

Signs of political radicalisation in Japan, despite its confused direction

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There are signs of a growing radicalisation among young people in Japan provoked by their own worsening prospects and the deepening gulf between rich and poor, amid the worst global economic crisis since the 1930s.

The resurgence of the Japanese Communist Party (JCP) and the growing interest in the “proletarian” novel *Kanikosen* (or Crab-Canning Ship) are two indications of a deeply felt, if still confused, hostility to capitalism and the current state of Japanese society.

The British-based *Telegraph* last month pointed to a significant rise in the JCP’s membership from a low point of just 375,000 in 2000 to 415,000. Since September 2007, the party has been swelling at a rate of 1,000 new members a month, particularly youth in their 20s and 30s.

Although the JCP has just nine seats in the 480-seat House of Representatives and seven in the 242-seat upper house, it is the largest opposition party at the local level with 3,089 members in various local governments. It is also the second largest party in terms of fundraising—bringing in 57.7 billion yen in 2007 behind 68.2 billion yen raised by the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP).

The JCP attributed its increased membership to a renewed interest among young people in the novel *Kanikosen*, first published in 1929, about the brutal exploitation of workers on a crab processing ship. The turning point of the story comes when some crew members are lost at sea and rescued by a Soviet vessel. They meet a Chinese communist who teaches them to stand up for the proletariat in Japan. Initially suspicious of “communism”, the workers return to their ship, form a union and revolt against their bosses.

The novel highlights the class tensions in Imperial Japan, when the militarist regime stamped out any industrial action or protests. In the story, the strike on board the ship is brutally put down. The book was banned in the 1930s and 1940s as part of the ruthless suppression of the socialist movement. The author Takiji Kobayashi joined the Communist Party in 1931, which was then illegal, and was tortured to death by Japanese police two years later at the age of just 29.

The novel was published after the end of World War II, but its annual sales never exceeded 5,000. So far this year, more than half a million have been sold. A manga comic version has sold another 200,000 copies. Kyudo Takahashi, a 31-year-old writer, told the *Telegraph* that young people see their social conditions mirrored in the novel. “They cannot become happy and they cannot find the solution to their poverty, however hard they work. Young people who are forced to work for very low wages today may have a feeling that they are in a similar position to the crew of *Kanikosen*,” he said.

Media commentators, academics and officials have expressed some nervousness at the growing interest in the novel and its obvious relation to the plight of many young people. An editorial by the *Asahi Shimbun* in July commented: “Non-regular workers who can’t afford to rent an apartment now sleep nights in Internet cafes. The ranks of ‘freeters’—temporary workers forced to move from job to job—in their 30s and 40s are growing... Many Japanese workers today don’t feel their jobs are rewarding and are unhappy about their low income and insecure employment status.”

Japan was once known for its system of life-long employment which provided secure jobs to a large portion of the workforce. Over the past two decades, however, casual and part-time work has mushroomed. The number of the non-permanent workers hit 17.3 million by March 2007—more than 50 percent higher than a decade ago.

Former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi passed legislation in 2002 and 2004 expanding the use of temporary and casual labour. The deepening social polarisation and associated social ills provoked a public debate over the “winners” and “losers” of the free market. Several popular best sellers were published which dealt with the plight of the “under-classes”. The discussion was unprecedented in Japan where social issues have been rarely discussed in the past.

An article in the *Japan Times* in July found that young people having trouble finding jobs were being attracted to the JCP. In February, the JCP chief Kazuo Shii challenged then Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda to help casual workers, who were “being discarded like disposable articles” by the bosses. The exchange recorded 150,000 hits, when posted on the Internet. The JCP

leaders have appeared more frequently on TV and radio programs, dealing with questions such as “Is there a limit to capitalism?”

A misplaced hope

The latest interest in the novel *Kanikosen* indicates that the radicalisation has not subsided. However, the decision of a layer of young people to place their hopes in the JCP is completely misplaced. While the party was initially founded in 1922 on the basis of socialist internationalism that heritage was rapidly destroyed under the impact of the rise of the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union.

While the JCP opposed the militarist regime and Japanese imperialism in the 1920s and 1930s, its program was based on the reactionary Stalinist perspective of “socialism in one country” and its corollary—the two-stage theory. Under the so-called first stage, the JCP limited itself to demands of a democratic and national character, subordinating the working class to the “progressive” sections of the capitalist class. The second stage—socialism—was relegated to the distant future.

The full consequences of these conceptions became apparent at the end of World War II. The Japanese ruling elites and their parties were deeply despised by working people who faced extremely difficult conditions in post-war Japan. Trade unions and working class political parties that had been small, illegal outfits suddenly swelled in the space of months to become mass organisations. The JCP because of its stand against Japanese militarism attracted the most radical elements.

Confronted with mass movements, not just in Japan but internationally, the US and its allies relied heavily on the Stalinists parties to suppress the aspirations of the working class to abolish capitalism. The key turning point came in 1947 when the head of the US occupation General Douglas MacArthur banned a planned general strike that threatened to destabilise the government. Rather than challenge the US general, the JCP complied, claiming, in line with its two-stage perspective, that the American occupation represented the fulfilment of the democratic first stage of the Japanese revolution.

Having stabilised capitalist rule in Japan, the US, as part of its international Cold War counteroffensive against “communism”, banned the JCP in 1949 and launched a “Red Purge” of suspected socialists from the state bureaucracy and other posts. The JCP was legalised again in the 1950s after the signing of the US-Japan Security Treaty in 1952 and the end of the occupation. Its political trajectory, however, continued to the right.

Like a number of European Stalinist parties, the JCP loosened its international ties in order to integrate itself more closely into the national political establishment. For decades, it has functioned as a loyal opposition party in the parliamentary arena, playing second fiddle to the Socialist Party before the latter’s implosion in the 1990s. The JCP retained a base in sections of the union bureaucracy, particularly in the public sector unions.

To even describe the JCP today as a socialist party is a misnomer. Its program adopted at a party congress in 2004 reeks of nationalism and economic protectionism. It defends the interests of small and medium businesses and farmers against big business and global capital. Its antiwar posturing is of the liberal, pacifist variety. Its anti-US stance meets up with demands of sections of the Japanese ruling class for a more independent foreign policy.

While denouncing “the historical and colossal evil of Soviet hegemonies”, the JCP program praises the efforts of those countries that “broke away from capitalism” to being “a new quest of socialism, including the effort to ‘achieve socialism through a market economy’... This constitutes a historically significant current in the 21st century as an effort that covers vast regions with a total population of more than 1.3 billion.” While not named, this can only refer to China where the massive expansion of capitalism, not socialism, has led to a huge and deepening divide between rich and poor.

It is somewhat paradoxical that the JCP, which is no less compromised and treacherous, than its collapsed or collapsing Stalinist counterparts around the world, appears to have a temporary new lease of life. In part, it is explained by the fact that the JCP is receiving a certain promotion by the mainstream media, conscious that it may be needed as a political safety value. Even *Time* magazine had an article last year comparing the JCP favourably to the LDP as the “most modern political party in Japan”.

However, a more fundamental reason for the JCP’s expanding membership is the understandable political confusion among young people that has been compounded by the isolation and insularity of Japan. That confusion will only be overcome through an assimilation of the lessons of the strategic experiences of the international working class throughout the twentieth century, in particular the struggle waged by the Trotskyist movement against Stalinism and all forms of national opportunism.



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