

Below the Surface

Japan's Foreign Workforce

Ronaldo N. is waiting. Waiting for a phone call that would bring him back to the construction site where he used to work for 12 years. In December he was temporarily discharged from his employment. For the time being, he has tried to sustain his family of four by packing lunch boxes in a convenience store. "My wife and I were packing lunch boxes even on New Year's Eve," he says in broken Japanese.

Ancestry as entrance ticket

Ronaldo is a Brazilian *nikkeijin*. In Japan, *nikkeijin* literally means: a person with ties to Japan; the term is used to describe persons of Japanese descent. Up until the third generation, *nikkeijin* are allowed to stay in Japan on long-term visas that include an unlimited work permit. This system is what makes the *nikkeijin* a highly attractive workforce for Japanese employers, and the largest group is the 300,000 strong Brazilian *nikkeijin*. They often work under temporary contracts for the big names in the automobile, heavy, and electronic industries. These workers have taken over Japan's 3K jobs, the ones that are *kiken* (dangerous), *kitsui* (tough) or *kitanai* (dirty). *nikkeijin* are the only foreign workers legally allowed to do so.

The 1990 revision of Japan's Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act introduced the *nikkeijin* visa. Back then, politicians argued that *nikkeijin* who wanted to visit family in Japan should be granted a permit to stay in Japan that exceeds the 90 days of short-term visitors. They furthermore should be given the chance to support their stay in Japan by taking up some part-time jobs. Even



within the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) which brought this law revision, nowadays it would be hard to find any politician bold enough to deny that the *nikkeijin* visa was a first step for Japan to open its doors to labor migration.

A non-immigration country

Up until then—and officially even today—Japan's migration policy is based on two pillars: "labor migration exclusively of the highly skilled" and "labor migration on a temporary basis only." As a result, Japan's foreign population amounts to a mere 2.2 million. This is 1.7 percent of the population—an extraordinarily low percentage compared to other OECD nations. The largest groups of foreign residents in Japan are Koreans and Chinese. Both groups have about 600,000 registered residents in Japan. Most Koreans are descendents of workers who came to Japan as forced labor during World War II. Most Chinese are newcomer migrants. They come as students, or as holders of the highly contentious trainee visa.

Trainee system faces end

Officially a part of developmental aid measures, Japan allows companies to hire foreign trainees for a period of up to three years. Ideally foreign trainees serve as transmitters of new skills and knowledge to their homelands. However, they hardly acquire any new skills or knowledge while working in Japan in the first place. What happens more often than not is that foreign trainees are exploited as cheap labor. One case that illustrated this problem was a lawsuit launched by Chinese trainees against their employer, a strawberry farmer on Kyushu Island. The case made headlines across the nation in 2008, bringing home the reality of the situation to Japanese households.

Amnesty International and even the Japan Business Federation, Nippon Keidanren, have long argued for a reassessment of the trainee system. While humanitarian arguments and concerns for the reputation of Japan's business community did not manage to bring about a policy change, the recent economic downturn seems to have done so: In 2007, more than 100,000 youngsters were hired on trainee visas

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by companies in Japan; by November 2008 their number had fallen to less than half that. Moreover, many of the trainees currently in residence in Japan have decided to cut their stays short and return to their homelands.

How Japan will work

Repatriation is a trend that can also be observed among Japan's *nikkeijin* workers. For Japan, this is a real problem. Only recently has Japan come to cherish its foreign workforce. Decades of falling birthrates and rising life expectancies lead to population aging and shrinking. It is the working age population (15–64 years), in particular, that has seen a sharp numerical decline. Now one simple question arises: How will Japan work from now on?

Sociologist Chikako Usui (University of Missouri, St. Louis) proposes that Japan needs to restructure its economy: using less manpower in a post-Fordist economy while keeping up or even increasing its productivity. A less radical suggestion comes from LDP Politician Taro Kono. He stresses that women and the so-called NEET (Not in Employment, Education or Training) need to contribute more to the national workforce. And, finally, there's the foreign workforce. Why not recruit workers on a global labor market if they are no longer available on the national one? Another LDP Politician, Hidenao Nakagawa, recently called for increasing Japan's foreign-born population up to 10 percent of the overall population by 2050.

The avenue Japan seems to be going down in light of its demographic change takes into

account many of the diverse policy options that are being added to the political agenda on an almost daily basis. Labor migration also plays a significant role. In February the first wave of Indonesian care-workers who came to Japan under a newly tied bilateral Economic Partnership Agreement took up their work in Japanese nursing homes for the elderly. Care-workers from the Philippines are expected to follow suit this spring.

Government steps in

Meanwhile, foreign workers already in residence have started to mobilize and make their voices heard: On December 21, a group of 250 protestors took the streets of Hamamatsu in Shizuoka Prefecture. They carried banners reading: "Save work and life" and "Don't allow disposal of workers". The Cabinet Office reacted quickly by establishing a new department in early January designed to create relief measures for foreign workers in Japan. By ensuring them access to education, accommodation and transitory jobs, the government hopes that migrant families will give living in Japan another chance. Employers are urged to support their foreign workforce by investing in "skill-up" programs. But it remains to be seen whether Japanese employers will be willing to put in the huge amount of extra effort needed into their foreign workforce with Japanese (temporary) workers facing similar hardships—by the end of February, 400,000 temporary workers found themselves without employment.

Ronaldo N. can count his blessings: At least he has not been sacked. He expects to return to his normal workplace by the end of this year. And he sounds optimistic. ■

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