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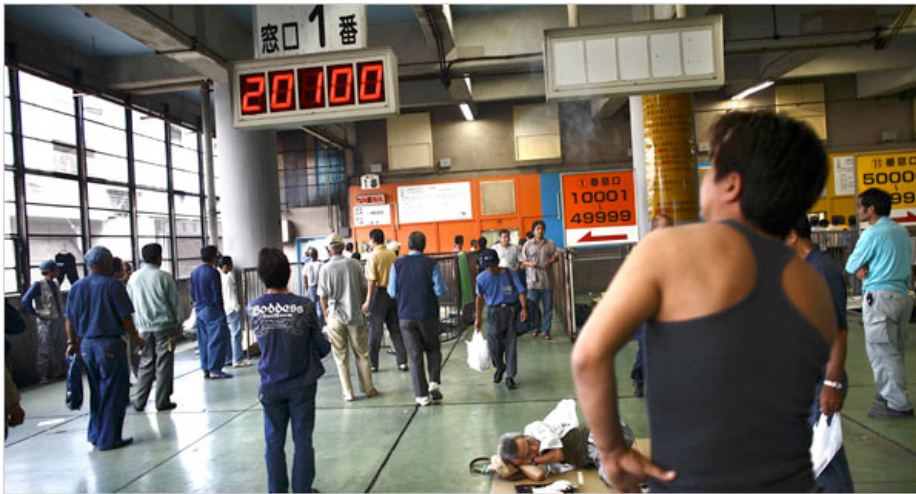
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## In Japan, Hope Fades for Disposable Workers



Ko Sasaki for The New York Times

Unemployed men in the Airin district of Osaka, Japan, waited at a labor center to collect welfare payments. Some of the younger men are able to find odd jobs.

By **NORIMITSU ONISHI**  
Published: October 11, 2008

OSAKA, [Japan](#) — With job signs stuck to their vans' windshields and sliding side doors left open in expectation, the recruiters were sizing up the potential hires at Japan's largest day labor market here recently.

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Ko Sasaki for The New York Times  
Kazuyasu Ikeda, 64, had good jobs during Japan's economic boom but now works sporadically.

By 4:30 a.m., thousands of aging day laborers had spilled out of the neighborhood's flophouses and homeless shelters, or risen from its parks and streets, to form a potential work force of mostly graying men.

A sign on one blue van, barely legible in the twilight, offered a 15-day construction job paying \$95 a day, minus \$33 in room and board. Although the terms were comparatively decent, the recruiter sitting in a folding chair in front of the blue van had found only one suitably young laborer by 5 a.m. Most were above the unwritten cutoff age of 55.

"It's really hard to use the men here because they've gotten old," said the recruiter, Takuya Nakamae, 55, turning his head toward his prize catch, a recruit in his 30s. "If you're this young, everybody wants you and you get plenty of offers. Just look at how young you are!"

And yet it was the older men who really knew how to work, he said, adding: "They're the ones who worked during Japan's decades of economic boom, so they know the ins and outs of every job. It's just that they don't have the strength anymore."

Nowadays, few young men gravitate here, the Airin district of Osaka. Little is being built in Japan's stagnant economy, and young day laborers or part-time workers find jobs by registering their cellphone

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numbers with temporary employment agencies.

Many of the older men who remain arrived here to work on the 1970 Expo in Osaka, which, like the Tokyo Olympics six years earlier, became a symbol of postwar Japan’s rebirth. Over the decades, they left to work on bridges, buildings and highways all over the country, performing the dirtiest and most dangerous jobs in helping build Japan. Some made it out of here and moved on to steadier jobs and lives.

But many others are still in Airin, one of the few corners of Japan where stray dogs lie in the middle of the street alongside drunken men, and Japanese mobsters, or yakuza, sell drugs openly on street corners and run gambling dens on certain blocks. After one worker claimed abuse by the police, scores of people here rioted for five days over the summer, though old-timers said the disturbances were only a faint echo of the violent and widespread riots of the 1960s and 1990s.

Many of the men left in Airin, on average just shy of 60 years old and with no family ties, are waiting to die here, said Minoru Yamada, who moved here in 1973, once worked as a day laborer and is now chairman of Kamagasaki Shien Kiko, a private organization that helps laborers.

“At one time, this was a place where you could remake yourself,” Mr. Yamada said. “But not anymore. Now it’s become a dumping ground for old men, a place where waste is disposed of.”

A grim report by the city government last year said that conditions in Airin were rapidly worsening: an aging population, rising homelessness, deepening poverty and increasing cases of tuberculosis and alcoholism. The number of welfare recipients has grown fivefold in the past decade.

An ancient slum, this area was renamed and reshaped into Airin in the 1960s when the city government cleared it of family dwellings, concentrated all the city’s day laborers here and invited others from all over Japan to meet a construction boom. Today, the city estimates that 30,000 people, about a quarter of its peak two decades ago, live in this 153-acre neighborhood, which is less than one-fifth the size of New York’s Central Park.

The district’s overall population is more than 85 percent male. But in Airin’s core — an urban valley hemmed in by wide avenues and an elevated train track — there are almost no women at all.

During Japan’s economic go-go years, the number of jobs offered here swelled, peaking at 9,614 a day in 1990. The number has fallen to about a third of that today and no longer includes jobs in the kind of large and lucrative construction projects that fueled Japan’s boom. Still, recruiters show up every morning at the Airin General Center, the day labor market, saying they need to check over hires before sending them to a job.

“This is different from bidding on dead tuna at a fish market auction,” said one recruiter, who said he shifted to Airin more than two decades ago after working as a pimp in Tokyo. “Sure, you can recruit on the Internet, but on the Internet, you can’t make out someone’s character. For example, a guy can be O.K. if he hasn’t been drinking. But if he has, he may get crazy and create problems for everybody around him.”

A couple of hours after the recruiters had left for the day, Tadashi Kato showed up at the center to put his name down for a job as a night watchman. Mr. Kato, 75, came here in 1957, abandoning forever his home in rural Hokkaido and family talk of fixing him up with a job at the national railway.

“It’d be natural to wonder whether I would have been better off joining the national railway, but I’ve led a carefree life and have seen things that people usually can’t,” Mr. Kato said in a guttural voice, explaining that he had taken photos of past riots here and was looking for a “successor” to inherit them.

He once lived in a flophouse. But nowadays, with few jobs coming his way, he sleeps on the streets. He refused to apply for welfare or enter the city-run homeless shelters, where each person receives one piece of hardtack bread a night. He would never, he said, depend on the government.

He was married briefly, and he said that, unlike many of the men who came here to escape after accumulating debts or abandoning their families, he long supported his former wife and their only child, a daughter.

He last saw his daughter, in Tokyo, when his first grandchild was born three decades ago.

“Your feet stink — don’t come here dressed like that,” he said she told him. “She said I could come if I had some money for her, but not to bother if I didn’t. Either way, it’s hard being a man.”

He had not seen his daughter since, but he said he knew her address in Tokyo.

“When I die, I’ll absolutely go to my daughter’s,” Mr. Kato said of his ashes, adding, “Sometimes, you know, I think if I could go painlessly, it wouldn’t be that bad not to wake up in the morning.”

It was not 11 a.m. yet, but Airin’s tiny outdoor drinking stalls were already filling up with customers.

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The most popular was a five-stool stall that belonged to Yayoi Onodera, 48, who charged \$5 per drink and sold rice balls. She had earned around \$40,000 in profit since moving here from Tokyo six months ago.

“I never dreamed I’d make so much money,” Ms. Onodera said, adding that she had struggled in the beginning but was encouraged by a local yakuza leader who used to stop by every now and then before he was arrested and imprisoned for drug dealing.

Later that afternoon, many of the men drifted to Sankaku Park nearby where they watched sumo wrestlers on a television set atop a pole.

But Kazuyasu Ikeda, 64, went straight home to the 49-square-foot room he had been renting for the past six years for \$11 a night. From his fourth-floor room, where he had a television set, 16 small cactuses and a small tank filled with guppies, he had a view of a parking lot and, beyond that, the Hankai train line.

He had just collected his wages for cutting grass that day and was in high spirits. The wages, of course, were nothing compared with what he had made during Japan’s economic boom. Helping to build a highway in Okinawa back then, he said, he far outearned American marines stationed there.

“At a foreigner’s bar that I used to go to, I was even more popular than the foreigners,” Mr. Ikeda said, adding that he was such a regular that the bar kept a bottle of Camus Cognac for him.

He never had children and thus suffered no guilt, he said with a laugh.

But as he watched the end of the day’s sumo matches, Mr. Ikeda, a red towel he had used while working still wrapped around his head, seemed to grow tired and his mood darkened. The conversation drifted, as it often did in Airin, to the topic of death.

Mr. Ikeda boasted that he had never taken a handout, stood in a soup line or stayed in a homeless shelter. When there were no jobs, he collected aluminum cans. His “policy” was to rely on no one, he said.

“I’ll hang on for another 10 years,” he said.

Outside, the train rattled past as dusk began settling on Airin. The men here, he said, were like cigarette lighters worth 100 yen, or less than \$1.

“It’s painful to throw away a Zippo or Dunhill lighter even if it doesn’t light properly anymore,” he said. “But 100-yen lighters you just throw away. That’s what we are.”

A version of this article appeared in print on October 12, 2008, on page A6 of the New York edition.

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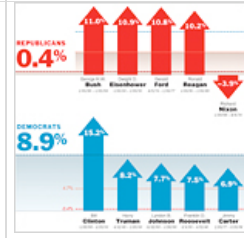
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