Random killing in Tokyo points to deepening social crisis in Japan

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Millions of Japanese citizens were shocked by a bloody lunchtime scene on June 8, when Tomohiro Kato, a 25-year-old temporary auto worker, went to Tokyo's busy Akihabara shopping district, ran down several people with a truck and proceeded to stab others in the street, killing seven. Ten people were wounded.

A traffic police officer was killed when helping the victims hit by Kato's truck. Kato only dropped his two knives when another police officer drew his gun, after failing to hold Kato back with a baton.

Kato's grieving parents repeatedly apologised before television cameras for their son's actions. Wiping tears, the parents were clearly shocked. Their son is a quiet, bespectacled young man who does not look menacing at all. Yet, he may face criminal charges that could lead to the death penalty.

While the police say they have been trying to determine Kato's mental health, there are indications that the tragedy is a product of personal isolation, poverty and alienation suffered by broad layers of Japanese workers and youth.

Kato had been working at a components factory, Kanto Auto Works, 100 kilometres from Tokyo, since November. He was dispatched there by an employment agency, but was apparently disturbed by the firm's plans for job cuts. Naoyuki Hashimoto, a company spokesman, said Kato's work attitude was "very good and he didn't stir any problems in the workplace". The firm is affiliated with Japanese auto giant, Toyota.

One of Kato's workmates told the media: "He was the only contract worker along with me. The factory chief summoned the two of us and said that our contracts were going to be terminated at the end of June. I think he was troubled by the job cut." Although the employment agency had told Kato that his job was safe, the company executive, Osamu Namai said Kato was enraged when he discovered his uniform was missing. "When his colleague got a new uniform for him, he had already left and never returned."

Kato, who was living in a small one-room apartment rented by his job agency in Shizuoka Prefecture, had said that he wanted to kill, because he was "tired of living". He had decided to carry out the attack two or three days earlier and had been posting disturbing messages online since May.

"I don't have a single friend and I won't in the future. I'll be ignored because I'm ugly," one message wrote. "If I had a girlfriend, I wouldn't have just left my job or be addicted to my cell phone. A man with hope could never understand this.... I'm lower than the trash because at least the trash gets recycled."

This deep disappointment in life then turned in a deadly direction. One of Kato's messages posted on June 3 said: "Should I run down people with a car because everybody makes a fool of me?" A subsequent post declared that he had spent "eight years of life as a loser ever since I graduated from high school." On June 5, he wrote: "My work clothes were gone when I went work. Do they want to me to quit?"

The next day, Kato went to buy several knives from a military equipment shop. On the eve of the killing, he went to Akihabara—a famous attraction where young people buy trendy goods, computer games and comic books. He apparently sold software there in order to get the money to rent a two-tonne truck for his attack.

Some Japanese media have tried to blame the rampage on modern youth's individual "irresponsibility", rather than any social breakdown. A criminologist cited by the BBC argued that Kato was "a sociopath who blames his unstable life as a temporary worker". The expert added, "it was a problem with him, not something we did wrong."

In fact, Kato's killing brought to the light the plight of the growing army of temporary workers in Japan. He had worked at a series of automobile assembly lines before working at Kanto Auto Works. He earned only about 200,000 yen ($US1,850) a month, and the contract expired in March. Although it was extended for another year, the firm announced in May that it would cut 150 jobs by June. The fear of insecurity evidently gripped his mind. "Now I'm losing a fixed address? It's getting more desperate. What I want to do—kill," he wrote two days before the killing.

Even Japanese cabinet secretary Nobutaka Machimura admitted: "If the instability of dispatch work pushed him to this heinous crime, we may have to consider measures to make employment more stable." The truth is that successive Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) governments, especially former prime minister Junchiro Koizumi's 2001-2006 administration, were responsible for pushing for casualised labour to breakup Japan's post-war system of life-time employment.

The numbers of casualised workers grew from 10 million, or 20.9 percent of the workforce, in 1995 to 17.3 million or 33.7 percent in 2007. Among them, 41 percent were women, one of the highest ratios in the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries. Part-time workers' average hourly rates are 40 percent lower than for regular employees.

Japan had a workforce of 51.2 million last year, but only 66.3 percent were regular workers—compared to 83.6 percent in 1985. The leading Japanese manufacturer of cameras and printers, Canon, for instance, now employs 70 percent of its factory workers on a non-regular basis, up from 50 percent in 2000 and just 10 percent in 1995.

Just a week before Kato's rampage, Fujio Mitarai, the chairman of Japan's most powerful corporate association, Nippon Keidanren, told the *Financial Times* that the country was moving toward an American-style "flexible" labour market. He defended the use of non-regular workers as essential to maintain Japan's global competitiveness, and resist the "hollowing out" of industry to low-cost hubs like China and India.

Employers have used technological advances to further press down wages and conditions. Japan had 370,000 industrial robots in 2005—40 percent of the world's total. According to a "roadmap" report issued by the trade ministry last year, the country will install one million robots by 2025. As one robot can do the work of 10 workers, the robots will eliminate 10 million jobs.

While the government cites an aging population and declining birth rates

for the necessity to increase productivity, there are no decent opportunities for young workers. An official survey last year found that more than 5,000 young casual workers were living in 24-hour Internet and comic book cafes because they could not afford a roof over their heads. Japan has the second highest rate of suicide among the industrialised countries, with more than 30,000 cases per year over the past decade.

Shuichiro Sekine, an official of a union covering temporary workers, told Agency France Presse (AFP) on June 13 that he often heard desperate stories like Kato's. "Because some temporary workers are hired on a short-term contract of just a few months, there is no way for them to dream of a stable life, not to mention a career path or a marriage," Sekine explained. He added: "Manufacturing companies treat temporary workers as if they were auto parts and just like they can slash inventory, they can suddenly slash their jobs."

There are growing numbers of random killings in Japan—a total of 67 in the past 10 years. There were eight in the 2007, double the 2006 figure, and there have been five cases already this year. In March, a 24-year-old man stabbed one commuter and wounded seven at a train station north of Tokyo. He told police: "I wanted to kill seven or eight people. I didn't care who they were."

These killers often share a psychological symptom called *hikikomori*, which roughly means social withdrawal. In order to escape social pressures, young people refuse to go to school or engage in social activities. They stay in their rooms playing computer games, reading *manga* comics and surfing the Internet, sometimes without stepping outdoors for months. Japanese psychologist Tamaki Saito, who first described this phenomenon a decade ago, has estimated there are one million cases across Japan.

Noriko Hama, a scholar from the Kyoto-based Doshisha University, told the British *Telegraph*: "First withdrawing, and then demonstrating violence against the world around them, are symptoms of the same thing. These people are showing uncertainty, fear, frustration and loneliness, all of which lead to desperation and a cycle of violence."

Kato had a troubled childhood ruined by an education system driven by exams and career concerns. He was born in the less developed town of Aomori, but into a middle-class family (his father is a banker). According to the mother of one of his early classmates, Kato's mother was very anxious about her son's education, with high expectations. He was an "excellent" student and a top tennis player.

On the eve of the rampage, Kato wrote: "I have been forced to play the good boy since I was little." He said his parents had done homework for him sometimes, in order to win prizes. "As they wanted to brag about me to other people, they would finish everything up to make me look perfect."

Kato's younger brother told *Shukan Gendai* that while their mother had an "excess" of love for her children, she demanded that they do well in school. She called Kato a "culprit" once he no longer performed well in school. "We were ordered to rewrite [homework] if she spotted one incorrect or ugly character.... It wasn't a correction by using an eraser but trashing the entire piece of paper and starting writing again," the brother said. He said his mother's "brainwashing" discipline must have left strong resentment in Kato's mind.

After Kato entered the most prestigious high school in Aomori, he slipped to a ranking of around 300 among 360 students. One of Kato's former teachers told the Fuji network: "He wasn't outstanding at all in his studies or extracurricular activities. He was really a mediocre student." Of course, Kato had to compete against the brightest children in the area. He reportedly started to act violently at around 15, sometimes beating up his mother. Some classmates recalled that he remained aloof from others, and was rumoured to carry a knife at all times.

Eventually, Kato failed university entrance exams twice. He trained to become an auto mechanic at a two-year college in Gifu Prefecture in 2001. A college staff member said he was a smart and diligent student, but failed to acquire the formal qualification. He ended up as a temporary worker with no job security.

In Japan and other East Asian countries, where family relations are still very formal, failing at school is often regarded as a family shame. Children with poor results cannot aspire to the middle classes. Being an elite student, Kato's experiences in the latter part of his life meant a sharp downturn. In a society that values those with high incomes and lucrative careers, he must have felt constantly denigrated.

These pressures are acute amid deepening inequality. While the number of Japanese millionaires rose by 10 percent from 2001 to 2004, to 1.34 million, the proportion of households with no savings hit 22.8 percent in 2005 and the number of households receiving welfare reached one million for the first time since the welfare program began in 1951.

Akira Sakuta, a criminologist at Seigakuin University in Ageo, told the *Japan Times* that Kato might have found things "tough going" after graduating from school. Psychologist Masafumi Usui at Niigata Seiryo University said Kato might have been disappointed with his low-paid jobs, and jealous of other young people who had better ones.

Susumu Oda, a psychiatrist at Tezukayamagakuin University in Osaka Prefecture, cautiously pointed to the widening gap between rich and poor: "Young people may feel they are at a dead end, with no way out." Oda added that as a lonely person spending much of his spare time on anime and Internet games, Kato might have regarded a random act of murder as a means of participating in society, and achieving something special.

Such explanations ignore the widespread alienation among Japanese youth from the entire political establishment. The old reformist parties of the working class, such as the Stalinist Japanese Communist Party and the Social Democratic Party have become bureaucratic empty shells due to their repeated betrayals. Right-wing LDP politicians, including a number of prime ministers such as Koizumi, have promoted Japanese militarism and nationalism. The so-called opposition Democratic Party of Japan, was formed by former LDP members, has an even more aggressive pro-market program.

With no progressive outlet for discontent, Kato's murderous rampage is a distorted and explosive individual expression of the growing social tensions. This pressure must explode, sooner or later, into forms of open class struggle.