

Communists in Japan ? the recent growth of the JCP and tasks for revolutionaries

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The Japanese Communist Party has seen massive growth in the last year. Chris Brennan examines why

As Japan's economy seems to be dying, the Japanese Communist Party is coming back to life. The ruling Liberal Democrat party is in disarray, mired in corruption and failure. The economy is on the precipice, with prices falling, raising the specter of deflation,ⁱ massive declines in exports, approaching 50 per cent compared with the same time last year. The only response of the ruling class parties, the Liberals and the Conservatives, has been to haggle over the size of the stimulus to the ailing economy! The resurgence and growth of the JCP, with new layers entering the struggle, stands in stark opposition to the pessimism of the traditional ruling class parties.ⁱⁱ

The JCP has been gaining over one thousand new members each month and now has 24,000 branch offices and claims over a million readers of its newspaper.ⁱⁱⁱ The leader of the party states that "the time is now right for capitalism to fall from the tree."^{iv} The Communist Party was popular in the 1960s and 70s and has kept a strong presence in local and prefectural assemblies. Still, it remains weak at a national level, with nine seats out of 480 in the country's House of Representatives.^v The weak economy is at the center of this resurgence. The lifetime employment guarantees and generous company pensions that Japanese workers once enjoyed are now just a memory. Hundreds of thousands of temporary workers have been laid off amid the global crisis. Question time in parliament has become one of the favourite youtube searches in Japan due largely to the JCP, with JCP Chairman Kazuo Shii's grilling of Prime Minister Taro Aso and Labor Minister Yoichi Masuzoe on the treatment of part-time and temporary workers attracting more than 100,000 views on YouTube and on NicoNico Douga, a Japanese video-sharing site.^{vi}

The new recruits are mostly in their twenties and thirties and come from the 44 per cent of Japanese workers who work on temporary contracts. Oomori Shuji, 30, a temporary worker for Toyota, who joined the party in June of 2008, stated her reasons for joining: "Since my graduation, I have never been fully employed. At a JCP workshop, I learned about the realities of temps hired by the day and the working poor, who are without social security or bonuses, and are often easily fired. The party is considerate of the plight of young people, including their jobs and living conditions. It has a concrete policy on these questions."^{vii} The scale of growth of parties like the JCP, in a country which has suffered economic stagnation for over a decade now raises serious questions for the workers movement and socialists.

The background of the JCP

The JCP was founded in 1922 as the Japanese section of the Third International, itself founded by Lenin and Trotsky in 1919. The party, formed in the post war period of revolutionary upsurge, underwent the same degeneration as all of the major communist parties following the failures of the world revolution in the 1920s and 1930s. The party was declared illegal in the period of Imperial Japan and suffered heavy

repression. Emerging from World War Two, the party was made legal by the US occupation authorities in an effort to cut across the rising working class militancy which greeted the end of the war. The leadership of the JCP played a collaborationist role in suppressing strikes and factory occupations, telling workers to call off strikes and go home. The leadership who had emerged from the war were opposed to struggles which would transform Japan, basing its strategy instead on an anti US occupation position, alongside taking up the demands for minimal reforms on jobs and pay. The JCP was a thoroughly reformist party, and not even a particularly left wing reformist party at that.

With the unprecedented global economic boom in the period after World War two and up until the 1970s the JCP were a marginal force. The principal cause of this was their reformist program and approach to the class struggle. Rather than mobilise workers and the poor sections of the farmers for a fight against capitalism, the JCP aimed to work alongside the small-scale capitalists, farmers and the middle class to remove some of the power from the enormous banks and industrial conglomerates. As the party program from 1967 stated "The JCP strives to change the nation's economic policy of what it sees as serving the interests of large corporations and banks to one of "defending the interests of the people," and to establish "democratic rules" that will check the activities of large corporations and "protect the lives and basic rights of the people... Regarding the issue of the international economy, the JCP advocates establishing a new international democratic economic order on the basis of respect for the economic sovereignty of each country."viii The JCP approach has changed little since the 1960s, viewing the United States, transnational corporations and international financial capital as pushing globalisation, which, it says, is seriously affecting the global economy, including the monetary and financial problems, as well as North-South and environmental problems. This line of argument is the usual mix of Stalinist-nationalism, accusing foreign imperialist capital of interfering in the 'democracy' of the nation. Economic sovereignty is impossible in the imperialist world system, unless it is connected to a struggle for a planned economy which removes the market levers through which imperialists can dominate other countries.

The JCP advocates "democratic regulation of activities by transnational corporations and international financial capital on an international scale."ix So, it correctly identifies some of the problems inherent within capitalism, but offers no real solution to them. The policy of greater regulation, higher taxes and removing some of the power from the industrial giants, alongside the policy of ending temporary employment and raising the minimum wage is of course a progressive approach and a departure from the approach of the communist parties in Europe who are still prostrate before the bosses. It is also far in advance of the social democratic parties, such as New Labour, whose most radical policy to cope with the crisis was a tax on the top 1 per cent which would raise £2.2 billion per year at a time when the public debt is almost 100 times that for 2009 alone. The problem remains that the approach of the JCP is inadequate to deal with the crisis and connect it with the struggle for socialism since it only seeks to reform some of the affects of the system and not challenge it root and branch. This is at a time when Japan is not only suffering as a constituent part of the global economic crisis, but is in many respects in the vanguard of that crisis.

The special crisis of Japanese capitalism

The ruling class in Japan are looking at yet another lost decade in terms of growth. Japanese share prices are today 70 per cent lower than at their 1989 peak with property values 40 per cent lower than they were in 1990. Economic growth in the 1990s averaged less than 1 per cent a year, followed by a small boost to 1.5-2 per cent in the 2000s. This was a fundamentally unsound basis from which to enter an economic and social crisis.x The most alarming statistics are those relating to exports, which account for 50 per cent of Japanese GDP. The figures show exports declines approaching 50 per cent for January 2009 from a year earlier, leaving the country with a record trade deficit. This followed an almost unbelievable contraction in industrial output of 9.8 percent in the December 2008.xi The declines subsequent to this were less sharp, with around a ten per cent fall in out put for the period January-March 2009. Even so, the reality is of a

decline of 20 per cent in a four month period.

The cause of this precipitous decline, greater in degree than the Eurozone and the USA, is the reliance of the Japanese economy on the hollow boom in the rich countries, which bought huge quantities of hi-tech Japanese exports, and the export of capital to China in the form of investments in new plant and equipment and also the export of capital goods-machinery and means of production-which allowed the very partial recovery of the late 1990s and early 2000s. This reality of an interlinked Imperialist country exploiting the cheap labour of a neighbouring country made a mockery of the concept of de-coupling. Decoupling held that European and Asian economies, especially emerging ones, had broadened and deepened to the point that they no longer depended upon the United States for growth, leaving them insulated from a severe slowdown there, even a fully fledged recession. This theory, which came to almost dominate bourgeois political economy during the boom years would have meant the losses occurring due to a global recession would be greatest in the heartland of the US economy-the USA. Contrary to what the de-couplers would have expected, the losses were greater outside the United States, with the worst experienced in emerging markets and such developed economies as Japan. Exports, as we have seen make up an especially large portion of economic activity in Japan, but that was not supposed to matter anymore in a de-coupled world because domestic activity was thought to be so robust. This was always a chimera in place of a sound theoretical understanding of current trends. With wages and incomes stagnant between the early 1990s and 2008, there never was any basis to the idea that consumers could pick up the slack of any export declines, as the limited incomes of the Japanese working classes were based upon working in the export sector.xii

It is here that the enormous growth of the JCP poses opportunities and also dangers for the working class. With an economy reliant on the twin dynamics of exports and foreign lending, there is very little room for any domestic fiscal boost. Raising wages, even if the capitalists could be forced to carry this out, would undermine the competitive edge of Japanese capital and provoke a further slump as recovery came. The programme of the JCP does not challenge this logic and in fact does not go beyond an extended version of the Japanese governments own fiscal stimulus. This stimulus, amounting to some £67 billion, represented slightly less than 2 per cent of output in April. This followed a similar sized stimulus in late 2008 and a massive bank bail out.xiii The focus of this strategy has been to build new roads, re-develop ports and rail infrastructure in order to attempt to emerge from the crisis strengthened and as a more attractive sight for investment. This will be a failure! This repeats the failed approach of the Japanese ruling class in the 1990s. The outcome of a decade of massive investments in everything other than jobs and incomes was: 40 per cent of jobs being temporary and a near stagnant real economy reliant on buying Treasury bonds and the super profits flowing from the super exploitation of Chinese workers. Now that workers are looking for solutions in the form of the JCP genuine Marxists must expose the reality that the JCP leadership do not advance the struggle against the crisis one iota. In fact the JCP, in the statements of their leadership, aim to actually re-shackle the consciousness of the great mass of workers to the ruling class through a modified form of corporatism and the strong but caring state.

The approach of the party has been to counter pose how far away from the good old days the Liberals and the Conservative Parties are, rather than to blame them and their system for the crisis and put forward a fighting alternative. "The law governing temporary dispatch workers was changed in 1999, allowing the current situation to develop," says Toshio Ueki, a party official from JCP headquarters in Tokyo. "The Communist Party was the only party that opposed those changes." This is as militant as the JCP leadership gets at a time when some ten million workers are forced onto massively insufficient state dole and more millions pushed into the very same temporary and insecure job contracts! It is a crime that so many are turning towards communism and the 'communists' are leading them down the dead end of minor reforms and tinkering with the edges of the system.

The Tasks for Revolutionaries in Japan

The possibility of the JCP being elected to take state power is still extremely remote. Despite the fact the Prime Minister, Taro Aso, is mired in corruption scandals and is extremely weak domestically, the JCP would need an enormous collapse of the bourgeois parties before it could take power - a collapse which could only be achieved if the JCP itself were to develop as a mass fighting party in the workplaces and the streets, rather than just on paper or on youtube.

So, how should revolutionary communists respond to the rapid growth of the JCP? The correct approach for Marxists in Japan is to recognise the peculiarity of the Japanese situation and enter the JCP alongside the new layers of youth and workers. The struggle inside must be around list of central demands, transitional demands for the program of the organisation.

Temporary jobs account for 44 per cent of all jobs in Japan. The Communist Party must force the government to abolish temporary contracts; a real job for all, on trade union agreed rates of pay. Unemployment is approaching 10 per cent. The party must force upon the government a sliding scale of wages and hours; the demand must be 'share out the work' with no loss of pay.

The Liberal Party and their even more right wing allies have led to the ruin of Japan, it's economy and the living standards of the working and middle classes. The JCP must mobilise the membership to take power, allied with the powerful trade unions, and implement an emergency program of expropriations without compensation of all bankrupt firms, under workers control and management.

The unprecedented global economic crisis has devastated the lives of millions of workers. Across the majority of the world the old parties of workers, be they communist or social democratic, have rightly been blamed for their part in the neo-liberal assaults against the past gains of working people. The relative isolation of the JCP from official politics has meant that, in the absence of a new pole of attraction, the fighting elements of the working class and youth have turned towards the communists. The JCP has increased its membership by almost one hundred thousand in a year. Any Marxist organisation which failed to account for this and attempt an intervention would be as bankrupt as the Japanese financial system.

The League for the Fifth International does not approach the question of the JCP with a dogmatic approach, merely claiming the old organisations are dead and pro-capitalist through and through-the truth is always concrete! The general trend globally has been for workers to move away from the old organisations, which were only ever minority organisations of the class and often the better off sections at that, and towards new formations. The entire trend of contemporary history after 1999 points towards the perspective that new formations, new methods of struggle and the development of new organisations. This was the case before the current crisis, with the anti capitalist outbreaks in 1999, the anti war movement after 2001 and the environmental movement since the turn of the century. The League has made the effort to intervene in all of these struggles on the basis of the militancy and vitality of the new elements.

The League has consistently argued and fought for the creation of revolutionary workers parties across the world. The reasons for this are several fold; the working class needs a revolutionary party in order to establish the dictatorship of the proletariat. Only a revolutionary party, which wins over the majority of the organised working class in the trade unions, the factory committees, workers' militias and workers' councils, can take power. Only a party can hold onto power against counter-revolution, protect it against bureaucratic degeneration and extend the revolution internationally. The building of a Leninist party in each country is the fundamental task of revolutionaries. It is for these reasons that the League has not been bogged down in the chimera of a debate over what sort of reformist party is needed, an old one or a new one. The issue of the JCP is of use in highlighting the failures of centrist and the vitality of a genuine

Marxist approach.

The leadership of the JCP have no perspective for this struggle. They are content to attempt to de-claw the capitalist beast slowly, the ultimate failure of all reformism, because the beast, even when wounded, will not allow itself to be destroyed without a fight. Also, the idea that some socialists have that the end of the social and economic basis for reformism will automatically revolutionise the JCP must be rejected as pure economism, the belief that the economic struggles automatically lead to political consciousness. The task for Marxists is to enter the common struggle alongside the new layers, patiently explaining the necessity of a revolutionary program and a revolutionary party with a mass base. This can be achieved by being the most self sacrificing and far sighted members of the struggle, calling out the reformists when they betray the working class, and counter posing the transitional program as pioneered by the first four congresses of the Communist International, updated for modern times.

From every major strike must come a picket defense squad, the basis for a workers militia. From every defense of plant closures must come the struggle for workers control and management, expropriation of the bosses with no compensation. From all of these struggles, inside and outside the JCP, will come the members and builders of mass revolutionary party, the Japanese section of a Fifth International!

Endnotes

i The Economist, April 16th, Print Edition, 'Buckle Down')

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iv ibid

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vi G. Blair, Land of Rising Communism, in Global Post, found at: <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/japan/090223/land-rising-communism> [3]

vii Danielle Demetriou, 'Japan's young turn to Communist Party as they decide capitalism has let them down', The Telegraph, Oct 18th, 2008

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xii C. Arnelle, 'The death of the 'decoupling' theory?,' in The New York Times, January 25, 2008, found at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/25/your-money/25iht-mdecouple.1.9494760.html> [7]

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[2] <http://www.france24.com/en/20090423-report-japan-crisis-swells-ranks-communist-party-politics-economic-crisis-kazuo-shii>

[3] <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/japan/090223/land-rising-communism>

[4] <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/8027397.stm>

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