

The Continuation of the Colonial Era

Southeast Asian Laborers in Japan and the Prospects of Internationalism among the Japanese Left

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Southeast Asian Laborers in Japan

Transnational labor has already become an important component of contemporary global capitalism. Developed countries introduce foreign labor to fill gaps in their domestic labor markets, thereby maintaining their advantage in international competition. Under neocolonialism, the unequal international relationships within the global supply chain are built on the plundering of resources and economic intervention in Third World countries. Poverty, unemployment, and inadequate infrastructure force large populations to seek better economic opportunities abroad, yet the return is merely cheap foreign exchange and further exploitation of labor. Meanwhile, these foreign workers are often trapped in low-end manufacturing, agriculture, or service sectors, and face long-term unequal labor, legal, and sanitary conditions compared to local residents.

Japan, as a highly developed capitalist country, is facing severe challenges of population aging and labor shortages, leading to an increasing dependence on foreign labor year by year. According to data from Japan's Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, since 2013, the number of foreign workers has grown annually at a rate of over 10%. By the end of 2024, the total number of foreign workers in Japan had surpassed 2.3 million, marking a 12.4% year-on-year increase and reaching a historic high. Among these foreign workers, those from Vietnam, China, Indonesia, and the Philippines account for as much as 55%, with laborers from Southeast Asia serving as the primary workforce in the lower-tier sectors of society.

However, despite playing an indispensable role in Japan's economic development,

these laborers endure extremely harsh living conditions and long-term unfair oppression and exploitation. First of all, most Southeast Asian workers are engaged in low-skilled, high-intensity jobs such as agriculture, construction, manufacturing, and caregiving, however their wage levels are significantly lower than those of local Japanese workers. Data shows that the average wage of foreign laborers is only 60% of that of local workers, amounting to just 80% of the legally mandated minimum wage, with many workers also facing issues such as wage arrears and illegal deductions. Moreover, the severity of poor working conditions is alarming. Laborers in construction and manufacturing often lack necessary safety measures, resulting in frequent occupational injuries and even fatalities. Workers in the caregiving industry are forced to endure long hours and intense pressure, with their physical and mental health generally in poor condition. In addition, Japan's legal system provides insufficient protection for the rights of foreign laborers. Language barriers and a lack of legal knowledge make it difficult for them to defend their rights when exploited, and many remain silent for fear of losing their jobs or facing retaliation.

Technical Intern Training Program — Modern Slavery

The main culprit behind the deprivation of rightful benefits for these foreign workers is none other than Japan's Technical Intern Training Program, implemented since 1993, along with related immigration regulations. Strictly speaking, the Japanese government does not officially recognize these Southeast Asian laborers as legitimate workers. Instead, it issues them "technical intern visas," defining their status as "technical trainees" and restricting them to so-called "skills training" at specific workplaces. On the surface, Japan claims that this system aims to help foreign workers learn advanced skills and apply them to develop their home countries. However, in reality, Japanese companies not only prevent foreign workers from truly acquiring skills but also treat them as cheap labor to be exploited in the short term. Due to visa restrictions, workers are often rotated among similar job positions under different employers, allowing companies to continuously replace them with cheaper labor through short-term contracts. Since the intern visa is tied to a specific employer, workers are unable to freely change workplaces

or positions. If they attempt to escape or resist, they face the threat of deportation. This system not only strips foreign laborers of their basic labor rights but also places them in a severely marginalized position within Japanese society.

The Immigration Control Act further intensifies the oppression of foreign laborers. Although the Specified Skilled Worker visa provides foreign workers with the opportunity to work legally, it is characterized by short residency periods, high application thresholds, and a lack of comprehensive social security. Workers find it difficult to obtain long-term residency or opportunities for family reunification, and even during their employment, they are unable to enjoy the same welfare benefits as local Japanese workers. Under such a system, the living conditions of foreign laborers in Japan are extremely fragile, and they may fall into hardship at any time due to unemployment, illness, or other unforeseen circumstances.

Unlike some Western countries, Japan's capitalist system has not fully embraced the labor market liberalization brought about by globalization. Instead, through the strengthening of local conservatism, it imposes strict limitations on the mobility and rights of foreign laborers. This conservatism is reflected not only in the government's deprivation of workers' freedom to choose their jobs but also in the Japanese society's exclusionary attitude toward immigrants. The implementation of the Technical Intern Training Program is essentially a joint compromise between global capitalism and local conservatism in Japan: capitalist enterprises gain cheap labor through this system, while the conservative social structure ensures that these foreign workers remain isolated from mainstream society, becoming a marginalized group. The labor flow under the Technical Intern Training Program is, in essence, a continuation of modern slavery and colonialism in international relations. In an invisible manner, it firmly binds Southeast Asian laborers to the bottom of Japan's economy, making them the "new slaves" in the modern capitalist system.

The Continuation of Colonial History

Japan's labor relations with Southeast Asia deeply continue the economic logic of colonial history, essentially forming a "neocolonial" structure centered on resource extraction and labor exploitation. In the first half of the 20th century, Japan, through military expansion, incorporated Southeast Asia into the "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere," forcibly conscripting local laborers to extract strategic resources such as rubber and oil. For example, during the construction of the Burma-Siam Railway in 1942, 60,000 Southeast Asian workers died due to intense labor and harsh conditions. This exploitative model was reconstructed post-war through economic means: Japan continued to maintain control over Southeast Asia's resources through capital export and technological monopolies. In 2022, Japan's direct investment stock in ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) reached 54 trillion yen, accounting for 23% of the region's total foreign investment. Industries such as automobiles and electronics, through industrial chain division, have locked Southeast Asia into low-value-added sectors. For instance, 80% of Thailand's automobile parts exports rely on orders from Japanese companies, forming a dependency relationship within the industrial structure. At the same time, Japan's trade surplus with ASEAN continues to expand, reaching 4.2 trillion yen in 2023. Through high-value exports of industrial goods and low-cost imports of raw materials, Japan is recreating the one-way resource flow reminiscent of the colonial era.

Japan, through economic means and institutional design, has recreated the colonial-era model of resource extraction and labor exploitation in contemporary times. Through Official Development Assistance (ODA), Japan attaches resource-related conditions to infrastructure projects in Southeast Asia. For example, when providing loans for port construction in the Philippines, Japan requires that the country prioritize supplying nickel ore (which accounts for 65% of Japan's battery raw material imports) to Japanese companies. This is essentially a modern version of the colonial resource

concessions. Systemic exploitation has further worsened poverty among Southeast Asian people: Indonesian workers must pay an intermediary fee of about \$7,000 (equivalent to three years of their family income) to work in Japan, while Japanese companies save over 1 trillion yen annually through the use of foreign labor. This wealth transfer mechanism mirrors the extraction of excess profits in colonial economies.

In the face of contemporary colonialism, Japan's left-wing struggles must not be limited to domestic organization and propaganda. Given that the Japanese bourgeoisie's power is already embedded in the exploitation networks between East Asia and Southeast Asia, its stability relies on vertical dominance over the East Asia-Southeast Asia economic system. This dominance is realized through dual alienation—alienating Southeast Asian laborers as “non-citizen” workers at the bottom of local production chains, while simultaneously imprisoning the consciousness of Japan's proletariat in the nationalist cage of “national interest first.” Under the false dichotomy produced by modernized colonial reproduction, Southeast Asian workers in Japan have already become a massive part of the most exploited, lowest class of Japanese society. With the growing radicalization potential in Southeast Asia's anti-colonial struggles, for Japan's left-wing, it is both necessary and urgent to establish a new internationalist alliance for the 21st century.

Political Potential and the Dilemma of Japan's Left

The political enthusiasm of the majority of citizens in Japanese society is generally low, a phenomenon closely tied to their co-optation within the post-war capitalist distribution system. Supported by rapid economic growth and welfare systems, Japanese society has developed a conservative mindset centered on stability and economic benefits, leading citizens to lack motivation and interest in political change. In stark contrast, the Southeast Asian labor force in Japan, due to the systemic exploitation and oppression they endure, possesses latent radical potential. Their working conditions are harsh, wages are low, and they face high instability in their visa status, which together foster their political

consciousness. However, this potential has not been transformed into actual resistance, as their dependence on economic conditions and fear of deportation make it difficult for them to organize and express political demands. Japan's immigration and labor policies effectively suppress the collective action capacity of workers, preventing their political potential from being fully realized.

Against this backdrop, Japan's left-wing has attempted to intervene in labor issues in various ways. One key strategy has been the "immigration struggle" (入管闘争), focusing on the oppressive policies within Japan's immigration system, particularly regarding the detention and deportation of so-called "illegal stayers." Left-wing organizations have organized protests, legal support, and public advocacy to highlight the unfair treatment of migrants by the Immigration Services Agency of Japan. In addition, some left-wing groups have provided legal assistance and social services to help laborers protect their basic rights. These citizen groups, supported by the left, offer visa consultation, legal litigation support, and language training for foreign workers. These efforts have alleviated the workers' difficulties to some extent, but due to limited resources and scope, their impact has been confined, failing to create a broad labor movement. Moreover, the internal fragmentation of the labor force and fear of risk often result in a wait-and-see attitude when it comes to collective action. This situation has led to left-wing support being more focused on individual cases, making it difficult to push for systemic change.

At the same time, Japan's communist organizations have also tried to build solidarity at the international level. A typical example is the collaboration between the Revolutionary Communist League (Chūkaku-ha) and the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU). This cooperation began in 2003 and involved joint actions such as strikes and protests. On the other hand, the Communist League Committee (the "Unification faction") also contributed to the formation of the Asia Action Network, reflecting the

Japanese left-wing's efforts in cross-border collaboration. While maintaining ties with anti-imperialist forces in Korea, Taiwan, and the Philippines, they participated in international consultations through the International League of People's Struggles (ILPS).

This cross-national solidarity work showcases the Japanese left's attempts to form broader alliances in the fight against imperialism and labor exploitation, highlighting a recognition that global capital and imperialist policies require a coordinated international response. Despite the challenges of organizing within Japan, these efforts at transnational collaboration are an attempt to strengthen the political and economic struggle against the exploitation faced by both local and migrant labor forces.

However, the practical effect of these collaborations is limited, mostly manifested as a symbolic gesture of cross-national solidarity. Although the immigration struggles and cross-national cooperation have provided support and solidarity for Southeast Asian workers to some extent, these efforts have not sufficiently organized the workers to tap into their inherent political potential. Under the circumstances where the Japanese bourgeoisie has deeply embedded its interests in the Southeast Asian region, the future of the Japanese socialist revolution is inseparable from the development of anti-colonial forces across the East Asia-Southeast Asia region. Although the communist cross-national cooperation has taken an important step, if it can further deepen the collaboration mechanism, integrating the ideas of the revolutionary line with practical material resources highly relevant to rebellious actions, it may lay a more solid foundation for future united actions.

Arrival of Action—Internationalism in the New Century

In political history, the mobility of transnational labor and its local distribution have made it an indispensable force resource in revolutionary struggles. Communists, in their confrontation with the bourgeois state apparatus, can efficiently transfer key

information and materials across borders by leveraging the unique advantages of transnational labor. The economic needs of labor and the resource flow of transnational networks make them an ideal medium for the transmission of materials. Through remittances, mail, or carrying items personally, they can transfer funds, equipment, or other supplies to revolutionary organizations, injecting substantial momentum into the revolutionary struggle. The mobility and cross-border identity of transnational labor provide natural cover for the transmission of information. They frequently cross borders, and carrying luggage or packages is an ordinary act in daily life, making it difficult for the state apparatus to pay special attention. This concealment makes labor an ideal channel for transmitting revolutionary propaganda materials and intelligence. With this mobility, communists can establish an efficient and secure information transmission network, avoiding direct exposure to the intense surveillance of the bourgeois state apparatus.

However, to establish a more comprehensive underground network, relying solely on the mobility of labor and the ability to transmit materials is not enough; it also requires a solid mass base and support from regional nodes. The "cell" organizational model adopted by Japanese communist groups in universities and trade unions, or the establishment of bases disguised as NGOs or other de-politicized civil groups, all need to cultivate more members with political potential as the foundation of the network. By setting up foundations or other de-politicized civil groups that outwardly appear unrelated to their cause, they can provide legal aid, language training, and life support for transnational laborers. These activities not only superficially improve the living conditions of laborers but also, in reality, provide opportunities for the vanguard organizations to make contact with and train activists. Through the selection and education of these activists, they can establish disciplined political relationships and gradually build a covert labor network. At the same time, transnational cooperation is key to the effective operation of the underground network. Japanese communists need to actively establish

close connections with anti-imperialist forces in Southeast Asia and other regions.

Through the entry and exit activities of transnational laborers, both sides can transmit key information, strategic intelligence, and financial support.

In conclusion, the anti-imperialist and anti-colonial situation within the East Asia-Southeast Asia region and the connections and cooperation between various communist organizations are closely intertwined. In the current global capitalist era, which increasingly harvests geostrategic industries, the left's immediate task is to achieve practical, material connections to foster more promising resistance forces. We look forward to Japanese communist organizations promoting the formation of an anti-imperialist and anti-colonial front with a more open attitude.