Japan's 'Generation I'

By GEOFF BOTTING

Spa! (Sept. 12)

On Aug. 5, around 350 angry young people gathered in the Tokyo district of Akihabara. Some marched with placards and banners shouting such messages as "Give us money!" and "Silence = Death," while the others cheered from the sidewalks. The crowd chanted, "Raise the minimum wage!" and "We want to eat!" The police, out in full force, watched nervously.

This was no summer parade; it was a strident protest, staged by what Spa! calls "the impotent generation." Their beef: job security, or lack of it.

It's a dwindling commodity in Japan these days. More and more young adults are being denied full-time and regular employment. Instead, they are forced to take on part-time or contracted work, offering subsistence-level pay and few, if any, benefits.

"This event wasn't just about employment. It also covered uncertainty over the future and being able to find a place to live," says Motoaki Yamaguchi, one of the demonstration's organizers.

This impotent generation is aged 25-30. They came of working age when Japan's unemployment rate was at record levels -- and many have been drifting ever since.

"Where I work, if I'm injured there's no workers' compensation and no health insurance," says one of the protesters, who works on a contract basis at a factory. "They told me I'd get 250,000 yen a month, but after all the deductions and everything, I only take home 120,000 yen."

Not earning enough money to support a decent lifestyle is the most common gripe heard at the protest. Spa! says many of these young adults solve the problem by resorting to moonlighting in illegal
businesses. For an increasing number of female office workers that means working nights in the sex industry.

Rie (a pseudonym), a 24-year-old contracted office clerk at a precision instruments manufacturer, started working nights as a call girl three years ago.

"I had been taking home 170,000 yen and had to scrimp on food," she says. "I lived off instant ramen and natto before entering the sex business."

The emergence of this class of working poor and its simmering anger cannot be ignored, Spa! believes. For a portent of what could lie in store in Japan, just look at Europe. In the last few years, Britain and France, among other countries, have been experiencing violent and large-scale clashes by youths disgruntled over a dearth of opportunities.

It should be noted that in Tokyo, the key word organizers used to publicize the protest was Italian -- precariato (precarious). In Italy, and now in Japan, the word describes how a growing number of young people view their future.

So the Aug. 15 protest may go down in Japan's history as a seminal event, a trigger for the kind of civil disobedience and strife that plagues Europe.

"Young Japanese appear to be manipulated, as they have been given superficial, rather than real, information," observed a Spaniard attending the protest. "But watching this event, I get the sense that something is about to begin."

The Japan Times: Sunday, Sept. 10, 2006
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