

The Time of Your Life

by Richard Evanoff

I first read about the government's new "Five Year Economic Plan — Sharing a Better Quality of Life Around the Globe" in an article in the November, 1992 issue of *Sumitomo Corporation News*, a corporate magazine I somehow ended up getting on the mailing list of. The article claims that whereas similar economic plans in the past "sought rapid economic growth," the present plan "is based on improvement of lifestyles." The article further states that "the plan was devised as a response to the changes in the international environment, growing pressure for a change in the existing world order, and problems concerning the global environment." The goal of the plan is to build Japan into a "lifestyle superpower" by focusing on three main objectives: "shorter working hours, home ownership, and social capital expenditure from the standpoint of the user."

Anyone reading the article on the government's plan who hasn't taken "Introduction to Ideological Legitimations for the Existing Status Quo" at their local university will obviously think that all of these objectives are worth pursuing. Who doesn't want to have shorter working hours, own their own home, and enjoy the benefits of more social spending, particularly if it is to be "from the standpoint of the user"? But let's look behind the propaganda to see what the plan is really all about. In this month's *ecoLogic* we'll focus on the plan's first main objective — shorter working hours.

Why should Japanese be working less? Here's the reason reported in *Sumitomo Corporation News*: "Since the 1980s, there has been mounting pressure to reduce working hours in order to appease foreign criticism that Japan is a nation of 'workaholics living in rabbit hutches'." How convenient to appeal to "foreign criticism" and ignore all the criticism coming from Japanese workers themselves about their death-defying work schedules. There is a need to reduce working hours in Japan, but the reason companies are so keen on the idea has nothing to do with foreign criticism or a desire to improve the quality of life of their employees. The fact is, overtime work is inefficient and it's costing corporations money.

How many times have you heard the tired stereotype that Japanese workers "work hard" because they're willing to stay in the office till late in the evening while American workers are "lazy" because they want to go home at five o'clock? Well, the main reason American workers can go home at 5:00 is because they've made "good use" of their time and have managed to finish their work by then. American managers deliberately work their employees hard during the day so

they won't have to pay them for overtime in the evening. Speed-ups and Taylorism (breaking tasks into small mindless steps so that they can be accomplished more efficiently) are facts of life in American workplaces. Improved efficiency through working harder means less wages to workers, more profits to corporate owners. So much for the myth that American workers are "lazy"! (And the myth that it is "lazy," "overpaid" workers that are responsible for America's economic decline.)

When the efficiency rates of workers in Japan and the United States are compared, we find that American workers are able to get more work done in less time than their Japanese counterparts. Of industrialized nations, the United States ranks towards the top in terms of efficiency, Japan ranks towards the bottom. A Japanese bank manager I know says that his bank is encouraging employees *not* to work overtime because the bank wants to cut its labor costs. Overtime pay is, of course, higher on a per hour basis than regular pay. The bank manager complains that workers deliberately slack off during the day (while always giving the appearance of being busy, of course!), so that they are "unable" to finish their work by quitting time and therefore "must" work overtime — for extra pay, of course. So much, then, for the myth that Japanese workers "work hard"!

Peasants in the Middle Ages worked fewer hours per year than we presently do.

Now, my intention here is not to set off a nationalistic/racist debate about "who works harder than whom" — although I would in fact like to correct the stereotype that American workers are "lazy." Obviously on an individual basis there are both lazy Americans and lazy Japanese as well as hard-working Americans and hard-working Japanese. What I hope to show, rather, is that for the past couple of decades American workers have in fact been working harder and harder — but with less and less to show for it. Despite steady gains in productivity, American wages actually fell by 19 percent between 1973 and 1987. In addition, payroll taxes have increased 24 percent and housing costs have gone up 56 percent. (Figures are from the December 3, 1990 issue of *Time*.) When we observe that the rich are getting richer at the same time that workers are getting poorer, it's obvious where the excess money is going. When I was growing up in the "good old" 50s and 60s, my father worked at a steel mill and my mother stayed home to look after my sister and me. My father was able to make enough \$\$ to keep a roof over our heads, food on the table, and clothes on our backs. These days, however,

even though husbands and wives both often work in America — resulting, incidentally, in 40 percent less "contact time" between parents and kids — there are fewer families now than then that are able to provide themselves with even the basic necessities of life. Strange that gross household incomes are declining at a time when householders are jointly spending twice as much time working for pay.

America is hardly the country Japan should emulate. Many Japanese would agree with me, of course, but again, racism and nationalistic pride isn't the issue. It's illusionary for Japanese to believe that their "unique" culture will somehow enable them to escape the downward spiral of an increasingly interlocked global economy. Cultural differences between Japan and the West are mere window dressing compared to the essential similarity between Japan's capitalistic economy and the capitalistic economies of the West. Capitalism has its own logic, and that logic is the same regardless of race, religion, creed, national origin, or degree of cultural "uniqueness." Thus in the current recession there is a perceptible moving away from long-standing cultural "tradition" as Japanese workers suddenly discover that "lifetime employment" is no longer lifetime. Just like their Western counterparts, Japanese companies are beginning to "restructure" by introducing new technology, cutting staff, closing plants inside the country, and shipping operations overseas where wages are cheaper and environmental laws are looser. Eliminating overtime work is nothing more than part of the corporate drive for greater efficiency — and thus greater profits. In a survey of 2,125 executives conducted by Japan's Federation of Economic Organizations (Keidanren), more than half said that "companies should cut overtime to save money and meet demands for more free time" (*The Japan Times*, May 15, 1992). In the same article a Nikon Corporation executive brought up the productivity issue by remarking, "The Japanese may work longer hours than their Western counterparts, but Westerners concentrate their work into a shorter working day."

I fully support fewer working hours in Japan — and in every other industrialized nation in the world for that matter. Peasants in the Middle Ages worked fewer hours per year than we presently do. What's the deal with all these great technological advances of the twentieth century that were supposed to make life easier and give us all more free time, anyway? Theoretically by splitting a 40-hour shift between husband and wife, the same amount of work would be getting done as got done in the 1950s, with the added bonus of full equality in both the home and workplace for men and women. By working half-days, everyone would have more time for families, creative projects, and — this is

See *ecoLogic*, p. 20

ecoLogic, from p. 3

what the lords of government and business really fear — constructive social change that would bring about a *real* improvement in the quality of life for everyone on a more egalitarian basis.

I can also sympathize, however, with Japanese workers who feel they have to stretch out their workdays just to make ends meet, especially given the skyrocketing cost of living in Japan. In most companies cutting working hours wouldn't mean more social equality but less, because salaries would also be cut. Cutting salaries translates into less money for workers and more money for — guess who! — the people who own the companies they work for. It's not difficult to see whose quality of life would improve and whose would decline under the proposed "Five Year Economic Plan." The plan would achieve the exact opposite of its stated intention, which is to "modify Japan's corporate-centered social structure and place greater emphasis on living conditions." Wake me up when they're ready to get serious about this, because actually achieving this goal would probably require nothing less than a full-fledged revolution. And I don't think that's quite what the government-corporate complex has in mind! □

Journal, from p. 19

the range is wide, including peregrine falcons, Chinese little egrets, black-faced spoonbills, spoonbilled sandpipers, Baikal teals, Australian curlews, and many others. The *satsukimasu*, a kind of salmon, which is one of the species singled out as being endangered by the Nagara River barrage dam, also lives in the Yoshino R.

Several speakers pointed out that though the Yoshino River delta wetland is of particular importance to migratory birds, overall, it is similar to what many river mouth areas used to be like across the country. Part of its value lies in the fact that most other similar areas have been wiped out by development in the past 25 years.

Organizers pledged to continue to study the natural values of the Yoshino River, to monitor the progress of the development project, and consider calling on the authorities to perform an environmental impact assessment for the dam project.

Another Yoshino River Symposium, with bird watching, nature observation, canoeing, a flea market, and a talk by well-known canoeist Noda Tomosuke, will be held in Tokushima on October 30. For details, please contact, in Japanese or English, Maggie Suzuki, tel/fax: 0879-33-6763. □

Forest Conservation Newsletters Available

Japan Tropical Forest Action Network (JATAN) is distributing two quarterly English-language forest conservation newsletters and is looking for new subscribers. The first is *Taiga News*, published by the Taiga Rescue Network (TRN), an international network of NGOs in over 20 countries that is working to protect the world northern or boreal forests from destruction. The second is the Native Forest Network's *Native Forest News*. The NFN is also an international coalition of forest conservation NGOs, although their focus is the endangered temperate forests of Chile, Australia, and the west coast of North America.

Subscriptions are ¥3,000/year for either newsletter (¥5,000 for both). If you would like to receive a sample copy, please send a note together with a self-addressed stamped (¥72) envelope (SASE) to JATAN, 6-5 (1F) Uguisudani-cho, Shibuya-ku, Tokyo 150. To subscribe, send ¥3,000 (or ¥5,000 for both) by *genkin kakitome* (registered cash mail), indicating which newsletter you wish to receive.