

Japan's finance minister: Old people should "hurry up and die"

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The reactionary social agenda of the new Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) government in Japan was underlined on Monday by Finance Minister Taro Aso, who berated the elderly for being a burden on taxpayers.

"Heaven forbid if you are forced to live on when you want to die. I would wake up feeling increasingly bad knowing that [treatment] was all being paid for by the government," he said during a meeting of the national council on social security reforms. "The problem won't be solved unless you let them hurry up and die."

Aso branded those who could no longer feed themselves as "tube people". He decried the fact that treatment for just one patient close to death could cost the government "tens of millions of yen" a month.

After his comments drew widespread criticism, Aso claimed that he had been misunderstood and that his remarks were intended to refer only to himself. This response, however, is simply absurd. As a LDP blueblood from one of the country's wealthiest and powerful families, Aso is never going to depend on government-provided health care.

The media dismissed his comments as just another gaffe. But there is nothing mistaken about Aso's callous remarks toward the elderly—and anyone who cannot afford to pay for their care. The finance minister is seeking to cultivate a political constituency for his government's plans for a far-reaching assault on the most vulnerable sections of the working class.

As part of its campaign for last month's election, the LDP pledged to slash welfare benefits by 10 percent, even as it proposed stimulus measures to boost growth and corporate profits. The government announced a 10.3 trillion yen (\$US116 billion) spending package on January 11, focussed on public works and "wealth creation" through measures to assist Japanese industry

to be internationally competitive. The package included defence spending, as part of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's aggressive foreign policy and strategic stance, especially toward China.

The welfare budget, which currently constitutes about 30 percent of public spending, is being targeted to pay for the Abe government's militarist, pro-business agenda. Monday's discussions on "welfare reforms" were among the preparations underway for the next budget, covering the fiscal year from April.

It was no accident that Aso's comments were primarily aimed at the elderly. Japan's "aging population" is routinely blamed for the country's economic stagnation and massive public debt, which currently stands at 240 percent of gross domestic product (GDP). Japan has one of the highest life expectancies in the world and nearly a quarter of the population is aged over 65. But it is capitalism, not the elderly, that is responsible for the depressed state of the Japanese economy, which is still suffering from the collapse of the speculative frenzy in property and shares of the late 1980s, now compounded by the global economic crisis.

In a statement on Tuesday, the government declared that Japan had to cut the debt-to-GDP ratio to half the fiscal 2010 level within two years. Currently, less than half of government spending is covered by revenue, so the remainder has to be covered by new bond issues that add to the public debt. As a result, the Abe government is preparing to make massive inroads into social spending, starting with a plan to make tax revenue exceed borrowings in the upcoming budget.

An editorial in the big business *Nikkei* newspaper last week, entitled "Welfare reform must instil motivation to work," applauded the government's plan to lower living allowances for welfare recipients, which it

claimed were higher than for poor working families. “An estimated 400,000 of the [welfare] recipients are believed to be capable of working, but few people in this category go on to find jobs,” it lamented. As well as cutting welfare spending, the government’s aim is clearly to push the jobless into low-paid work, providing a new pool of cheap labour for business, and undermining wages for all workers.

Japan’s welfare system, which was originally designed to supplement the country’s life-long employment system, has always been very limited. The number of welfare recipients has grown as job guarantees have been torn up over the past two decades, leading to a huge rise in unstable, temporary and part-time employment. The current total of 2.09 million recipients is nearly double the figure of 1.07 million in 2000. More than 678,000 households receive welfare for family members over 65, or about 40 percent of the total.

As welfare costs have risen, governments and the media have stigmatised recipients. Central and local governments have made it increasingly difficult to obtain benefits and resorted to bullying to force recipients off welfare. Shocking cases have emerged of people, especially the elderly, starving to death because they have no income (see: “Starvation tragedy underlines social deprivation in Japan”).

Aso’s attitude to the elderly reflects the outlook of the ruling elite as a whole toward the working class: once workers no longer contribute to the scandalous wealth of the financial aristocracy and become a burden, they should be thrown on the scrapheap, or to use Aso’s words, just “hurry up and die.”

There is nothing particularly Japanese about these comments. Aso has enunciated in a crude form the reactionary nostrums used around the world to justify the austerity agenda and the slashing of basic entitlements. Aso’s argument is no different in essence from those who call for access to costly medical procedures to be limited or eliminated, especially for those near the end of their life.



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