can we perform by protecting the vested rights of 260,000 postal employees?” This led to his great electoral victory.

True, it seems that the move to the right by young people is in conflict with their basic interests. For example, the Horiemon boom of one time was full of contradiction in that poor young people supported the rich. The Koizumi administration pushed policies that enlarged the gap in the name of reform and the Abe administration undoubtedly inherits that line. Even so, young people react favorably toward the Koizumi and Abe administrations. By looking down on Asian countries like South Korea, China, and North Korea, and by supporting Japan’s militarization, they support from below this neoliberal neoconservative administration.

So naturally, a question arises: “Will this really

make young people happy”? Isn’t this easy-going rightism simply squeezing the necks of young people themselves? But I don’t find young people’s rightward tendency incomprehensible. To put it very simply, if Japan is militarized, if there is war, and many people die, then Japan will become more mobile. I think that many young people want this to happen.

Toward Equality in Which All Citizens Suffer

Sato Toshiki, in his book “Unequal Society Japan: Farewell to the Era in Which Everyone is Middle Class”, observes of inter-generational mobility among white and blue collar workers that, even as openness temporarily grew due to postwar high speed economic growth, it was reduced to the prewar level for the baby boom generation. In other words, the war expanded mobility, and as society stabilized, that mobility was gradually lost.

Still, when the economy was expanding, there was no problem. Even without mobility, as long as the economy expands, salaries continue to increase. With wages rising, all workers are rewarded.

To the three imperial regalia (black and white TV, washing machine and refrigeration), the three Cs (color TV, car and cooler (air conditioner), plus one’s own house and building families, let’s add the longing for a trip to Hawaii. These were the dreams of ordinary citizens. People were able to secure these things. Sure, gaps existed, but it was at the level of “X is driving a high class car; I drive only an ordinary car.” It was not fatal for leading daily lives.

In an age of rising economy, even we could dream: now we are freeters, but one day we will support a wife and children. But salaries don’t rise in a Japan that is at peace but without mobility. However long we wait, we

can’t escape poverty.

Since we were thrown out to society as low wage laborers, already more than ten years has passed. Yet not only does society not extend the hand of relief to us, it continues to revile us, saying that we push down GDP and we lack motivation. If peace continues, this kind of inequality will continue throughout our lives. To break this closed situation and create mobility—one such potential is war.

Intellectuals conclude that the rightward trend among youth reflects “a desire to connect to something great” and that it is a manifestation of escape from reality. But what we want is not so unrealistic. The economically weak, like myself, seek a society that allows us to escape the distress of poverty, attain social status, support family, and attain human dignity as adults. This is a very realistic desire, natural for human beings.

It is most regretful that we might have to use the instrument of war for this end. But to the extent that we are drawn to that, it means that the gaps in society are large and unshakeable.

War is tragic

But the tragedy is that the haves “lose something” and, as I see it, for those who “have nothing”, war is not tragic. Rather it offers a chance.

Naturally, in time of war, regardless of whether one is at the battle front or the home front, one is next door to death. But that is true for almost all citizens. War is a gamble of life and death that affects the entire nation, while in peace only the weak taste humiliation—you don’t even need to think about which is more desirable for the weak.

The haves feel threatened by the prospect of losing all, but those who have nothing see the possibility of gaining something through war.

In that unequal society in which the haves and the have nots are deeply divided and there is no mobility between them, war ceases to be taboo. Far from it. The anti-war peace slogan is the very thing that is understood as the arrogance of the haves, which keeps us locked in poverty throughout our lives.

There is an interesting statement in Karibe Naoshi's "Maruyama Masao: Portrait of a Liberal." In March 1944, the thirty-year-old Maruyama was drafted. With a history of arrest for thought crimes, he was sent to Pyongyang as an enlisted man and was persistently bullied by superiors who probably had not even advanced to middle school.

For Maruyama, to have been drafted, surely must have seemed unfortunate. By contrast, for his superiors, who did not even go to middle school, in the absence of war there could have been no opportunity to bully a Todai elite.

Maruyama described the army as pseudo-democratic compared with the navy. In the army, soldiers' rank alone determined their status. But isn't the present situation in which we live similar to that?

Within a pseudo democracy, in which the moment you go out to society determines the rank of human beings, for those of us who are thoroughly bullied, war is a beacon of hope for overturning the present situation. We may be able to stand in a position of being able to slap Maruyama Masao's cheek.

Nevertheless, I don't wish to see even a complete stranger, or those who look down on us, suffer in war. So I appeal in this way: please don't turn me toward war.

However, if society in the name of peace continues to force me into a position of weakness, if it continues to deride my wish for modest happiness, then I will not hesitate to hope for and choose the "equality in which the

entire nation continues to suffer."

[1] The title echoes a poem by Ishikawa Takuboku. NHK: hataraitemo hataraitemo yutaka ni narenai: we work and work, yet we cannot become rich. Takuboku: hatarakedo/hatarakedo nao waga kurashi raku ni narazari/jitto te o miru. I work/ and work, yet still my living does not become easy/ I gaze at my hand.

Akagi Tomohiro, born 1975, while working as a freeter, aims to become an author. He manages the website Shin'ya no shimaneko. <http://t-job.vis.ne.jp>

This article appeared in Ronza in January, 2007. Comments appeared in the January, 2007 issues. The author responds in the June issue of Ronza.

Responses

Freeters are the Ones Who are Made to Go to War

Fukushima Mizuho, Head, Social Democratic Party

Halfway down, as I read, I was feeling persuaded, but toward the end, I felt like screaming "Look! This is not so."

Akagi-san, I'm sorry to say this, but you cannot slap "Maruyama Masao." You will be slapped by "the nation-state" and people will be indifferent to that, just as they are indifferent to your situation now.

You write, "Society sympathized with middle aged and older workers who were spared restructuring and ignored freeters who could not get regular jobs and were pushed to low-wage work." Just so.

What you say of freeters can also be said of women and part-time workers. Women and young people cannot easily become regular employees. They are discriminated against, and however bad their working conditions, they are told that their efforts are insufficient and they are spoiled. It has not been understood as a social structural issue.

In 1999, the Worker Staff Service Business Law (Rodosha haken jigyo) was revised for the worse and in principle it became possible to dispatch workers for any kind of work. Between 1997 and 2004, which includes the Koizumi administration, the number of regular employees was reduced by 4 million and the number of irregular and part-time, staff service, and contract workers increased by 4 million. The enlargement of gaps, the increase of irregular employees and young people in the working poor, were all created by government policy including deregulation of labor laws.

Precisely for this reason I was persuaded by the first half of your statement. It is true that as a policy the government “has been abandoning” people like you. However, in the last half you say, “War is not tragic. Rather it offers a chance.”

That, I think, is wrong. The nature of modern war is that only one side suffers. The US, which is making war in Iraq, never suffers air attack. If the US adopts the draft, as it did during the Vietnam War, rich people’s children will also go to war, so war inevitably becomes the problem of “the entire nation” and anti-war activity becomes active.

However, those who go to war under the “enlistment system” are the poor, jobless young people from poor localities. Only one child of a US congressman has gone to the Iraq War. As Michael Moore depicts in “Fahrenheit 9/11”, young people in areas where factories closed and employment disappeared enlisted to go to Iraq “seeking employment” to “get

scholarships” in order to “obtain qualification”.

Uchihashi Katsuto in his book “Cycles of Bad Dreams” (Bungei Shunju), points to the affinity between neoliberalism and war. The enforcement of the free market principle, the plunder of natural resources under globalization, and unequal distribution of wealth—these things go hand in hand with war.

I too think that the enlargement of gaps and the path to war are two sides of a coin. The former Secretary-General of the LDP once said “Let freeters go to Samoa.” I think that freeters are the very people who are meant to go to war.

If the constitution is changed and it becomes possible for the Self-Defense Forces to take part in combat overseas together with US forces, then if Japan is at war, “damage” will not fall equally and directly on all citizens.

You write, “War is a gamble of life and death that affects the entire nation. Although I’m sorry to say this, people in government and diet representatives who decide that Japan will go to war, won’t themselves go to war. They won’t suffer from the war.”

I met a US soldier repatriated from Iraq who was suffering health damage from depleted uranium weapons. The wife of this former soldier became pregnant after his return and gave birth. But the baby who was born had no hands. He has filed suit charging that the damage was caused by depleted uranium. In Iraq, the dead and wounded American soldiers are increasing.

Needless to say, war is illogical, unequal, “violent”; it robs so many of their lives, and wounds so many. Nazi Germany didn’t just slaughter the handicapped, homosexuals, people called Roma and Jews. Weak people, “heretics”, “people who were in the way” of the “nation-state” were targeted first.

LDP Minister of Health, Labor and Welfare Yanagisawa described women as “productive machines”, but in time of war, women are indeed “machines that produce soldiers” and citizens are handled like chess pieces. I think that “freeters” will be the first targets if Japan goes to war.

“Equal suffering” . . . there is no such thing. The one who will be slapped is nobody like Maruyama Masao, but you yourself. What is robbed will be your life. And war deprives people of other countries of their lives. Do you still want to talk about “the road to war”?

You are the one who loses the gamble

Mori Tatsuya, Movie director and author

This is a trend occurring particularly in the last several years, but I see a lot of discourses and arguments that are developed after first setting forth as a premise a dichotomy that is clearly removed from reality. Does the lacewing fly, which is the grown up form of the ant lion, suck the nectar of flowers or eat worms? If such a question is put to you, you should answer that the lacewing has no mouth, therefore it takes no food. However, that viewpoint somehow disappears. I don’t have to raise as an example the vote two years ago in which privatizing postal services was the issue. The dichotomy of whether it sucks flower nectar or eats insects, before one realizes it, ends up by becoming the vested presupposition.

You are past age thirty. You work at night and your monthly income is just a little over 100,000 yen. You lament the present situation saying, “The want ads in Hello Work call for such things as service work for physical labor or temporary office jobs.” It’s easy to just read this sentence and go on to the next sentence, but is it really so? There are many workers

wanted for staff service jobs and managerial posts. But that’s not all. If you really try to find them, there are any number of stable jobs. The wages may not be at the level of big industry, but one can live normally. One can also marry.

“I would like to live alone, renting a cheap apartment in Tokyo or elsewhere. But, I can’t do that given my present economic situation.” So you say. But for a healthy man in his thirties, it is not impossible to find a job to live in Tokyo renting a cheap apartment. No, it’s not all that hard.

You divide the post-bubble generation (including yourself) from the economic growth generation. And you state that the economic growth generation sucked the sweet nectar thanks to the bubble and after the bubble, “Many of us will continue to live in the face of humiliation. By contrast, many of those in the ‘economic growth age generation’ will continue to live comfortably.”

Certainly there may be such people. But it’s only a part, and not the majority, as you write. The economic growth generation would say, “We lived desperately in competitive society. Many dropped out. The post-bubble generation began by receiving benefits from our generation.

About the intellectual who stated that “taking care of one’s wife’s funeral expenses represents human dignity,” I too think: “what careless language he employs.” There I agree with you. But I’m even more taken aback by your statement, “If that is dignity, then where is the dignity of us freeters, for whom marrying and having a family, or saving one million yen, are an impossible dream.” Are marriage and savings dignity for you? Haven’t you just negated it?

On the basis of the fragile logic of the first part, you brought up the mobility of society by “war as a solution for those who do not possess”.

You seem to think that you know well that war is tragic. But you say, “the tragedy is that the haves ‘lose something’ and, as I see it, for those who ‘have nothing’, war is not tragic. Rather it offers a chance.” Do you genuinely believe that war is tragic only to the degree that those who have lose something and is harmless to those who have nothing?

You write, “War is a gamble of life and death that affects the entire nation, while in peace only the weak taste humiliation—you don’t even need to think about which is more desirable for the weak.” It’s a typical dichotomy. But ‘the weak portion’ is not an opposing concept to the nation. The gamble of life and death falls on you, too. You write, “I choose the situation in which the gamble of life and death falls on the entire nation.” But just before that, you stated, “what we want is stable work, not a gamble that is called a challenge or something.” Because you lightheartedly write “No need to think,” the logic becomes this sloppy.

About applying the expression “pseudo-democratic” that Maruyama Masao used in describing the military deductively to the present society, I do not disagree. If you would really like to seriously overturn this structure, you can aim for revolution. Why do you, instead, once again look forward to the military, which is pseudo-democratic?

While writing I noticed that, after first positing that “they long for war” as a reason why internet rightism is increasing, you develop a theory counting backward. That is a fundamental mistake to begin with. The increase in internet rightism is not because these people desire war. A heightened awareness of crisis is at the root of its mechanism. You short-circuit the increase of internet rightism to the tendency of going to the right among young people and further connect the rightist tendency to the fact that “those who long for war are increasing.” So I want to say: think more, undergo more mental

conflict.

. . . Reading what I have written so far, I think that I have to speak about myself, who seems a little too worked up. It’s true that stratification in this society is increasing. Although sloppy, it’s not that your logic entirely lacks persuasiveness. However, in the end, I have to say at least this. You write: “War is a gamble of life and death that affects the entire nation.” War is not such an impartial thing. When it comes to the matter of the draft, who will be sent to the battlefield? The answer is clear if you look at America today.

Although this may sound harsh, the person who is likely to lose in this gamble is perhaps you who are 31, without a family, and with no fixed job.

No Time for Despair

Okuhara Noriharu, head of the editorial office, Akahata Shimbun.

I felt shock at the phrase “A Thirty Year Old Freeter Whose Hope is War,” but I read your statement that resembled a shout, feeling as if my chest was crushed: “However long we wait, we can’t escape poverty.” I cannot suppress my indignation toward Japanese society and politics which drives the younger generation to despair.

In today’s Japan, one out of two young people are without secure employment, working in dispatched, part-time and temporary jobs. In the majority of those cases, the monthly salary is in the range of 100,000 to 150,000 yen, with no prospect of future raises, and no knowledge of when one will be fired. Marriage and stable life are distant dreams. Veteran reporters at Akahata, who for many years reported on homelessness, write that the number of young homeless people who work at a manga coffeeshop or sauna and sleep there has

increased. Since five or six years ago, some of them are seen in the queue for relief food provided by supporters of the homeless.

You say that the generation that lived in the era of economic growth will continue to live comfortably in the future, too. You also say that in order to break through this closed situation and create mobility, the only way to go is war. Of course, your conclusion is that we should not resort to war. I would like to accept the seriousness of your appeal.

So, there are two things that I would like you to think about. One is to reflect on the cause of the situation in which society pulled people down into such a cruel situation.

This is neither a natural phenomenon, nor was it caused by “the generation that lived in the era of economic growth.” Much less is it the responsibility of you young people. To put it directly, the fundamental cause lies in a politics that responds to big enterprises and the financial circles whose primary pursuit is profit, thereby destroying human-like employment.

Following the collapse of the bubble, financial circles and big enterprises restructured, reducing regular employees, replacing them by dispatched, part-time and temporary workers. They have driven workers to extreme low wages and conditions without rights. This has been fully supported by the government centered on the LDP.

Under the slogan of “loosening regulations”, the government and the LDP amended the labor laws one after another, deregulating dispatched labor and expanding it to almost all kinds of occupations. “The generation that lived in the era of economic growth” lost jobs due to restructuring that targeted middle- and higher-ranking people or they had awful times due to wage reductions. Even if they remain regular employees, they are driven by heavy work

norms. They hardly get any overtime pay and are nearly worked to death.

Starting around the time when restructuring became serious, the number of suicides that had been 20,000 a year suddenly rose to more than 30,000. Of those, seventy percent were people in the forties or above. Among the causes of the suicides of those in the forties and fifties, most frequent was “economic problems” (National Police Agency Survey 2005). People of this generation are not protected.

With labor cheap, enterprises made profits even beyond those of the bubble. Worker salaries continued to fall and, beginning with young people, poverty has grown. This is an abnormal situation. The extreme situation facing today’s young people was artificially created, so we should be able to change this by human effort.

The other thing that I want you to think about is that there are people and groups who seriously think about how to open up the situation and are active in building movements. Labor unions like the National Confederation of Trade Unions, unions that target young people who participate as individuals, and the Metropolitan Area Youth Union, are acting energetically.

In addition, the Japan Communist Party has called for “Launching poverty and citizen movements for defending livelihood.” During this time, in solidarity with various citizen movements, we have demanded that the government redress unpaid overtime work, and rectify camouflage service work under the name of contracting. At the Diet, we have demanded budget revisions to eliminate poverty and gaps, and to establish rules so that people can work as people.

What is important is that, instead of opposing one another separately, people who want to

change today's awful situation get together to act. This kind of solidarity more than anything can provide the power to break the logjam. It's no time for despair. Let's move forward.

This is a slightly abbreviated translation of an article and selected comments that appeared in

the March 2007 issue of Ronza. Published at Japan Focus on June 17, 2007.

Translated by Kyoko Selden. Kyoko Selden is Senior Lecturer in Japanese at Cornell University. She is the editor of [Annotated Japanese Literary Gems](#), the first two volumes of which have recently been published.