INTRODUCTION

Feature Articles: The Issue of Foreign Workers

Today, there are an estimated 2 million foreigners in Japan, of whom 800,000 are believed to be working. The combination of fewer children per family and a rapidly aging society in Japan is making the shrinking working population an imminent problem. Because of this, there is increasing talk about whether or not it is advisable to look to foreign labor as a means of maintaining, and if possible strengthening, the economic vitality of the nation.

However, the debate over the influx of foreign labor into Japan is no recent phenomenon. In the first half of the 1980s, there was a conspicuous increase in female immigrants from Southeast Asian countries – particularly the Philippines and Thailand – seeking jobs in service sectors such as the entertainment business. In addition, from the middle to the late 1980s, when the bubble economy boomed, the manufacturing and construction industries ran into serious manpower shortages and the possibility of employing foreign workers to make up for the shortfall began to be discussed in earnest.

Disagreements persisted between employers, who called for the acceptance of foreign labor as a means of helping the economy, and labor unions, who feared the negative impact such a move might have on domestic employment. One point of agreement that eventually emerged was that foreigners with technical or craft skills should be accepted while caution should be exercised in accepting unskilled workers. It was further agreed that foreign workers of Japanese ancestry, namely descendants of Japanese emigrants to South America, etc., could be accepted with few restrictions.

When the Japanese economy ran into a phase of protracted stagnation, an over-supply of labor replaced the shortage, and the arguments concerning the acceptance of foreign labor lost momentum. Since entering the new millennium, however, fear of a future labor shortage has surpassed that of

the 1980s, when the shortage was due to a greater demand for manpower. This time, the shortfall has come as a result of an anticipated drop in childbirths and the advancing age of the population. However, against the backdrop of China's rapid economic growth, workers have been increasingly employed on short-term contracts in factories as a flexible way to utilize human resources and strengthen Japan's industrial competitiveness. Foreigners with Japanese ancestry were seen as a valuable resource in meeting this demand.

It should be noted, however, that millions of foreign workers would have to be employed every year if the shortfall in the labor market due to the shrinkage of Japan's population is going to be made up solely by accepting foreign labor. Consequently, a consensus seems to have arisen in Japan that priority should be given to the utilization of women and the elderly, who are not counted among the working population at the moment, as well as young labor, among whom the unemployment rate remains high. Recently, caution has been increasingly voiced over the unconditional acceptance of foreign labor, partly due to concerns over an increase in crimes by foreign residents and a deterioration in public safety in Japan.

At the same time, however, many sectors of industry and small businesses cannot survive without employing foreign workers for simple jobs. In districts where such industries and enterprises are concentrated, many cities have communities of "settled" foreign residents rather than "migrant" workers. The indigenous citizens in these areas are faced with a challenge today – not tomorrow – of how to live together in harmony with these foreign residents as neighbors in the same community.

On the theme featured in this issue, we are privileged to have articles by experts who are well acquainted with the realities of individual work places and local communities. In these articles, the respective authors identify, from a detailed point of view, the problems involved and propose viewpoints from which solutions to the problems can be sought.

Mr. Makoto Ogawa, in his capacity as a policymaker on the employment

of foreign workers, describes the current situation in detail as well as the contents of relevant policies and future trends. His article points out that the issue of accepting foreign workers is not merely a matter of labor policy, but also has to be discussed in a comprehensive framework in the context of seeking a national consensus in such areas as education, public safety, industrial competitiveness and locally oriented policies.

Emeritus Yasuo Kuwahara, as a top expert among Japanese labor economists on the issue of foreign labor, places the issue of foreign residents in the context of postwar history and explains its contemporary significance. In his article, the author points out that the current policy on foreign residents still involves the negative byproducts of a vertically aligned public administration system that can only respond to problems on an ad hoc basis. He states the need to set up a government body with a unified authority over all foreigner-related measures – currently handled by many different ministries and agencies – and to establish a long-term vision regarding immigration policies.

Emeritus Kuwahara's proposition is echoed in the article of by Mr. Kazuaki Tezuka, a legal expert, who points out the need to set up a government body responsible for the formulation of a comprehensive national policy on the issue of foreign residents, and draws attention to a number of cases where early remedies are needed for specific legal problems. One is the isolation of many children of Japanese ancestry from the rest of the community, as they cannot speak Japanese and do not go to school. As they do not want to return to their native countries, this situation may result in a serious public safety problem in the future. In addition, some contractors rely on illegal labor agencies. Workers of Japanese ancestry are often employed through such unlawful brokers without any protection of their rights as workers.

Mr. Hiroaki Watanabe, an economist, reports on the management of immigrant workers through findings in a survey he made on contractors who employ many workers of Japanese ancestry. He outlines an emerging new situation, which is characterized by a shift in the pattern of recruitment

of such workers from approaches in their native countries to the use of a network within Japan, and by an increasing trend for recruiting female workers. At the same time, he also points out long-established tendencies of long overtime work, lack of opportunities for skill development and wage levels that pay little attention to individual workers' experience.

Finally, Mr. Naoto Omi identifies problems concerning foreign labor from the viewpoint of the labor union. He stresses the need for caution in easily accepting unskilled workers, and tidies up the points of discussion regarding the utilization of foreign labor in the field of medical and nursing care in the context of the aging population. The author draws attention to the need for not only regulation on entry, namely qualification for lawful immigration and visa status, as currently practiced, but also for the development of an adequate policy covering foreign workers "after they are accepted," based on the assumption that most of them want to settle down in Japan.

I hope that these features contribute to the reader's better understanding of the current status of foreign labor issues in Japan.

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