

Japanese Election Mired in Nationalism and Militarism

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The campaign in Japan for the December 16 election has marked a sharp turn to nationalism and militarism across the political establishment, directed especially against China. The rightward shift in Japanese politics is a warning of the dangers facing the working class as a consequence of the worsening breakdown of global capitalism.

Two issues signal the turn: the dispute with China over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, and calls for constitutional change to remove or modify Japan's so-called pacifist clause.

The ruling Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) deliberately inflamed tensions with China by "nationalising" the disputed islands in September. The result has been a dangerous stand-off between Japanese and Chinese maritime vessels, which the opposition Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and the right-wing Japan Restoration Party (JRP) propose to exacerbate by building permanent structures on the islands.

LDP leader Shinzo Abe, known for his right-wing nationalist views, has focussed on the defence of all of Japan's claimed territories as the means of pressing for constitutional change to transform the "Self Defence Forces" into a regular military force able to participate in "collective self-defence". The "pacifist" clause has acted as an impediment to participation in the US-led wars of aggression in the Middle East and thus to the interests of Japanese imperialism.

JRP leader Shintaro Ishihara calls for the complete scrapping of the "occupation" constitution, drawn up by the US following the end of World War II, and has suggested that Japan consider building its own nuclear weapons. While warning of the dangers of "anti-foreignism and adventurism" and advocating "responsible defence", Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda has previously argued for amendments to ensure the constitutionality of the military.

These proposals are accompanied by a concerted effort to revive Japanese militarism and deny the terrible crimes of Japanese imperialism in its wars throughout Asia in the 1930s and 1940s. Abe signalled his agenda by visiting the notorious Yasukuni Shrine to Japan's war dead and calling for a wholesale revision of the "unjust" perception of Japan's wartime history. While not as blatant in his advocacy, Noda previously defended a Yasukuni Shrine visit made by Junichiro Koizumi, when he was prime minister between 2001 and 2006.

The Obama administration has purposely encouraged these militarist tendencies in Japan as part of an aggressive US drive to undermine China's influence in the Asia Pacific region. Washington was instrumental in forcing the mid-2010 resignation of DPJ leader Yukio Hatoyama, who advocated a foreign policy more independent of the US and closer ties with

China. His replacement as prime minister, Naoto Kan, quickly affirmed support for the US alliance and engaged in a major diplomatic row with China over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in September 2010.

More fundamentally, however, the turn by the Japanese ruling class to nationalism and militarism is a product of the country's deepening economic and political crisis. Japan's trade surplus has turned to deficit amid a slowdown in China, recession in much of Europe and uncertainty in the US. After two decades of economic stagnation, the economy is again heading for recession, with a 3.5 percent contraction in the third quarter.

The historic weakness of Japanese capitalism—it has always been heavily dependent on imports of raw materials and export markets—has been underlined by last year's earthquake and tsunami "triple disaster" that forced the closure of much of its nuclear industry. Imports of oil and gas, as substitute energy sources, have been major contributors to the trade deficit.

For the Japanese bourgeoisie, the turn to militarism is a desperate attempt to shore up its position as the dominant imperialist power in Asia. That is threatened by the rise of China, which eclipsed Japan last year to become the world's second largest economy. The whipping up of nationalism is also directed against the working class, in preparation for the next government—whichever parties form it—to impose austerity measures to address the country's huge public debt.

The present crisis of Japanese capitalism has deep historic resonances. The brief period known as the Taisho democracy in the early 1920s soon gave way to a right-wing nationalist agenda of militarism and repression against the working class. The Peace Preservation Law of 1925 outlawed all parties advocating socialism and paved the way for the suppression of strikes and protests.

The vulnerability of the Japanese economy was graphically exposed after the 1929 Wall Street crash and the onset of worldwide depression. Japanese exports halved overnight, fuelling desperation in ruling circles and a drive to rearm and overcome the crisis through colonial conquests, above all in China. The military, backed by the emperor, assumed political dominance, initiating the invasion of Manchuria in 1931 and China as a whole in 1937. The militarist regime's plans for a Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere collided with the interests of US imperialism, ultimately leading to the Pacific War in 1941.

The restabilisation of Japanese capitalism after World War II under the aegis of the US depended on the crushing of a resurgent working class that was hostile to Japanese militarism, war and deprivation. The chief political responsibility for the defeat of the working class movement rested with the Japanese Communist Party, which subordinated workers to the American occupation, claiming the US intervention was carrying out the democratic revolution in Japan.

In reality, Japan's post-war democracy has always been stunted. Relying on the US alliance that set the framework for economic expansion, the LDP held power almost continuously from its founding in 1955 to 2009. The party never broke from Japan's militarist past and included figures like Abe's grandfather, Nobusuke Kishi, a member of the prewar cabinet, who became prime minister in 1957. LDP governments only very reluctantly issued limited formal apologies for Japan's war crimes.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the end of the Cold War and the re-emergence of great power rivalries precipitated a restructuring of Japanese politics as the ruling class sought to fashion a political instrument to prosecute its economic and strategic interests in an increasingly unstable world. The eruption of the global financial crisis in 2008 has added to the urgency felt in ruling circles. What is being fashioned in the 2012 election is a revival of the reactionary ideology and methods of the 1930s in a 21st century form, to meet the current requirements of Japanese imperialism.

The longstanding and deep-seated opposition of the working class to Japanese militarism, which brought only war, economic hardship and repression, finds no avenue for expression. Rather there is a profound alienation from all political parties, including the Japanese Communist Party, which is mired in nationalism and part of the political establishment. A genuine revolutionary party must be built as a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International to unify Japanese workers with their class brothers and sisters internationally to put an end to the bankrupt capitalist system that has nothing to offer but war and austerity.

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