Teaching is becoming a 'black occupation' in Japan

Japan is working itself to death. The frequently recurring term karoshi (death from overwork) suggests as much. It’s an indirect rather than a direct cause of death, which makes statistical precision difficult, but, as a rough standard, 80 hours a month of overtime work in the months leading up to a victim’s death from a heart attack or stroke will back a claim for karoshi compensation.

Karoshi is generally associated with the private sector and its ruthlessly exploitative “black companies,” but among workers lately toiling “borderline karoshi” overtime hours are, says Shukan Toyo Keizai (Sept. 16), professionals you might not expect to find in such a plight: public school teachers.

Not all of them, but significant percentages: Nearly 60% of junior high school and 30% of their elementary school counterparts, work 60 hours or more a week, education ministry figures show.

It’s a relatively new development, brought on by aging teachers whose retiring ranks cannot be replaced rapidly enough, and by social change, of which more in a moment. Teachers today work on average 4.5 hours a week more than they did 10 years ago — “not counting work done at home,” one teacher is quick to point out — and though only one case of officially recognized karoshi among teachers is mentioned, teachers complain of endless working days and no time off. “At this rate,” says one, “I’ll surely break down physically.”

The one who succumbed – in June 2011 – was a 26-year-old Osaka-area junior school teacher. It was his second year on the job and he was highly dedicated, maybe too much so. To teach good lessons requires preparation. He prepared. There’s after-school club activity to supervise. He threw himself into that too, and into keeping in touch with parents. He was working 60-70 hours a month overtime, but actually more than that...