

THE NOT-SO-COMMUNIST COMMUNISTS

C B Liddell *interviews the chairman of the Japanese Communist Party, KAZUO SHII*

For several decades after the war, Japanese politics was dominated by the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). This was originally a rural-based party supported by the US military occupation authorities as a counterweight to the Left-leaning urban areas. In recent years, however, the country has been moving toward a two-party system, rather like the ones in the United Kingdom or United States. While the LDP (with their coalition allies the Buddhist Komei Party) play the part of the Conservatives or Republicans, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), founded in the 1990s, is seeking to fulfil the role of the Labour Party and the US Democrats. As with the British and American systems, there is very little to separate the two main parties, and they represent a very narrow band of the political spectrum strategically located near the centre.

Existing beyond this nascent duopoly of power is the Japanese Communist

Party (JCP). In the last general election (2005), the JCP obtained 7.25% of the vote, making it Japan's fourth largest party, with nine MPs in the Lower House (*repetitive*). In the Upper House, half of whose members are elected every three years, it holds seven seats. The JCP is expected to do well at the forthcoming general election for the Lower House, which must be held by or before September this year.

Although technically a Leftist party, membership is effectively limited to the indigenous population, and the party supports economic and political autonomy from the globalist system. It is hated by many in the international socialist movement, who view its policies as nationalistic and protectionist¹ as well as by the pro-globalist political and business establishments. The party calls for the return of the Kurile Islands from Russia, but it also opposes Japanese reliance on the United States.

Kazuo Shii was born in 1954, and graduated from the Department of Physical Engineering at Tokyo University. His grandfather was a Lieutenant General in the Japanese Imperial Army who was killed in action in 1945. In his free time, he enjoys playing the piano and is particularly fond of Schubert. He was elected as a JCP MP in 1993, and became JCP leader in 2000. Since becoming leader, he has been particularly vocal about the liberalization of Japan's labour market.

C B Liddell is a Japan-based journalist, who writes on a variety of topics for a number of publications.

In recent months, Japan has been badly hit by the credit crunch and recession. What is the party's attitude to the current economic crisis? What are the solutions?

In the face of the present financial crisis and the economic downturn, the JCP has made urgent economic proposals. There are three pillars to these proposals.

The first pillar is that we are seeing casino capitalism, and ordinary people should be protected from the negative effects of this. In Japan, the cost of this crisis is being paid by small and medium-sized enterprises, and workers are also suffering as employment is being destroyed.

The second pillar of our position is that we have to change the character of the Japanese economy from one that

is dependent on foreign demand to one that is based on internal domestic demand. In order to do this we are calling for a shift of the economic focus away from one that is big-business-oriented to one that is people-oriented. In order to realize this aspiration, we need to do three things: ensure the stability of employment, improve social welfare and improve the agricultural sector.

The third pillar is that the financial crisis we are currently witnessing, which started in the United States, has been the result of excessive deregulation. This started in the 1980s and continued through the 1990s. One of the examples was the repeal of the Glass Steagall Law². Speculative money has expanded and lots of very strange derivatives have been prevalent. So we have to move towards stronger regulation of the financial market.

From what you've just said, it sounds like the main problem is the global nature of the economy. You emphasized that instead of Japan being an exporting country supplying America, Japanese companies should supply domestic demand more. You have also pointed out the problems that arise from this kind of global capitalism. With sub-prime, one problem was that bad debt could easily be repackaged and sold around the world. So would it be true to

say that the approach of the JCP is towards a kind of localism versus globalism, with the emphasis on local production and local consumption, rather than global exports and the kind of global market where some countries act as consumer nations, while others like Japan fulfil the role of producer nation?

We don't see globalization and localization in terms of an opposition or confrontation. As regards globalization, it is inevitable in the capitalist system. For example, Marx wrote in the *Communist Manifesto* that the economy would be globalized. So we don't endorse anti-globalization. What we are calling for is democratic or orderly globalization. This means that the economic sovereignty of each nation should be respected and that equal and mutually beneficial relations should be maintained.

What you're saying is that globalization has been too powerful and there has been nothing to balance it, so we need more local economic sovereignty to balance globalism.

Yes. The economic sovereignty of each country means that they will improve or strengthen domestic demand, and by this, we will be able to make people's livelihoods better than before. This would be the first priority. Then we would hope to forge good international trading relationships. The worst point of the Japanese economy to date is that

Japan has been so much dependent on foreign demand and exports. For the last several years, the big companies that have depended on exports have been making vast profits. But, on the other hand, ordinary Japanese people have seen poverty spreading. This upside-down situation must be overturned.

My broad impression of the global economic situation is that America creates all this money or debt, which is then exported to countries like Japan, while in Japan, corporations produce all these manufactured goods which are then exported. To a certain degree, both are unnecessary. People in the West don't really need more and more gadgets, while the dollars to pay for them are inherently worthless because America offers few products or services in return.

America has a lot of debts and these have been exported to other countries. For example, Japan bought a lot of national dollar bonds. These should be returned to the United States. In order to support this system, Japan's interest rate has always been very low, almost zero, which is unbelievable in the capitalist system – a zero interest rate! This is in order to support the United States, and this shows how subservient Japan is to the United States economically. This should be corrected.

In recent years, how has the party been doing in membership terms? I



CENTURY

THE KOBE-OSAKA HIGHWAY IN 1995

heard that quite a lot of young people have been joining the party.

In recent months, we have been seeing a rise in membership of around one thousand new members. We now have over 400,000 members. I think, roughly speaking, every strata of society and every age group is represented in the party. But it is true that the younger generation – teens, twenties, and thirties – has been increasing its ratio among our membership. The biggest reason for this is because there is a very bad employment situation. Under the neo-liberal economic policy in Japan, 37% of workers are now non-regular workers. This figure is for all workers, but about 50% of young people are in

this unstable employment situation. The numbers of such temporary agency workers are also increasing³.

When you have the kind of economic hardship that is becoming common in Japan, usually it expresses itself culturally before it expresses itself politically. Recently the 1929 novel *Kanikosen* (The Crab Factory Ship) by the communist writer Takiji Kobayashi, which describes the extremely harsh conditions on factory ships in the Sea of Okhotsk, has become a surprise hit, selling over 500,000 copies plus 200,000 in a comic book version. Are there any other cultural signs of the changing mood of the country?

For my own part, I was impressed that one of the big commercial TV stations asked me to appear on one of their programmes to choose some words or phrases from Marx's *Das Kapital* to be shown through flip boards. I chose, "After me the deluge," the unofficial slogan of capital. In order to get the profits, they don't care at all what will happen afterwards. My second choice was prompted by the sub-prime crisis: "Excessive credit gives rise to excessive speculation". My third choice was Engels' words that nature will be revenged on people through environmental destruction. This was the first time in Japanese history that a commercial television station showed such phrases from Marx and Engels.

Soon there will be a general election, and, of course, the governing LDP is quite unpopular. Just after they changed their leader, the economic crisis came along, so they lost the advantage of holding an election in the 'honeymoon period'⁴. If the LDP is defeated in the next election, what do you expect will happen?

Whether the DPJ will replace the LDP in government or not no one can say exactly, but what we can say is that the LDP, politically and organizationally speaking, is in the last stages of its lifespan.

Not only do the LDP and the DPJ

have a lot in common, but many of the members have a shared political history. For example Ichiro Ozawa⁵ used to be very important in the LDP. Are these parties basically offering voters a false choice?

When I was first elected to the secretariat of the JCP, Ozawa was Secretary General of the LDP, so it seems to me that there is no difference between the LDP and the DPJ. A public opinion poll recently showed a very interesting result. The question was 'Who do you think would be better as a Prime Minister, Taro Aso or Ichiro Ozawa?' With just these two choices, Ozawa was slightly more popular, although both of them had almost the same level of support. However, more than 50% of the respondents said that neither of them was appropriate.

The reason the JCP appeals to Japanese voters these days is because the voters are no longer satisfied with just changing the faces in politics. They feel that it is also necessary to change the contents of government as well. This means changing the system that makes Japanese politics subservient to the United States, and which gives priority to big business over the needs of ordinary people. This kind of broad perspective is only being proposed by the JCP. This is the change that we are calling for. While I don't expect the JCP to take power, people are clearly deeply disillusioned by both the LDP and DPJ.



DETAIL OF ARTWORK BY ON KAWARA FROM SOTHEBY'S CATALOGUE, ESTIMATE £25,000-30,000

This similarity between the two main parties is a problem everywhere. In Britain, too, the Conservative and Labour parties are not so different. In America the Democrats and Republicans once in government act in remarkably similar ways and share many of the same agendas.

I think we have come to a period in which the world capitalist system is seeing its own limitations. I'm always saying there are three points of limitation. First, they cannot resolve the poverty problem. Second, they cannot solve the problem of speculative activity and its results. Third, the capitalist system cannot solve problems of international relations. So, looked at in the perspective of the 21st century, the capitalist system is not capable of

leading us towards a future society. The future society will be based on the socialist system. This is inevitable.

Japan has a very serious demographic problem. Not enough children are being born and the number of old people is disproportionate, so there's major pressure from some quarters to increase immigration to Japan for economic reasons. Recently, I heard there was an agreement between Japan and Indonesia to facilitate bringing nursing staff from Indonesia to help take care of Japanese senior citizens.

This problem of not enough children is one of the effects of the present political and economic system. This should be solved by taking into account every aspect of the problem - for example,

and the welfare problem. Employment and welfare conditions should be changed so as to induce an increase in the Japanese birth rate. ♦

NOTES

1. See <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2008/nov2008/japa-n24.shtml>

2. The repeal of the Glass-Steagall law in 1999 enabled commercial lenders to underwrite and trade mortgage-backed securities and collateralized debt obligations. This led to the setting up of the notorious SIVs (structured investment vehicles), the funds that were at the heart of the sub-prime mortgage crisis

3. In 2004, in response to employer demands to liberalize employment regulations, the government changed the law to allow employers to provide less pay and fewer benefits and safeguards for workers employed through agencies. This has effectively created a two-tiered employment system with directly employed full-time workers and agency-employed, part-time workers

4. Taro Aso succeeded Yasuo Fukuda as leader of the LDP and Prime Minister in September 2008, after Fukuda's popularity dipped sharply in opinion polls

5. Ichiro Ozawa was party leader of the DPJ at the time of the interview. He resigned in May this year following a fund-raising scandal and has been replaced by Yukio Hatoyama. Like Ozawa, Hatoyama was originally a member of the LDP



BACK ISSUES OF THE
QUARTERLY REVIEW

PHOTO: JAMES BIRCH

£5 (UK) or £7.50/US\$16 each (ex-UK).

To order, please send sterling cheques, postal orders or international money orders (payable to *Quarterly Review*), or your credit card details, to:
Quarterly Review, 26 Meadow Lane, Sudbury, Suffolk, CO10 2TD, United Kingdom

For a complete list of all writers – including Rowan Williams, Taki, Ezra Mishan, Michael Levin, Richard Heinberg, Kirkpatrick Sale, Tito Perdue, Keith Waldrop and Anthony O’Hear – and subjects in each issue, please see www.quarterly-review.org