Women Workers Caught in the Economic Crises

by Midori Ito

Trends in Labor Counseling after the Financial Crises

The number of free-dial calls received by Action Center for Working Women between December last year, when the financial crises reached Japan, and May 20th almost doubled from 136 to 215 cases compared to the same period in the previous year. Lately, the number of part-time workers that have been dismissed after working for the same company for several years and the number of full-time employees whose working conditions have changed for the worse have been increasing. The trend between December last year and the end of March is that an increasing number of companies stopped hiring part-time workers. It’s particularly noticeable that more companies have stopped providing maternity leave and childcare during this period.

The large number of temporary workers that lost work in the manufacturing industry at the end of last year has now become a social problem in Japan. Yet, in the current economic crises, where most of the women do part-time work rather than temporary work, it’s difficult to clearly make out the severity of the impact on working women. Many women asking for help have been employed for less than a year on short-term jobs. Working for one company on a day-to-day basis is not enough to get by on. Before the financial crises it was easy to let go of irregular workers, but now the situation has gotten even worse. It’s become impossible for working women to piece enough work together to make a living.

There are cases where part-time and full-time working women have lost their jobs because of the economic downturn. This is after being employed by a company for almost 20 years. However, many of those companies haven’t given up on hiring new employees. To let a worker go a company has to satisfy three conditions: there has to be a legitimate reason, every effort had to be made not to terminate the employee and all procedures have to be properly followed. However, companies are ignoring these conditions and dismissing employees. There are companies that have zero debt, and still they are cutting childcare under the pretext that there is an “economic slowdown.”

Another noticeable trend is that companies are encouraging their employees to quit their jobs by transferring them to another location. In one case where a woman was looking for help, her company told her to transfer from Tokyo
to either Osaka or Kyushu. When she said that she couldn’t comply because she had to take care of her parents and was married, she was told that she had to work part-time or retire if she didn’t relocate. When she originally started work at the company she was told that she wouldn’t have to transfer to a different location. She had been working for the company for about 20 years. She now had to transfer to the new location because under the equal opportunity law in Japan, discrimination on the basis of sex is illegal and that according to the regulations of the company, “an employee must transfer if ordered to do so.” In addition, people don’t receive much of an allowance for living at the new location and they have to pay most of the expenses themselves. In the end they live two lives: one life alone at the new location and another life when they visit their family. So when they add it all up, it’s better to quit. There is no balance between work and personal life. And if they are married some people will choose to work part-time.

Women in Dire Straits

In May many of the women who contacted the consultation center couldn’t find work. The current job market is a buyers market. If a worker asks for social insurance, paid vacations or refuses overtime work they are fired. But if a worker doesn’t have social security they could end up living on the street, so it’s better to have a job. Even though the law protects workers, workers are unable to exercise their rights. It’s as if workers should be grateful that they have work, and that they are asking for too much by wanting a balance between

A rally of women workers demanding tighter regulation over companies dispatching workers
their work and personal life. In a recent case, a woman gave up looking for a permanent full-time job. She was not looking for a contract job or a part-time job but casual work. She decided to look for that kind of work because there was the possibility that she could later become a permanent worker. She has reached a point in her life where she has lowered her personal value. In another case, a woman living in the countryside of Japan felt that she was trapped. She was having a difficult time with her local community because she was over 40, didn’t have a job and was single.

A long time ago people needed advice dealing with bullying problems. But people were not getting sick as a result of being bullied. These days, the number of people suffering from depression from being sexually harassed or bullied has risen sharply. After restrictions on night work for women were abolished in 1999 the workplace environment became inhospitable to women. Women with unstable jobs can somehow make due, but when they get older they can no longer find work. When their money runs out and their telephone service is cut, they are severed from society. This is how women are placed in an increasingly dire mental situation. I sense that lately the type of bullying done now is different from the past. The weak seem to be preying on the weak. The feeling of those young women asking for advice is that they are “afraid of work.”

Despite these issues, when dispatch workers are seeking a legal remedy to their problems, some people still think that, “it’s tough for dispatch workers to do physical labor at factories, but it’s easy for women dispatched to offices to do their jobs.” However, in reality, office work involves physical labor. Answering the phone, doing the accounting and entering vast amounts of data is very hard work. But, since women are doing those kinds of jobs, it is valued less. A woman taking care of her family and home does the same kind of work as a nursing care provider. Women working at the cash register of a grocery store have to stand in the same position for hours at a time. It can be quite painful and can cause inflammation. It may look like anyone could press the buttons at the register of a fast food restaurant. But it’s hard doing that kind

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**Layoffs During Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Maternity Leave on the Rise**

Since the start of the new year, there has been an increase in consultations concerning unfair treatment – including layoffs, pressure to retire, or salary reduction – following requests for child care leave. According to data compiled by the Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare, by February 2009, the number of consultations in the 2008 fiscal year had already reached 1107 cases, 1.3 times the total number of cases in the previous year. Consultations concerning unfair treatment during pregnancy and childbirth had also reached 1806, again exceeding the previous year’s figure (1711 cases). On March 16, the Ministry sent a notice to Labour Bureau offices throughout the country, requesting more business and industry supervision.

Source: “Record High in Consultations for ‘Maternity Leave Layoffs,’” Asahi Shimbun, March 17.
Recent Examples of Consultation Cases (compiled by ACWW)

I was told that since the company was in bad shape, management would like me to quit. I don’t get it. Managers are frivolous with the finances of the company, yet they are hiring new employees and I have to take care of my family. (Location – Tokyo / Age – 40’s / Employment Status – Regular Employee / Business Sector – Service Industry / Type of Work – Technical Industry / Length of Work – 1 – 5 years)

When nobody volunteered to retire early, I agreed to the request that I change from being a regular employee to a non-regular employee. Now, the company is asking me to retire because I will receive retirement benefits. (Location – Tokyo / Age – 50’s / Employment Status – Regular Employee / Business Sector – Service Industry / Type of Work – Technical Industry / Length of Work – 10 – 20 years)

I was working part-time when the company asked me to take some time off because there is no work. Now that I have temporarily quit, I have asked the company to do the required paperwork so that I can collect unemployment insurance. But they tell me, “you’ll be returning to work soon,” and they won’t do the paperwork. (Location – Fukushima / Age – Over 60)

I work at a medical office only 2 days a week. Since business is slow my wages have been lowered to 750 yen per hour, which is below the minimum wage. (Location – Tokyo / Age – 20’s / Employment Status – Short Term Part-Time Worker / Business Sector – Medical Services / Type of Work – General Office Work / Length of Work – Less than 1 year)

of work for 8 hours a day. In the service industry women have to practice bowing many times over. What kind of value do you attach to that kind of work? The idea that, “it’s only natural that women office workers should not be paid much since office work is easy and the women doing it are supported by their husbands,” must be changed.

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Translated by Mark Wehlack