

Wave

Yuji Osawa
Waseda Univ. ESS

Last summer my father said during dinner time, "I've been working with Filipinos these days." Some of you might guess. "Ah. Osawa's father must be a so-called international business man like Mr. Takehisa." But no, he's a Japanese carpenter. One day I helped him at a construction site as a "legal domestic worker." There I became acquainted with Mr. Chin. He was from Southeast Asia and might have been an illegal foreign worker. He reminded me of an unforgettable scene. It was early in the morning at Takadanobaba Station. Tough-looking brokers were ordering Asian workers to get on a bus. They treated the workers as if they were slaves. It was very shocking to me.

Recently the foreign workers issue has become very hot in this country and I believe Japan should legalize their entry. When we say the words "foreign workers", that does not mean Dr. Harris or Mr. Gentry but "unskilled workers," and Japan does not allow their entry. However, a lot of foreign workers are laboring at kojigemba or construction sites already. Most of them are from developing Asian countries such as the Philippines, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. "Shinjuku Shokuandori" Avenue is now called "Shinjuku Aseandori" Avenue. Some people call the backstreets of Ikebukuro "Little Manila." The Justice Ministry estimates the number of such people to be more than 100,000.

People surge into Japan like a big tidal wave. People never stop coming. Why? Because there is a demand for labor. Now Japanese small enterprises are facing a very serious labor shortage. In a recent survey by the University of Tokyo, about 60% of the small company owners answered that they would not hesitate to hire foreign workers. The Economist magazine estimates that Japan will suffer from a shortage of 3 million workers by the 21st century. In fact, 100 companies went bankrupt last year simply because of the labor shortage. On the other hand, the average income in Bangladesh, for example, is \$175 a year but it is more than \$20,000 in Japan. No wonder they come here. Demand leads to supply. This is basic economics.

However, the Japanese government is trying to tighten the Immigration Control Law, as reported in Mainichi Shimbun on Oct. 18th. At first people tried to come into Japan on tourist visas. The government tightened the regulations. Then people tried to come into Japan pretending to be exchange students. The government tightened the regulations again. Now some Chinese have drifted to Japan as refugees. This is a kind of vicious circle and never-ending struggle.

Unless we change the law, there will continue to be illegal workers, and being illegal makes their working conditions even more severe. First, their human rights are totally ignored. Since they are illegal workers, women are quite often forced to engage in illegal jobs such as prostitution but they cannot complain because they came here illegally. Second they cannot receive social welfare. For example, when they get injured during work, they cannot get public assistance.

Then why does Japan try to exclude them? The Justice Ministry says that the foreign workers would raise the crime rate, therefore the Immigration Control Law prohibits their entry. But I disagree. The White Paper reveals that about 9000 such people were arrested last year but about the same number were involved in crimes as victims. Furthermore, this law was enacted in 1951, shortly after World War Two.

You might say, "They are illegal, who cares?" Yes, that's right in a sense. The problem is that the Justice Ministry knows it and we know it, but the situation is left as it is. Why? Because companies can take advantage of their weakness. The Justice Ministry is supposed to protect human rights, I believe.

Then how should we accept this wave of foreign workers? Of course, there should be some rules. The government should conclude bilateral or multilateral treaties in advance. Then the government should negotiate with worker-sending countries to decide the details. At the same time, the workers also need to satisfy some entry requirements concerning drugs, infectious diseases, crime and so on.

Ladies and gentle man, now is the time to accept them legally so that the workers can enjoy the legal protection. I believe now is the time to face reality and revise the Immigration Control Law. We should learn to cope with the wave of foreign workers rather than just building a breakwater to keep them out.