

Japan's new government: Promise and reality

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After more than half a century of near continuous rule, Japan's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) was swept out of office in a landslide defeat at national elections on Sunday. Like Barack Obama in the US, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) and its leader Yukio Hatoyama won office by appealing to widespread popular hostility by adopting the vague slogan of "change" and promises of handouts to families, farmers and small business.

The gulf between the limited election pledges of the Democrats and the social realities facing broad layers of working people will quickly become evident. Even as he basked in his victory, Hatoyama was acutely conscious that voters had cast their ballots against the LDP, rather than for the DPJ and regarded the next government with deep suspicion. "Japanese people feel profound anger toward the current politics," he told a press conference.

The sentiment was confirmed in many press reports. The *Japan Times* wrote on Monday that the election result was a product of the "frustrated public". Hidekazu Kawai from Gakushuin University told the newspaper: "The enormous anticipation for change resulted in a snowball effect, a dangerously momentous snowball effect." Noting rising unemployment among young people and anxiety among the elderly over pensions, the article concluded: "People are fed up."

After two decades of economic stagnation, the global economic crisis hit the Japanese working class hard, especially millions of low-paid, non-regular workers who are mostly young. With official unemployment at a record high of 5.7 percent in July, the jobless rate among 15-24 year-olds was 8.7 percent. In the April-June quarter, nearly half a million "irregular" workers lost their jobs. Some estimates put real unemployment

at more than 12 percent in June.

The LDP's pro-market "reforms," especially employment deregulation in 1999 and former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's labour measures in 2004, resulted in a huge shift from life-long employment to casualisation. In the space of just a decade, the proportion of contract and part-time employees exploded to 33.5 percent of the workforce. Most temporary workers earn just 40 percent of the pay of regular employees.

Those who lose their jobs can only count on unemployment benefits for a few months. After that they are forced to rely on family or friends or join the growing number of homeless who live under blue tents in parks or on the streets.

The country's deepening social crisis is virtually ignored in the media. It emerges in the mounting statistics of homelessness, suicide and poverty and when an especially terrible incident punctures the media blackout. In January, a 49-year-old man was found starved to death at his Osaka apartment, with no food in the fridge and a few hundred yen in his pocket. In April, a 47-year-old unemployed worker near Osaka killed his son and then committed suicide, leaving note saying he had lost the will to live. The same month, a woman from the Saga Prefecture was arrested for forcing her two teenage daughters into prostitution.

The discontent extends into the rural heartlands of the Liberal Democrats. When the LDP was founded in 1955, only a third of Japan's population lived in the cities. Now the figure is two-thirds. Free market "reforms," particularly those implemented under Koizumi, have had a devastating impact. His administration privatised social services, relaxed

restrictions on food imports, cut so-called pork-barrel spending to rural areas and downsized local governments. The result has been job losses, falling living standards and an exodus, particularly of young people, to the cities.

Commentator Gerald Curtis told the *Sydney Morning Herald*: “The further you go from Tokyo and the big cities, the angrier people are... They don’t want roads and dams and expensive community centres. The major community centre in rural Japan has been taken from them—that is the post office. They want doctors, nursing care. They want an economy that will encourage young people not to move to the big cities. And the LDP was not offering these things.”

The Democrats are completely incapable of addressing, let alone resolving, this social crisis. While criticising “US-led free market fundamentalism,” Hatoyama is well aware that his government will come under immediate pressure from big business to press ahead with economic restructuring, despite overwhelming public opposition. In fact, before the global economic collapse over the past year, the DPJ routinely criticised the government for not pressing ahead fast enough. Koizumi lifted much of his economic agenda from the DPJ program.

As for his party’s election promises, Hatoyama is already urging restraint. After two decades of massive stimulus packages following the collapse of the share and real estate bubbles in the 1990s, Japan’s public debt is rapidly approaching 200 percent of its GDP. Hatoyama has pledged to limit further government bond issues: “We need to do some soul-searching about the past practice of spending freely without limit and then selling bonds if there was a budget shortfall.”

Speaking to national broadcaster NHK on Monday, Hatoyama declared that he would not use the party’s majorities in both houses of parliament “to bulldoze our policies through”. “We must exercise patience and seek people’s understanding because we have been given such latitude,” he added. Hatoyama’s refusal to use his election mandate to implement even his own party’s limited social policies makes clear that the next government is going to rule on behalf of the corporate

elite, not the millions of voters that put it into office.

Workers and young people in Japan are confronting the same fundamental political issues as their counterparts around the world. As capitalism slides deeper into crisis, the lies used by governments to offload the burdens onto the working class are becoming increasingly transparent. No political party in Japan fights for the class interests of working people. The old discredited parties of the working class—the Social Democrats and the Communists—are lining up behind the Hatoyama government. The Social Democratic Party is in a formal alliance with the DPJ and during the election campaign Communist Party leader Kazuo Shii promised to act as a “constructive opposition”.

Workers must turn to the building of a new political party based on a socialist and internationalist perspective. None of the problems confronting the working class in Japan can be resolved outside the development of a unified movement against the transnational giants that exploit workers in every part of the globe. We urge workers, young people and intellectuals in Japan to make a serious study of the perspective and program of the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world Trotskyist movement, which is based on the vital lessons of all the key strategic experiences of the international working class. It is only on these firm foundations that the working class in Japan can take its place in carrying out the historic task of abolishing the outmoded capitalist system and reorganising society to meet social needs, not private profit.

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