

Japanese history a trade union issue

Over 5 500 trade unionists, anti-war and political activists rallied in Tokyo in November last year to demand an end to the war in Iraq and Afghanistan.

An important part of the rally was the campaign in defence of anti-war teachers who refuse to sing Kimagayo nationalist songs. The Japanese government wants to re-militarise schools and censor books about the crimes of the Japanese Imperial government in countries such as Korea, China and the Philippines. It also wants to censor information about its actions in Japan where in Okinawa the military ordered civilians to commit suicide rather than surrender to US forces in the Second World War.

In recent months more than 100 000 people in Okinawa participated in one of the largest rallies in its history to protest the government's order that schoolbooks eliminate this part of Japanese history.

Today, thousands of teachers in Japan refuse to go along with re-militarisation and refuse to stand when nationalist songs are performed during graduation ceremonies.

These teachers are fined and in many cases suspended and threatened with dismissal. The best known cases are that of Kimiko Nezu and Kawarai, two disabled student

teachers who protested against militarisation in schools and were suspended.

There is an international campaign to defend Japanese teachers' rights to object to standing in support of these songs. Nezu and other Japanese teachers are arranging to go to the US to gain support. Already the San Francisco Labor Council, Oakland Education Association, San Francisco United Educators, AFT 2121 and the United Teachers of Los Angeles have backed their cause and are planning to send delegations to Japanese consulates in San Francisco and Los Angeles.

A video, 'Against Coercion' has been produced which tells the stories of these teachers who are standing up against war. It shows that when Nezu was suspended, instead of staying at home, she went outside the school to discuss with students and teachers why she was protesting. One retired teacher has been charged with handing out flyers outside graduations to educate people on the issues and was fined 200 000 yen.

Tokyo's prefecture governor Shintaro Ishihara has made it his personal campaign to rid schools of these teachers and intends to use the state to do this. Unfortunately the right wing leadership of the Japan Teachers Union (JTU) has been silent about the victimisation of thousands of anti-war teachers even though it supports the Japanese constitution which prohibits war.

Nezu and many other teachers attended the November rally and declared that they would continue their activities despite court cases and possible firings. The courts are also pursuing hundreds of cases filed

by the anti-war teachers.

Republican and US Democrat politicians are demanding that Japan ignore its constitution and embrace war to "fight terrorism". The US government was angered that Japan was forced to pull its military tankers out of the Middle East. These tankers were illegally providing fuel to the US military and other allies for their operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The Japanese government openly stated that it was against withdrawing these ships. The US defense secretary visited Japan and called for it to continue its war supply operation. Japanese prime minister, Yasuo Fukuda, recently visited President Bush and promised that he would continue military support despite opposition from the Japanese people.

Los Angeles teachers Arlene Inouye and Greg Sotir, who are organisers in a national network to fight militarisation and recruitment of students into the US military, also attended the Tokyo rally. They previously took part in a national teachers' conference attended by hundreds of anti-war Japanese teachers where they reported on the increasing militarisation of schools in the US. Joining the Japanese teachers, Inouye said she would not stand silent while her students went to their deaths.

This was the first time in Japan that US anti-war trade union teachers joined with Japanese teachers to fight militarisation. Their presence greatly encouraged the Japanese anti-war teachers. LE

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