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Japan's Internship Training Program for Foreign Workers: Education or Exploitation?

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They fall deep in debt, and one trainee became so disturbed that he committed murder.

In 1993, when Japan still depended on foreign labor in the last days before the Bubble Economy burst, the Japanese government introduced a Foreign Training Internship Program. Although it was claimed that this system was designed to support foreigners in their acquisition of technical skills and knowledge of Japanese advanced technology, in reality it has been used to make up for a shortage of unskilled labor in Japan. Because the Japanese government is reluctant to invite transnational migrant laborers into the country, companies have had to look for new ways to find workers. As a result, many foreigners enrolled in the training-internship program—with valid three-year work permits—became a source of cheap labor, and end up working under wretched conditions.

I recently received an e-mail from Kurematsu Saichi, the Assistant Director of the Labor Union Association of Aichi Prefecture. He said that he had just returned home on the Bullet Train after meeting three Vietnamese workers in the suburbs of Komaki City in Aichi. The three work in the electric parts department at M Factory (a pseudonym). However, the M Factory had just received a three-year suspension preventing them from taking on new training-interns. Mr. Kurematsu therefore went to help find them new jobs.

They had only eight months left to work in Japan before returning home after completing their training program. Mr. Kurematsu recalls that the three told him they had hoped to save one million yen, but so far they had only been able to save 40,000 yen each. Still they were all smiles at the prospect of returning home soon. One of these men, the twenty-four-year-old Mr. A, could speak Japanese a little. He had waited for two years helping out in his parents' noodle restaurant in Vietnam before his application to become a trainee in Japan was accepted.

This was not the first time this had happened. Last November, the M Factory suddenly fired all three workers without warning. The reason was that there was no work for them. The three had just finished the first year of their "study period" and the second year of their "internship," and they still had another year in Japan to complete the program. After being asked to help, he tried to obtain unemployment benefits for them, extend their visas, and find new jobs. Four months later, the three were re-hired at M Factory.

However, immediately the factory let them go once more. This time it received an "illegal practices" sanction because the previous year it had paid its trainees only ¥63,000 per month as opposed to the promised ¥65,000 as indicated in their contracts. Mr. Kurematsu couldn't believe this punishment, and criticized the government's decision. He also commented that immigration officers often go after only the easy targets.

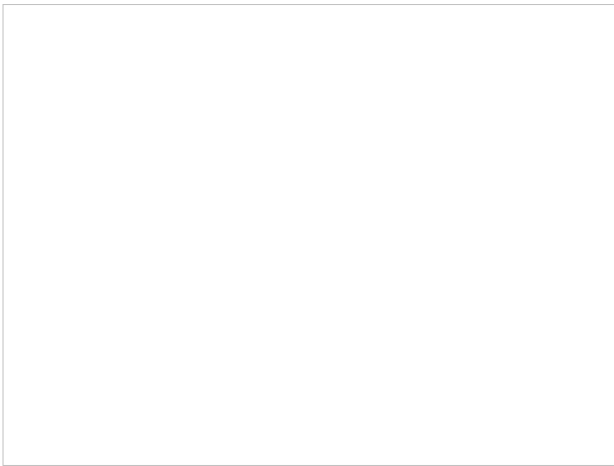
When they heard that they were being rehired at the factory, the three felt quite relieved. But on hearing that they were being fired again, they lost hope. If someone does not help them soon, this time they won't be able to support themselves at all. They have no money because they had sent all their savings to their families in Vietnam. Moreover, they had already used up their unemployment insurance when they lost jobs earlier.

This is just one example of the kinds of problems caused by the Foreigner Training-Internship Program. These kinds of problems—like continually being fired and rehired, violations of contracts, and violations of human rights—happen on a daily basis. Recently, twenty-three subcontractors of Toyota Textiles and the Toyota Technology Exchange Cooperative—which had accepted Vietnamese trainees—were charged with "illegal practices." Currently, damages are being decided in court. This is a textile-parts factory of the world-famous Toyota automobile conglomerate. These incidents were partially reported in the mass media: abuses included taking away the passports or health insurance cards of the trainees. [1] The trainees were also forced to place their wages in factory savings accounts in order to prevent them from leaving the factory. The factories did not pay overtime, and they skimmed the workers' room and board, and heating and lighting, expenses. The trainees were also forced to pay fines like ¥15 per minute to go to the bathroom during their work hours, or ¥2,000 for forgetting to clean their facilities after their shift. There were also accusations of sexual harassment by management.

THE SILENCE OF BOTH GOVERNMENTS

These imposed fines demonstrate the social status of the trainees. These fines can be imposed not just at work, but in their private quarters as well. For example, fines included ¥10,000 for irritating their neighbors or staying out overnight without reporting to their dormitory supervisor, and ¥20,000 for allowing other company trainees to stay overnight in their rooms. When the trainees complained about these things to the Japanese Immigration Bureau, officials simply told them to return to their home country since they cannot study under such circumstances. The trainees told the officers that they could not simply return home without making money in Japan because they had borrowed approximately one million yen to give as a security deposit to the trainee agencies. It would be impossible for them to return before making enough money to pay off this debt. The immigration officials, however, told them that if this was true, then they were not qualified to come to Japan to study in the first place. They simply refused to do anything about these complaints.

Theoretically, these trainees are not international migrant workers. Because they are technically "students," neither the Vietnamese associations which arrange to send trainees overseas, nor the Japanese companies which accept them, are subject to labor laws. In other words, both the Vietnamese and Japanese governments ignore the plight of these people—some of whom wind up as illegal migrant workers, though holding the fancy legal title of "foreign trainee."



Vietnamese Trainees. 30,000 Vietnamese trainees have come to Japan over

16 years

JITCO (the Japan International Training Cooperation Organization) consists of officials from five main government ministries, including the Ministry of Justice; the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare; and the Ministry of Economics, Trade and Industry. [2] JITCO has issued its goals and guidelines in its "Operative Manual for Sending Organizations." [3] The manual states that the purpose of Japan's foreign trainee and internship program is to foster the development of human resources in ways that would contribute to the industrial development of other nations. This would be done by having trainees acquire the knowledge, professional techniques, and skills of Japanese industry and technology. As they say in the beginning of the manual: [4]

The Japanese Industrial Training Program (ITP) and Technical Internship Program (TIP) aim at human resource development that contributes to industrial development in individual countries through the transfer of Japanese industrial and professional knowledge, skills and technical expertise by accepting many young and middle-aged workers from other countries into Japan.

These programs have been designed to be useful for trainees for ITP and TIP technical interns to improve their occupational lives through acquisition of skills in Japan and being able to demonstrate those skills after they return to their countries. These programs are also for the development of companies and industries that send trainees and technical interns, and additionally for sending companies to invigorate their enterprise activities through making use of the knowledge know-how and technologies of trainees and technical interns after they return to their home countries. The trainees, technical interns and sending companies rate the programs highly because they get successful results.



JITCO's pledge

The intention is for trainees to have direct guidance from company management and to learn about Japanese management philosophies, administration, and production, and acquire the basics of human resource management: [5]

Trainees are similar to students from overseas with regard to matters such as "learning" technology, skills and knowledge. However the learning site is not a school such as a university, but rather facilitates knowledge acquisition through working at companies. Over a long period, Japanese companies and industries have created a human resources development method that stresses on-the-job training (OJT). This human resource development method has consistently been given high marks internationally as one of [the] main reasons why Japanese companies and industries have achieved high productivity and strong international competitive power. Trainees and technical interns who have completed training at workplaces in companies using the OJT method under ITP and TIP and have then returned to their home countries are therefore expected to play active roles as talented workers who can contribute to the development of their companies, industries and ultimately their countries by using acquired technologies and skills.

However, the following cautionary caveat is also added: [6]

There are, however, signs of the system becoming more oriented toward the dispatch of labor. Its use for profit can be seen in the cases of some sending organizations and sending companies, with some cases of inappropriate dispatching, as well as some cases of trainees and technical interns losing their enthusiasm for acquiring technologies and skills, while others enter Japan for the sole purpose of earning income, seizing the chance to escape or disappear. In cases involving inappropriate activities such as these, the system is being used to acquire cheap foreign labor. Not only is the development of international human resources not achieved, but there is also an increased likelihood of illegal work taking place. These matters need to be improved as problems of the system.

This booklet does not, however, say anything about sanctions against Japanese corporations which accept illegal foreign labor. This sounds like “blaming the victim”—only penalizing the sending side and not the receiving side. But we must remember that this “trainee” program was started by Japan in order to more easily import foreign unskilled labor (which has been illegal since the late 1960s). In other words, this program was started for the convenience of Japan and not foreign countries.

“TRAINING COMPANIES” INCLUDE THE TOYOTA CONGLOMERATE

One of the best known labor-exporting organizations in Vietnam is the Cocyan Overseas Labor Agency, with main offices located in Ho Chi Minh City. M Factory, as well as many other Toyota subsidiaries, have been receiving Vietnamese trainees from this outlet for some time. Cocyan has sent over 500 trainees to over 600 companies. These include primarily Toyota-affiliated subcontractors such as machine, metal, and plastic industries in central Japan. In sum, it has sent over forty percent of all Vietnamese trainees in Japan.

The Cocyan Overseas Labor Agency arose from the Eirain Textile Development Company, a Gifu Prefecture-based enterprise which produces women's clothing and embroidery. Cocyan grew out of a project that Eirain Textile Development launched in order to sponsor Vietnamese translators. Still, it must be mentioned that the Eirain Textile Development Company had already been in the business of accepting trainees even before the Foreign Training-Internship Program started in 1993. The Eirain Textile Development Company has organized several business associations and cooperatives to accept overseas trainees. These include “The G-Net Cooperative,” “The Central Gifu Prefecture Textile Integration Cooperative,” the “Gifu Textile Development System Cooperative,” and the “Gifu Sewing Technical Cooperative.” Other cooperatives are all located within the same company and share the same telephone and fax (except The G-Net Cooperative which handles business differently than the others).

Complaints about these sending companies are numerous. Currently the Japan office of Cocyan is operating in Ichinomiya City in Aichi Prefecture. Cocyan gathers trainees in Vietnam, and these students are introduced to their places of employment through cooperatives which belong to the Eirain Textile Development Company. According to Assistant Director Kurematsu, many complaints about the Labor Union Association in Aichi Prefecture are received from trainees who were sent to their jobs by the Akebono Cooperative of Toyama Prefecture. The recruiting company ABIC, which recruited trainees through Eirain, changed its name to the Attain Cooperative Association and restructured the company.

Some examples of the kinds of inequities these Vietnamese labor-exporting organizations foster include having trainees receive overtime wages of ¥600 per hour (this is up to 25% below the minimum normal hourly wage of ¥694 in the area). The company also collected airfare twice (once from trainees and again from the receiving companies). And after the trainees return to Vietnam they have to pay remuneration. Before leaving for Japan, a trainee has to pay a \$10,000 security deposit. This deposit is not returned completely—the sending-company takes a thirty percent commission.

According to Japanese government statistics, 92,846 people (including some 62,000 Chinese) entered Japan in 2006 with a trainee visa. This is an increase of 9,527 trainees, 11.14% higher than the previous year and double the number from a decade ago. Those who come to Japan to work as trainee-students are exempt from labor law protection for the first year. From the second year on—for two years—they can still work in Japan as interns with almost the same wages as the first year (if they are lucky enough not to get sick and if their factories do not go bankrupt). In Aichi Prefecture, about fifteen or sixteen thousand Chinese—and fifteen or sixteen hundred Vietnamese—are working under these conditions.

At the same time, it is reported that since 2002 some 9,607 trainees have turned up missing in Japan. Since they cannot return loans on their security deposits (about one million yen) or repay other expenses to their agencies, when they get back their passports—which were taken away by the agencies during the three year training period—about two thousand trainees each year have fled their agencies and have become illegal immigrants. Those people become unskilled laborers at the bottom of the workforce in the automotive or IT industries. Such small-scale factories provide the worst working conditions, and no Japanese, not even Japanese temporary laborers, would work in them.

According to the intern system, students can be trained not only in factories but also at commercial gardens, crop fields, dairies, fisheries, and hog and poultry farms. In August, 2006, a 26 year-old Chinese man who was “training” at a hog farm in Kisarazu City in Chiba Prefecture, stabbed and killed a staff member of the training agency. His basic monthly salary was ¥65,000 and overtime was ¥450 per hour. Even though he worked hard, he could not save more than ¥100,000. At the time he committed murder, he was about to be sent back home after he requested that his agency change his work place. Who could blame him for being troubled when we think of the loan he took out to come to Japan?

On top of that, two months before this incident, a 38-year-old Chinese man was shot by the police in Tochigi Prefecture. He worked at a construction company as a trainee. However, even though he was coming to the end of his training period, he still was not able to make enough money to pay off the loan he took out in China. At the time he was shot he was one of those “missing person” trainees. Stopped by the police for questioning, he tried to run away and was shot by the police. The Japanese society which invited him to fill its need for cheap labor killed him as if he were a common criminal. How selfish is Japanese society! I think that such actions are accepted because of Japanese racial discrimination toward Asians. This is the same kind of racial discrimination seen in the Korean Massacre during the Great Kantō Earthquake of 1923. [7]

PLUNDERING AND EXTRACTING FROM ASIA

The three Vietnamese workers at M Factory are living on just ¥30,000 per month for food and other expenses. Although they have had many difficulties, they have received support from the Labor Union Association of Aichi Prefecture and they were able to save ¥400,000 over the last three years. Yet even now they do not know what will happen at the end of their journey. When I asked, “Do you wish to work longer in Japan?” the three said, “We do.” Other people returned to Vietnam. One was a man who married a Japanese woman. All come to Japan with hope. If they return to Vietnam with more loans than when they left their country, they would only have a bad image of Japan. Previous labor migrants—such as those from Japan's Tohoku farming area—at least could survive. [8] Mr. Kurematsu says, “We Japanese are heavily dependent on foreign labor now, so we must organize an association to support them.”

If we are plundering the countries of Asia, this is no different than the colonial ideology of the “harmony of the five races” that we once espoused. [9] The Labor Union Association of Aichi Prefecture is requesting the Nagoya Immigration Bureau to improve and control the current system that finds sending and receiving agencies and cooperatives conspiring with each other, allowing for all kinds of illegal practices.

Chairman Sakai Toru of the steering committee of the Nagoya Communal Union explained these trainees' weak position because once they are fired, they are forced to leave Japan. He was once a contract-employee himself for a Toyota affiliate, and for a while was a temporary worker sent out from an employment agency. Once he even became homeless. In other words, his is the voice of the young working poor. Just before their departure from Japan, many of foreign trainees come into Sakai's union asking for help to extend their stay in Japan. Usually the union is unable to contact trainees directly because trainees and interns are prohibited to have cell phones, and their letters are opened and checked by their agencies.

One Chinese woman who worked for a small sewing factory consulted the union. She told Sakai that factory managers had warned foreign workers not to contact anyone outside of the factory. They were prohibited from falling in love. Absolute obedience to the head of the factory was the rule. There could be no organizing or collective bargaining. She was threatened with being sent back to China at her own expense if she violated these rules. This is medieval!

Small companies with less than fifty workers—like the one where this woman works—can accept three first year trainees every year. However, there is no restriction on the number of second-year trainees they can have. As a result, this sewing factory has eighteen Chinese trainees, while there are only three Japanese employees. There are two hundred hours of overtime every month, and after midnight there are only Chinese operating the factory—in front of a surveillance camera.

In an extreme case, a company took ¥200,000 and started a subsidiary. Its business is described as "Providing counseling for running a foreign trainee enterprise and temporary staffing agency." This crooked company takes advantage of the sham of the trainee system.

The Temporary Assignment Labor Services Law and the Foreign Training-Internship Program are a disgrace to Japanese society.

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Notes

[1] This is actually more intrusive than it might appear at first glance as health insurance cards are often used as de facto ID's in Japan.

[2] This is the Ministry formerly known internationally as MITI.

[3] This 64 page booklet was released in 2004. An English version is available at http://www.jitco.or.jp/english/overview/english_manuals.html (then click on sendorg_manual_English.pdf). For the quotes that Kamata uses in the next few paragraphs, I have used this translation as I believe it captures in their own words the flavor of what the organization is trying to accomplish and the language in which its ideas were conveyed to many trainee/workers.

[4] Manual cited above, p. ii. In the interest of clarity, I have quoted from the manual a bit more extensively than in Kamata's original.

[5] Manual cited above, p. 1.

[6] Manual cited above, p. ii.

[7] The Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923 destroyed much of Tokyo and the surrounding area, and more than 100,000 people died, though the exact numbers may be higher. In the chaos and social upheaval that followed, an estimated two to three thousand Koreans were killed after rumors spread that they were looting and poisoning wells. The police and army were accused of doing little to quell the vigilante mobs attacking Koreans, and the incident is still a sensitive issue in the Japanese Korean community today.

[8] Kamata is referring to the influx of workers to the cities from the rural areas in Japan in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. These tales of hardship comprise much of Japanese popular culture, even today. His point, however, is that being Japanese, these internal migrants at least had a chance to eke out a life for themselves.

[9] This phrase, "gozoku kyowa", literally the "harmony of the five races" [of Asia], was widely used in the 1930s and 40s as a justification for Japan's attempts to colonize Korea, Manchuria, China and other parts of Asia.