

JAPAN - Call for Solidarity from Tokyo's Tatekawa Kasenshiki Park

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We are the homeless of Tatekawa Kasenshiki Park, in the East of Tokyo. Our park is built on top of a filled-in river, and extends lengthwise under the highway. We have built shelters and live there. In 2012, we were targeted by two violent eviction operations. Using the renovation of the park as an excuse, running water has been stopped, access to the public toilet has been prohibited for 4 months and the toilet is now closed overnight. Since the renovation work, large iron gates prohibit access to the park at night from 6pm to 8am. Metal fences 2m high enclose our living area, we are confined in a very restricted space. We are going to celebrate Mayday in these difficult conditions. This is why we would like to connect with our comrades who are waging the fight against eviction all around the world, and call for solidarity.

The situation of day-laborers → homeless people in Japan

During the "high growth" of the 60s and 70s, when people from the countryside were massively moving to the cities to find work, many day-laborers were employed everywhere in Japan in the construction industry and in public works. Thousands of these workers were gathered in markets for day-labor called "*yoseba*". Every morning an usher would direct them from the *yoseba* to their workplace. Many young people, later called "*kin no tamago*" (golden eggs) were thus massively employed in urban factories and stores where they worked, often in strenuous and dangerous conditions.

The day-laborers lived in labor dormitories called "*hanba*" where living areas and working space are amalgamated. The day-laborers' rights were seldom respected, and cases of unpaid wages and abuse were frequent. The *hanba* system was a leftover of the exploitation of Chinese and Korean labor practiced in the Japanese colonies until the end of World War II.

In the early 1980s, the Japanese economy was hit by the high-yen recession; it is the period of the financial bubble and its collapse in the late 80s. In the early 90s, because of the bursting of the bubble, the change in the structure of the economy and the aging of day-laborers, the workers were massively evicted from the *hanba*. Those who did not have enough money to stay in the "*doya*" (cheap accommodation where rent is paid by the day) were thrown out on to the street. They were forced to live outside, and built shelters in public spaces around the *yoseba*. In these improvised camps there were day-laborers, but also factory workers and salaried employees. Improved tents and permanent shelters were set up in the most important parks of Tokyo, which soon became crowded. This happened in an entirely spontaneous manner.

The administrative practices of the time kept those who had lost their housing away from their rights. Without residence registration, access to Livelihood Protection (state-subsidized financial aid to the poor) was refused to homeless people, unless they were either older than 65 or so sick that they had to be taken to emergency rooms. The government had decided to do nothing to help the unemployed. Excluded from the social security system and faced with the government's indifference, mutual help in homeless camps was the only thing that allowed them to survive hunger, cold and disease.

In the early 2000s, the neo-liberalist policies of the Koizumi government heightened job insecurity by loosening labor legislation. A regressive reform of the Labor Code was implemented, and temporary work became more and more common amongst young people. It is said that the system of day-labor and *yoseba* spread to the rest of society. In the absence of new measures against unemployment, and while subsidies to companies were systematically cut, Japan was hit very hard by the worldwide subprime crisis triggered

by the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers. Temporary workers were laid off one after the other, with no legislation to support them afterwards. Although the crisis did not affect those who were already on the street, the layoffs led to more housing losses.

Protest movements rallied and demanded the fair implementation of the Livelihood Protection Law. Until then, the government had been able to hide the exclusion of day-workers and homeless people from the social welfare system, but it could not keep ignoring the growing number of unemployed brought about by the Lehman shock. Under pressure from the public, discriminatory administrative practices were changed so that benefits were also granted to the poor, in addition to the elderly or disabled. Such a change in administrative policy reflects the government's desire to maintain public order during times of major societal change.

Although the criteria for accessing public welfare have officially become less restrictive, the implementation of the Livelihood Protection law is still heavily criticized. Although they were extremely rare, abuses of the system are used as a pretext by the media to encourage the systematic bashing of the use of Livelihood Protection, and to stigmatize recipients. Humiliations at the social welfare counters as well as abusive restriction of access to benefits are still commonplace. It is in this context that cuts in the Livelihood Protection budget may be implemented, without any assessment of the actual need.

While counter-productive reforms are weakening the public welfare system, the welfare system itself is increasingly used as a tool of discrimination against the homeless. Administrative practices are still discriminatory. Homeless people are frequently turned away from Livelihood Protection centers, and in the event of the subsidy request being approved the homeless people are forced to live in sordid private establishments, whose owners collude with the government. Urban planning works and evictions are carried out in parks and river banks under the pretext of 'the cleaning of urban space,' while in the meantime the social protection device itself is used to evict the homeless. In return for benefits, the administration requires that recipients give up their life on the street and settle into apartments. The usual carrot and big stick...

Currently, the East of Tokyo is in full redevelopment and gentrification. The building of the new communications tower of Tokyo - the "Sky Tree" -, opened in May 2012 and quickly becoming a tourist attraction, resulted in the creation of huge shopping centers in the vicinity and, as a corollary, the eviction of homeless people. Along the Sumida River, a homeless person was found drowned a few days after being evicted from his living area by employees of the district. We believe that the renovations of the Tatekawa Park are part of a larger gentrification plan for the entire area around the Sky Tree. An expensive canoe-kayak circuit and a futsal pitch were built after the renovations (the use of the futsal pitch costs 10,000 yen/hour). In addition, the park is now closed at night like in gated communities. This is the context in which repeated violent evictions are conducted against the homeless of the Tatekawa Kasenshiki Park.

We have been fighting against these abusive evictions for 4 years, though it has been almost 20 years since the eldest homeless person settled in the park. Many homeless people live off day-labor, or collect cans and used paper for recycling. Before the park renovations, the district mayor had never taken any action to inform poor people of their rights to Livelihood Protection. For 20 years, the poor have built their own shelters, found work, and survived by helping each other, without relying on Livelihood Protection. This is why many of us are critical when offered social protection in return for unwilling expulsion (those who agreed to leave are of course helped throughout in their paperwork by support groups). The lifestyle of these homeless people reflects the struggle of those who are at the bottom of the social ladder. It is a very harsh fight that the poor have to lead in order to maintain their existence, without relying on authorities, all the while attempting to preserve our dignity as human beings. We would like to connect with our comrades who are fighting for the same cause all around the world and appeal to your solidarity!

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