

Two newly-appointed Japanese cabinet members resign

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Two ministers in the cabinet of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe resigned Monday after accusations of separate improprieties were leveled at the pair. Trade and Industry Minister Yuko Obuchi and Justice Minister Midori Matsushima resigned only hours apart from each other, after serving in their positions for less than two months. Abe appointed them as part of his September 3 cabinet shakeup.

The resignation of the two women so soon after their promotion to Abe's cabinet is a sign of a further shift to the right in the government. While the alleged misconduct was the pretext for their departure, a lack of sufficiently right-wing credentials was far more likely to be the real reason.

Matsushima was accused on October 7 by opposition Democrat Party of Japan (DPJ) member Renho Murata of violating campaign laws by handing out paper fans over a three-year period. The fans carried Matsushima's image as well as brief descriptions of her policies and reportedly cost about 75 cents. However, the DPJ accused her of handing out gifts to voters.

Matsushima stated after she resigned, "I feel sorry that my recent words and actions caused political and administrative stagnation." She maintained, however, that she had broken no laws.

Sensing blood, the right-wing tabloid *Shukan Shincho* last Thursday leveled charges at Obuchi of misusing funds. She is accused of using 26 million yen (\$245,600) in political funds to provide theater tickets for her supporters as well as having a support group purchase 3.6 million yen (\$35,000) worth of goods from businesses run by her sister and brother-in-law.

Corruption charges and scandals, however, are routinely used in bourgeois politics in every country as a means of removing rivals and carrying out policy shifts. In the case of Obuchi, she appears to be have

been targeted by the extreme right for being a "moderate."

Obuchi, 40, was a rising star in the ruling Liberal Democrat Party (LDP), coming from a long line of LDP politicians. Her grandfather held a parliamentary seat and her father Keizo Obuchi is a former prime minister. Obuchi "inherited" her father's seat, entering parliament in 2000. She became a cabinet minister in 2008 at the age of 34 and held the powerful Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry (METI) in the recent reshuffle. The Nukaga faction of the LDP to which she belonged was touting her as a possibility to become Japan's first female prime minister.

Obuchi told the press on Monday that she was unaware of any wrongdoing. "As minister of METI, it's unforgivable for my personal issues to cause economic policies and energy policies to stagnate. I resign here and would like to put all my effort into regaining everyone's trust by investigating these doubts."

Obuchi and Matsushima were among five women added to Abe's cabinet last month. That figure was hailed by the bourgeois media as proof of Abe's supposed commitment to gender equality. Rather, the purpose of the cabinet reshuffle was to solidify support for Abe as he prepared to ratchet up his agenda of remilitarizing Japan and attacking the working class.

Fifteen of the 19 cabinet ministers belonged to the far-right Japan Conference or Nippon Kaigi. Nippon Kaigi, founded in 1997, promotes the lie that Japanese imperialism "liberated" East Asia from the West in the run-up to World War II and denies the horrendous war crimes that occurred, such as the Rape of Nanking, in which estimated 300,000 Chinese soldiers and civilians were massacred. They also promote "patriotic values" in education and are opposed to gender equality.

Neither Obuchi nor Matsushima are members of Nippon Kaigi, unlike the other three women Abe selected in September: Sanae Takaichi, Eriko Yamatani, and Haruko Arimura. The three ministers visited the notorious Yasukuni war shrine on Saturday, a symbol of Japanese militarism.

Moreover, *Shukan Shincho*, which reported the allegations against Obuchi, is known for its militarist stance towards China and North Korea. Obuchi's Nukaga faction is known to favour a more conciliatory approach and closer ties to Beijing.

Obuchi can only be considered "a moderate" within the context of an extremely right-wing cabinet. While not a member of Nippon Kaigi, she does belong another right wing grouping that advocates visits to the Yasukuni Shrine. Rather than visiting personally she usually sends one of her staff, an aide told Reuters.

Who exactly was involved in leaking details about Obuchi and Matsushima is not known. The result, however, is a cabinet that is more solidly committed to a right wing agenda of militarism, confrontation with China and austerity.

Significantly, two of the remaining female ministers—Internal Affairs Minister Sanae Takaichi and Eriko Yamatani, the head of the National Public Safety Commission—remain in their posts despite damning evidence of connections to ultra-right groups in Japan.

A photo of Takaichi posing with Kazunari Yamada, the leader of a neo-Nazi party in Japan, surfaced shortly after her appointment. Tomomi Inada, Abe ally and LDP policy chief also appeared in a photo with Yamada. Yamatani was seen in a photograph with Shigeo Masuki, a leading member of Zaitokukai, a group which has called for the killings of ethnic Koreans living in Japan.

Abe is increasingly unpopular as a result of declining living standards, his push to restart the country's nuclear reactors and the government's reinterpretation of the constitution to allow "collective self-defense," that is, Japanese involvement in US wars of aggression.

Since coming to office, public support for Abe has fallen from 70 percent, which was largely due to anger with the DPJ, to 48.1 percent, including a decrease of 6.8 percent from September, according to *Kyodo News*.

Yet Abe is under pressure to implement more draconian economic measures. The economy shrank by 6.8 percent in the second quarter, leading to demands

from big business to implement the second increase in the sales tax to 10 percent next October, and to slash the corporate tax rate from 35 to 20 percent over the next few years.

Obuchi's replacement at the Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry, Yoichi Miyazawa, is a former finance ministry official. This ministry has been demanding increased taxes to make up for the loss of corporate tax revenue, something which Miyazawa has strongly supported, while the METI opposed it.

The finance ministry supports increasing the sales tax which is opposed by Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga, one of Abe's closest allies. The addition of Miyazawa to Abe's cabinet is a clear indication that the government intends to impose new economic burdens onto the working class.

The overall agenda of the Abe government is an extremely right-wing one. As opposition grows, Abe and his ministers will no doubt further stir up nationalism and militarism, especially against China and North Korea, in a bid to project social tensions outward.



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