

Education in contemporary Japan

1. The current situation of privatization of public education and the focus of struggles

Similarly, privatization of public education in Japan has been precipitously promoted in recent years. Higher education and pre-school education are the first targets of the education privatization.

In 2004, every national university was turned into “a national university corporation”—a sort of independent administrative agency. As the subsidies from the government have been cut year by year, universities have become increasingly dependent upon donations from for-profit corporations. The government started to impose more and more draconian control over universities; the autonomy of the universities was severely destroyed. The tuition fee is now 15 times higher than three decades ago. As the student loans displaced the public scholarship system, students from poor families have been shut out from higher education.

Public nursery centers were rapidly privatized; there are now more private nursery centers than public ones. The new administration of Democratic Party of Japan is planning to create new facilities, combining nursery centers and kindergartens, and then to privatize them. With the privatization of pre-school education, the installation standard and the child staff ratio were deregulated. This resulted in frequent accidents and sharp increase of non-regular employees with horrible working conditions.

With regard to primary and secondary education—private operators have not been thus far introduced in public funded schools. The Ministry of Education has resisted the representatives of business circles in the Council of Regulatory Reform and other government’s consultative bodies who have strongly demanded establishment of a system like charter schools in the United States. The Ministry naturally wants to defend its jurisdiction and vested interest, not from the standpoint of defending children’s interests.

However, there are already several cracks in the existing system. First, joint-stock corporations have been admitted to operate high schools in so-called “Special Zone for Structural Reform.”* Some of them use people with no teaching credential as “teachers.” They get high profit by using dispatched workers and contract workers.

***Special Zone for Structural Reform:** a designated area exempt from certain regulations, based on proposals put forward by local governments, so as to experimentally implement deregulation, to establish a “successful model of structural reform” and to induce deregulation in the rest of the country.

Second, various services in schools—from school lunches and security guards to marking, rating and analysis of achievement tests—are now contracted out to private companies. Recently more and more municipalities promote after school or Saturday tutoring sessions in cooperation with private cramming schools. With introduction of English class to elementary schools, increased number of Assistant Language Teachers (ALT) work in Japanese schools, many of whom are dispatched or contracted illegally.

The business circles have felt such development of education privatization too slow. So, they are now pushing ahead with *Doshu-sei* (Wider Area Local Government System), the wholesale privatization of the government system or the “ultimate structural reform” as stated by the Japan Business Federation.

Doshu-sei is a wider area local government system in which there will be only seven to nine merged prefectural governments—*Do* and *Shus*— instead of today’s 43 Prefectures. With introduction of *Doshu-sei*, the Central government will be reduced to military, foreign, and inner security administration and *Do* and *Shus* will concentrate on construction and maintenance operations of

infrastructures for monopolistic corporations. Social security, healthcare and education will be drastically cut and left to municipalities.

The most important aspect of introduction of *Doshu-sei* is firing of all of 3.4 million public employees at once and rehiring around 2.75 million after screening. Those who “lack public conscience” and “do not have nerve and ability to perform the work twice with half of the workforce” will never be rehired. Such massive firing scheme is an exact copy of the privatization of Japan National Railways in 1980s. This is meant to dismantle Jichiro (Prefectural and Municipal Workers Union) and Nikkyoso (Japan Teachers’ Union)—the pivotal unions in the public employee labor movement.

If introduced, *Doshu-sei* would result in the rapid charterization of public schools, more “flexible standard” of installation, staffing, teacher credential etc. and lowering of the education standard.

2 Neoliberal Reform of Education including National Standardized Test

In 1961, Japanese government introduced the National Academic Aptitude Test. Nikkyoso strongly opposed it and fought back until the Ministry of Education stopped the National Test in 1967. During this period, the major objective of the National Test was hardening of governmental control of the contents of education by enforcing the Curriculum Guidelines, which had been changed from a mere “tentative proposal” to legally binding guidelines in 1957. In several lawsuits against the National Test, the central issue was the educational freedom of teachers and the legal binding force of the Curriculum Guidelines.

In 2007, the National Academic Aptitude Test was restarted under the pretext that decline in academic performance had emerged as a social issue. But the real objective of the National Test 2007 was quite different from that of 1960s’. In Japan the government’s standardized control on the contents and methods of education have been already substantially achieved. The today’s National Test is certainly meant to evaluate schools and to introduce the school-choice system and preferential budget allocation for high achieving schools and someday the voucher system in which each school gets its budget proportionate to the number of “students’ intake.”

Contrary to the publicity, “academic improvement of underachieved students,” the National Test is used to heavily prioritize the budget allocation to a handful of elitist schools, in order to enhance international competitiveness of big corporations.

Decades ago, every students from every social background was involved in a tough competition to get into a good school—so-called “examination war.” Today, however, the education administration intentionally makes innumerable early dropouts from the competition. The ex-chair of the Curriculum Council of the Ministry of Education blatantly expressed the real intention of the ruling class: “Underachievers remain underachievers. So what? We have wasted our energy for the underachieved. The energy must be transferred to boost the performance of high-achievers. It’s enough for the ungifted to get unassuming personality.”

In urban areas, the school choice system has been adopted more and more by education boards: children need not go to nearby schools any more. This system is meant to create disparity among public schools, introducing “market principle.” Some municipalities prioritize their education budget to “high-achieving schools.”

Japanese education laws do not yet stipulate punitive measures on underachieving schools as in the US and the UK, including school closing, lay-off or transfer of teachers, charterization etc. However, the schools that cannot get enough children are already targeted to be closed.

In Japanese compulsory education system—elementary and middle schools—the graduation and the promotion are given automatically upon age and class attendance. There are basically no holdovers. In high schools, however, around 2 % of the students—60 to 70 thousand— drop out each year. Disparity among schools and ability grouping within schools traumatize students, lower their motivation and make them drop out. Student from poor families are first to be thrown away.

There is in Japan no provision similar to Section 9528 of NCLB, under which schools are obliged to send personal information of students to the military. Many people believe that the very existence of the Self Defense Forces violates the Constitution, which stipulates renunciation of war. Members of JIU, whose main longstanding slogan has been “Never send our students to the battlefields again” are strongly resisting against recruitment advertisements on school walls, work-study program in the SDF facilities and so on. Nevertheless, job shortage under the global economic crisis is now driving young people into the SDF; also in Japan the poverty draft is working.

3. Transformation of Education System in Recent Years

(1) Revision of the Fundamental Law on Education and Instillation of Patriotism

The biggest event in recent transformation of the Japanese education system was the revision of the Fundamental Law on Education, which openly changed the fundamental concepts of education from peaceful and liberal ideals to reactionary ones.

After World War II, the Fundamental Law on Education was legislated in combination with the new Constitution in 1947 based on the repentance of the education before the end of WWII, which had been build on the Imperial Rescript on Education with its “highest virtue”—i.e. to give one’s own life to the Emperor. The Fundamental Law on Education of 1947 stipulated “the full development of personality” as the purpose of education and proclaimed a desire to “educate a people who seek truth and peace.” It prohibited “unreasonable control” by the educational administration and guaranteed the educational freedom. The law was extremely important for teachers who promoted peace education and fought back against intensification of governmental control on education.

With the revision of the Fundamental Law on Education in 2007, however, the fundamental concepts of education were changed to completely opposite direction. New “purpose of education” includes “to foster respect for Japanese traditions and culture”, “to nurture an attitude to love our country and the spirit to contribute to the international peace.” “Education as a right” was changed to “education to make useful persons for the state.” The provisions for strict distinction between education and educational administration and limitation of the jurisdiction of the latter to maintenance of the educational facilities were also revised. Although the letter of “unreasonable control” remains, the interpretation of it is now completely different.

After the revision of the Fundamental Law on Education, “the objective of education” of each school system (elementary, middle, high school, university etc.) under School Education Act was also changed. Under the new Curriculum Guidelines, not only moral education class is underscored but moral contents are infused into every subject. The textbooks of Japanese in elementary schools contain the birth-myth of the nation. The math textbooks also encourage “patriotism” “community spirit” and so on.

The middle school revisionist history textbook that glorifies Japanese aggressive wars increased its share of the market. After the unified lower and higher secondary education schools and special needs schools in Tokyo and Sugunami Ward in Tokyo, schools under Ehime Prefectural Board of Education, Yokohama City also adopted the revisionist textbook.

The revision of the Fundamental Law on Education has an adverse effect on the lawsuits over the refusal to stand up and to sing *Kimigayo*, and dismissal and rejection of post-retirement workers.* The Directive of October 10, which is nothing but an fragrant violation of the provision of “unreasonable control” of Fundamental Law, has been repeatedly legitimized in by the reactionary judges.

***Post-retirement workers:** Although retirement age of Japanese public employees is 60, the pensionable age was changed from 60 to 65. So, the government promised to guarantee retirement age employees’ post-retirement jobs at least until they reach 65.

****Directive of October 10:** a directive by Tokyo Metropolitan Board of Education of October 10, 2003 to the principals requiring to order teachers to stand up and sing *Kimigayo* (national anthem) with detailed

methods of enforcing the graduation and entrance ceremonies including display of *Hinomaru* (national flag) in the center of the stage, the word of command by the ceremony master to start singing *Kimigayo* in unison.

(2) Educational Policy of the DPJ Administration

The expectation of many teachers for substantial change under the administration of the Democratic Party of Japan was already destroyed. The DPJ government has improved not even a slightest bit of the former government's education policies—nationalism and merit system and sparse education budget. During the general election campaign in summer 2009, the DPJ promised abolition of the extremely unpopular Teacher License Renewal System and the revision of the National Academic Aptitude Test so as to get support from members of Nikkyoso (Japan Teachers' Union). After DPJ took office, however, the abolition of Teacher License Renewal System was indefinitely postponed. The National Academic Aptitude Test was said to be changed to a "sampling method." However, many schools were induced to participate in the National Test "voluntarily" and 70% of schools eventually took part. The National Test was substantially maintained, with less public money and more teachers workloads—marking and so on.

The DPJ administration decided to pay tuition fees of public high schools from public funds. A part of private high school fees are also to be paid by the state. However, the schools for Korean residents were excluded from this funding; the ethnic educations for minorities are thus oppressed. The new funding system is a preparation to introduce a school voucher system.

Currently, the standard of class size and student/teacher ratio are stipulated by the state law and one third of the wages of teachers are directly borne by the central government and the rest of them by the revenue shares from the central government's budget. The DPJ administration is aiming to deregulate criterion of class size and change the whole portion of direct funding to the revenue shares, which have no designated purpose.

These measures would only result in increased irregular teaching jobs.

The DPJ won the election creating a liberal atmosphere. So, some of teachers expected a change in educational policies, especially in the coercion of *Hinomaru* and *Kimigayo*. Nevertheless the Education Minister of the DPJ was quick to destroy this illusion. Responding a question in the Parliament, he made clear that the new administration would "thoroughly carry out guidance on National Flag and Anthem." He also ordered to raise the *Hinomaru* at each school, celebrating the 20th anniversary of the current Emperor's reign. The DPJ has certainly submitted a bill to re-revise the Fundamental Law on Education: however, downright patriotism was incorporated much more overtly than the former LDP administration's legislation.

The true nature of the DPJ administration was shown in its unprecedented oppression on Hokkyoso (Hokkaido Teachers Union), the most powerful and militant prefectural union in Nikkyoso, which had launched a strike against the introduction of teacher evaluation system and persistently refused to stand up and sing *Kimigayo* in front of *Hinomaru*.

The prosecution under the DPJ Justice Minister arrested and detained the Hokkyoso leaders and repeatedly raided the headquarters of Hokkyoso, on the ground that Hokkyoso had donated a political fund to a DPJ member of the Parliament. The court ruled that Hokkyoso guilty. The Minister of Education directed to carry out overt union busting. In every part of Hokkaido, the principals and other administrators interviewed union members one by one and forced to provide detailed information about the union activities. This was a massive coercion of betrayal unparalleled in the Japanese history after WWII.

Also the planned abolition of the boards of education is very serious. Although the boards of education were said to become fig leaves of bureaucratic control of Education Ministry after the abolition of popular election of board members, the boards have supposedly represented the principle of "the independence of the education administration from the general administration" and thus the boards have not been able to completely dump "political neutrality of education." Therefore, the far-

right governors and mayors, including Tokyo Governor Ishihara, have concentrated his effort to replace members of the education boards with their loyal followers, in order to adopt the revisionist history textbook. Direct control of education administration would further accelerate the recent trend of top-down enforcement of education policies, directly putting teachers under the general administration's chain of command. The planned successor organizations of the board of educations, "the Education Inspection Committees," are conceived after the model of the notorious Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted); it would intensify surveillance or education workers, not check and balance.

The DPJ's Kan administration stated its intention to advocate much more openly the agenda of monopoly capital that its predecessor: corporate tax reduction combined with consumption tax increase, sales talks by cabinet members to export nuclear power plants, the bullet train system and other infrastructures and so on. As the fiscal crisis deepens, the DPJ administration is aiming at massive dismissals and pay cuts of public employees. It has escalated neoliberal education reform. The so-called "Local Sovereignty Reform" is a prelude to the *Doshu-sei* and a full-fledged privatization of education.

4. A striking intensification of administrative control and a drastic deterioration of working conditions

(1) Intensified control over teachers

Over the last ten years, the administrative control over teachers has been strikingly intensified. The school management based on New Public Management (NPM) which advocates the contract-type system on principle that merits will be rewarded and demerits punished is actually the privatization of education in the broad sense. The private sector management has been brought into public school administration and is now paving the way to charter schools:

First, we describe about the introduction of Teacher Evaluation System (TES) and Merit-based Pay Raise System. The "Education Personnel Evaluation System in Tokyo" was introduced in April 2000 as a pioneering teacher evaluation system and has spread all through the country. This is the shift from conventional prior control based on a standard (traditional bureaucratic system) to "management of result" based on the NPM system that emphasizes ex-post assessment. Under these circumstances, teachers now undertake a central role in responsibility for the result of education released to the market.

The Teacher Evaluation Systems vary slightly from region to region in design of institutional arrangements. Let's take a look at the case in Tokyo. Teachers are evaluated in two different ways. One is so-called self-assessment system. A principal decides the school management policy at the beginning of a school year, and every teacher has to set a personal goal according to the policy. Then at the end of a school year, he/she has to turn in a self-rated report. The other one is a performance evaluation system. A principal evaluates every teacher's ability, performance and emotion in respective domains of educational activities and performs comprehensive evaluations of four stages: A, B, C and D. Teachers are judged by a principal whether they could have made appropriate curriculum instructions, given appropriate guidance and counseling for students and managed classroom operations. The outcome evaluation is reflected in pay raise, sometimes in biannual bonuses. If you are given a D, you are to be a punishable person obliged to attend a Teaching Improvement Program (about this program we discuss later).

These systems are introduced to destroy the unity and cooperation of education

workers at their work places, and so as to control their education activities in the direction the government wishes.

Secondly, reorganization of school management system has undergone dramatic change. Middle management personnel have been introduced and their wages are paid in a different standard from other ordinary teachers. They are next to a principal and a vice-principal, and titled as an executive teacher or a leading teacher (though titles differ from region to region). In Tokyo, the wages on job classification were totally adopted.

For a considerable time after WWII, it was quite natural for most of the teachers to think it their ideal job to engage with their students in a classroom. To head for supervisory job was, as a matter of course, out of question. Teachers were thought to be equal in authority and responsibility. Their wage system was the seniority-based pay in which salary rose accordance with length of service. Under such circumstances, the reactionary proposals of principals were overwhelmingly rejected at faculty meetings. Such distinctive working conditions, however, became a target for criticism. The authority brought in a pyramid structure, namely a top-down system, into school management clearly intending to sever corporative relationship among teachers.

Thirdly, we explain about the Teaching Improvement Program. Local education boards had been entrusted with judging under their own standards the competence of their teachers, and were responsible for providing training for improvement. However, boards of education are now required by law to provide improvement training for teachers deemed “lacking in teaching ability”. The education ministry has listed examples of teaching practices that are regarded as lacking teaching ability. Teachers considered ill-qualified are sent to the training center and have to receive intensive training of so-called “improvement training programs” including mock lessons. If these teachers are judged to be the failure after undergoing as much as two years of training, education boards can take such measures as transferring or dismissing them.

NEZU Kimiko, a middle school teacher who got punishment for six month suspension three times for remains firm in rejecting Hinomaru and Kimigayo had a good reputation for her excellent teaching ability, especially for ability to bring out students’ independence in mind and power of judgment. However, she was once notified as “lacking in teaching ability.” in 2001. A part of far right parents complained hercourse contents, which included lessons on “the wartime comfort women”. The Education Board repeatedly inspected her class. Her refusal to obey the Board’s improvement order was the reason of the notification as “lacking in teaching ability” This event shows us the risk of arbitrary administration to eliminate the teachers who do not bow to the education administration.

Fourthly, a Teacher License Renewal System came into a full-scale operation in 2009, following the revision of teaching license regulations in June 2007. Under the revised regulations, teaching licenses are now valid for a period of 10 years. Teachers who received licenses prior to the introduction of this new system are now also required to complete renewal courses every 10 years. The object teachers are obliged to take a teaching license renewal course of 30 hours at universities or some other designated institutes. Teaching license renewal courses must be completed prior to the end of one’s 10-year license period. If they fail to pass the qualification test, they will lose their licenses. The attendants bear full expenses, and moreover, they have to find the time to attend the course by their own efforts.

The introduction of this system actually aims to switch over the employment status of teachers to a fixed-term basis. There are some local education boards that offer license renewal courses and give qualification tests in their own rights. But it gives an

appointing power the possibility of eliminating union activists from schools and we think a very dangerous situation growing.

In addition to this evil purpose system, the administration of Democratic Party intends to extend the duration of teacher training courses from the current four years to six years, aiming to differentiate teacher licenses into two classes, regular and professional. The Teacher License Renewal System is also aimed to take away certificates of those teachers who are not obedient to the authority. Even just participating once in a demonstration or a refusal to Hinomaru and Kimigayo ceremony at one time will be a target of this system.

(2) Deteriorated working conditions of teachers

The unions of the Japanese local government workers have no rights to negotiate wage agreement at the labor-management negotiations. The local public bodies are required to establish either a personnel commission or an equity commission, and it makes recommendations on working conditions of local government workers. Personnel commissions have been trying in all their efforts to cut down the level of wages with the excuse that the wages of the public service workers must comply with the appropriate standard of private sector. In addition to this, the drastic cut down of wages was forcibly conducted because of fiscal crisis of local government.

The most serious issues of working conditions for teachers are the long and hard work, the death from a overworking and stress and the sharp increase of mental illness. The long-term absentees in 2008 amounts to 8578 teachers, 0.93% of all teachers, and 63% out of them, that is 5400 teachers, are diagnosed with psychiatric disease.

The Japanese public education workers are exempted from the application of working hour regulation of the Labor Standard Act under the pretext of “independence of education work”. They are not paid for their overtime work, but routinely forced to accept working late at night till 9 or 10 o'clock. They even work at home. Moreover, in many districts, they have to work on Saturday every two weeks to ensure the increased hours of lesson under the new curriculum guidelines.

Teachers are facing severe overwork and job spill. There are lots and lots of work to do besides teaching; making various reports, preparing for school events and ceremonies, supervising extracurricular activities, attending official trainings etc. But the underlying cause is the lack of unity among education workers. They are divided and deprived of their power to stand against the tough problems.

Over the last decade, the number of irregular employment teachers is increased drastically. This is also due to the deregulation. The use of the state subsidies is now at the discretion of local governments and this allowed to hire two irregular working teachers for a salary and benefit of one regular teacher.

The various types of employment are now available for hiring teachers; fix-time hiring, part-time hiring, casual hiring, temporary hiring, rehiring etc. Various treatments and legal bases of irregular working teachers are now making 30 to 50% of all teachers in public schools. The young part-time teachers are earning their livings by working at night as temporary workers. Those ambitious applicants are taking teacher's exams every year, but most of them fail to get the regular employment.

5. Organizing strategy

Under such circumstances, the anger and frustration of education workers are now reaching the limit of their patience, but the existing teachers unions cannot effectively organize their anger and make it a power to fight. The unionization rate is declining a year after year, particularly prominent among young teachers. We would say that there are two big reasons why teachers do not willingly join teachers unions.

In Japan, we have the Beginning Teachers' Training System and first-year teachers are accepted conditionally for a period of one year. Even if they are accepted after a year, teachers have to attend other official trainings every year, and they must terminate training programs with acknowledgement. And at the tenth year, there waits them the notorious Teacher License Renewal System. The young teachers tend to think it a lucky thing that they had been accepted as a "public service worker" in a job-scare world of such economic crisis. Under this administrative structure, a teacher would get negative grade if he/she becomes a member of a teachers union. Therefore, teachers seldom join unions unless there are some compelling reasons.

There are in Japan two major national organization of education workers: Japan Teachers' Union (JTU/Nikkyoso) with 285, 000 members and All-Japan Federation of Teachers' and Staff's Unions (Zenkyo) with 65,000 members. Here is another reason teachers do not have expectations for unions. The leaders of these two big teachers unions are not against the neoliberal reform of education. They are only bowing down to the authority and gave up fighting at the work places. Small wonder teachers cannot recognize the power and unity of unions. Rather, teachers strongly distrust union leaders.

However, in the situation increasingly deteriorating working conditions, teachers feel strong indignation. With the introduction of Merit-based Pay Raise System which forces teachers to compete with each other and work long and hectic hours, they are now on their last nerve. Many colleagues are driven to suicide or take sick leave because of mental disease. This is not somebody else's problem. Teachers feel that these things can happen to them too.

When Sohyo (General Council of Trade Unions in Japan) broke up and merged with Rengo (Japanese Trade Union Confederation) in 1990, we established the National Coordinating Center of Labor Unions (NCCLU) with the lead of Doro-Chiba (National Railway Motive Power Union of Chiba). This organization was founded to drive class struggle labor movement with the slogan of "fight on our own with solidarity". The union activists and rank and file workers are gathering across all industrial unions. We issue organ every month in order to engage in information exchanges.

We organize industry by industry, region to region. The Education Workers Caucus is one of them. We are holding meetings at regular intervals and each member is fighting in one's own union towards our shared goal.

We feel rather strongly that now is the time to revive militant labor unions. We have a respectable union, Doro-Chiba, in our organization. Doro-Chiba is a sole union in Japan that has been fighting against neoliberal attack by staging militant strikes and consolidating unity and solidarity of its members. This year again, Doro-Chiba went on strikes against privatization, outsourcing and irregularization. Also Doro-Chiba is promoting to organize young workers.

We, the members of the Education Workers Caucus of NCCLU, are fighting against the privatization of education and the militarization of schools. We are working hard to revive a militant union at our working places by consolidating unity and solidarity of

teachers. We strongly believe that the growing unity and solidarity all over the world will change the world.

The struggle for reinstatement of dismissed irregular workers, the refusal to stand up in front of Hinomaru and to sing Kimigayo, and the struggle for withdrawal of the disciplinary measure on a worker who took paid holiday on the A-Bomb Day in Hiroshima are the priorities among our vast range of activities. Enlargement of workers' unity and solidarity is our pivotal objective.