

Japan's "education reform" to indoctrinate nationalism

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The Japanese government has pushed through controversial changes to the country's education law, winding back the clock to the state indoctrination that characterised the militarist regimes of the 1930s and 1940s. The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and its coalition partner New Komeito passed the so-called reform in the parliamentary upper house on December 15.

Championed by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, the bill declared that the goal of education was to develop students' "respect for the nation's tradition and culture and fostering an attitude of love for the nation and the homeland that cultivated them." Citing declining education skills and deteriorating morality, Abe declared that his aim was "to nurture people with ambitions and create a country with dignity".

In fact, the bill to obligate Japanese schools to foster nationalism is a breach, in spirit at least, of the country's post-war constitution, which was based on the renunciation of militarism and guaranteed freedom of thought. The education "reform" is part of the government's efforts to promote patriotism and remilitarise the country in preparation for aggression abroad.

The bill is the first amendment to the Fundamental Law of Education since it was enacted in 1947 under the US occupation. The law reflected not only US efforts to dismantle the wartime regime in Japan, but more fundamentally the sentiment of masses of working people who had suffered under the regime's repressive rule, hated its anti-democratic methods and despised its symbols.

The pre-war Imperial Rescript on Education was based on conservative Confucian ideology and the glorification of the Japanese imperial system. It stressed the "virtue of filial piety, loyalty to the emperor and love for the state"—which is not so different to Abe's call for young people to be patriotic, "traditional" and obedient to state authorities.

The 1947 law established mandatory free education for all young people for nine years and abolished state control of schools. It did not refer to "patriotic education" or the national flag and anthem. On the contrary, it emphasised the

"full development of personality," which Abe and the government now denounce as the cause for the moral decay of Japanese society.

Article 10 declared: "Education should not be subject to improper control, but shall be directly responsible to the whole people." Article 6 defined teachers as "servants of the whole community". Under the new law, both phrases have been deleted. The purpose of these amendments is to once again allow direct government control over all aspects of education, including curriculum and the setting of detailed numerical targets.

Abe's "reforms" are also aimed at meeting the requirements of the private sector, by restoring harsh competitive tests. He has announced as a priority the re-establishment of a "national achievement test". The test was suspended in the early 1960s amid widespread criticism of its destructive impact on the development of young people.

The unpopularity of the education reform is one of the factors contributing to a sharp fall in the approval ratings of Abe's four-month old cabinet. Prior to the upper house vote, nearly 5,000 people attended a rally in central Tokyo demanding the bill be scrapped. On the day of the vote, more than 400 teachers, students and workers protested in front of the Diet building with banners reading "We are against forcing patriotism" and "We are against state control of education".

Shigeki Okuno, a 28-year-old student from Waseda University, told reporters: "This attitude is extremely dangerous. I believe this kind of education will lead to the revival of a country like the Empire of Great Japan, in which people sacrifice their lives for the emperor." He opposed the decision to send Japanese troops to Iraq in 2003. "Japan has been involved in the occupation of Iraq with the United States, and is becoming a country that can engage in war. And the government is telling people to love such a country."

Abe has also been hit by a scandal over "rigged" town hall meetings—seating officials or paid stooges in the audience to ask scripted questions, including on education reform. Such

has been the public hostility to the discovery that Abe has felt compelled to forego three months of his salary. Masatoshi Adachi, a 46-year-old schoolteacher from Oita, told the media: “Prime Minister Shinzo Abe should do these town meetings again and after that discuss revising the basic education law.”

The opposition parties—the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), the Japanese Communist Party (JCP), the Social Democratic Party and Peoples New Party—opposed the education reform. To delay the upper house vote, the parties submitted a no-confidence motion in the lower house against Abe’s cabinet over the town hall meeting scandal. With a majority in both houses, however, the LDP and its allies defeated the no-confidence motion and passed the bill.

The opposition parties have no principled opposition to the promotion of nationalism. The DPJ had initially supported Abe’s education reform and proposed its own bill calling for schools to “cultivate the spirit to love Japan”. The Stalinist JCP issued a statement in June denouncing the reform, saying it would turn Japan into “a war fighting nation” and “an economic society under the law of the jungle”. The Stalinists, however, advocate their own brand of nationalism and proposed a code of civil morals for students, including “true patriotism”.

The promotion of nationalism was well underway before Abe came to power. In 1999, the Japanese parliament reinstated the notorious wartime “Hinomaru” (Rising Sun) national flag and the national anthem “Kimigayo” (May the Imperial Reign be Forever). In 2003, Shintaro Ishihara, the right-wing governor of Tokyo, punished teachers who refused to fly the “Hinomaru” flag and sing the “Kimigayo” anthem in schools.

Abe’s predecessor as prime minister, Junichiro Koizumi, consciously promoted Japanese patriotism in schools. His government allowed the publication of a number of controversial history textbooks whitewashing the atrocities of the Japanese military in Asia during the 1930s and 1940s.

Abe’s “education reform” is aimed at accelerating the process of reviving Japanese militarism with explosive political implications for Japanese society. Nationalism is being fomented both to justify aggression abroad and divert public attention from the deepening social divide at home. Over the past decade, the undermining of the system of lifelong employment has led to rising levels of unemployment and poverty.

The education reform is aimed at uprooting any semblance of egalitarianism and making schools more responsive to the demands of business. Abe has appointed a 17-member Education Rebuilding Council, which includes the Toyota chairman, to oversee the changes.

In a comment to the *Wall Street Journal* on December 6,

deputy chief cabinet secretary Hakubun Shimomura admitted that the reform was a “risky endeavour” due to widespread public opposition and an upper-house election due in July. “However, the prime minister has no choice because time is not on our side,” he said, adding that the need for “productivity” had to be impressed on the next generation, or the future of the Japanese economy would be in question.

Abe has attempted to exploit a spate of student suicides to justify his education reform. Since September, more than a dozen Japanese teenagers have killed themselves after being bullied at school. In the southern city of Kokura, a 17-year-old girl jumped off a school building. In Osaka, a 12-year-old girl leapt from the 8th floor of an apartment after being teased for being too small. In the Saitama prefecture, a 14-year-old boy hanged himself after school bullies demanded 20,000 yen. A 14-year-old boy hanged himself after classmates allegedly pulled his pants down.

A survey conducted by the Kyoto University in September showed that 56 percent of boys and 63 percent of girls had been bullied or subjected to violence in elementary schools. The pattern was similar in high schools. While the promoters of “education reform” have blamed the bullying and suicides on moral degeneration and the lack of order in schools, the promotion of intense competition amid a deepening social divide is a major cause of extreme tensions in schools.

Naoki Ogi, an education expert from the Rainbow Institute, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation in November: “Numerical targets and competitiveness will be made much of in the expected revised education law. But these are actually the cause and the root of the current bullying problem and other educational problems. Therefore I think if we revised the basic law, the situation will become worse.”



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