

The reviews in Internationales Asienforum try to give a brief evaluation of recent German publications.

ANGELIKA ERNST in collaboration with RENATE HEROLD and SHUNICHIRO UMETANI: Japans unvollkommene Vollbeschäftigung - Beschäftigungsprobleme und Beschäftigungspolitik. (Mitteilungen des Instituts für Asienkunde, Nr. 115). Hamburg: Institut für Asienkunde, 1980, 523 pp., DM 32.-

"Hito-Kane-Mono" (personnel - finance - inventories). This was the motto of Japanese firms in their attempt to rationalize and reduce costs after the first drastic oil-price increases in late 1973/1974 and adjust to a phase of slower economic growth. Besides rationalization of production and stricter controls on bank credit, these measures concentrated in manpower. On the one hand, there was a more thorough exploitation of the in-built flexibility of the employment system so as to adjust manpower needs to changes in demand. On the other hand, the attempt was made to lower the average age of the working force so as to reduce the automatic increase in labour costs, a consequence of the existing wage system and the aging of the labour force. What were Japanese firms able to do within the specific context of their employment system? What were the effects on the labour market? And, above all, with what means and aims did the relevant political institutions try to influence changes in the patterns of employment?

In their study, "Japans unvollkommene Vollbeschäftigung", Angelika Ernst et al. examines Japan's employment problems and employment policy in the 1970s.

The first part - the problems - presents the features of the Japanese labour market and follows up with an analysis of the changes in this market and the specific possibilities these hold for businesses.

The effects of the employment measures in firms are to be seen and measured less in the official statistics on unemployment - which here come in for a critical examination - than in the increase of unstable employment conditions. These are presented in great detail in their various manifestations.

The second part - the policies - deals firstly with the political institutions responsible for employment policies, and then traces the history of the instruments of labour policy after 1945. The central aspect of the analysis is the instruments created in the 1970s: the - very limited - social security benefits for the unemployed and the program to foster employment.

The study includes comprehensive data and graphic surveys of the various employment programs. The discussion on the employment situation in Japan is also viewed in relation to the Japanese export offensive in the FRG. The main points of this discussion are:

1. Only a fraction of Japanese workers enjoy the protection and the advantages of the system of so-called life-long employment, a system developed in the 1920s as a reaction to the lack of skilled labour. It has been possible to maintain this system only at the cost of those numerous workers employed under extremely insecure conditions.
2. Notwithstanding the peculiarities of the Japanese employment system the Japanese labour market is no less flexible than that of other industrial countries.
3. Although by international comparison the rate of unemployment seems very low, this is a reflection of a very narrow definition of unemployment, which in effect conceals the true state of affairs.
4. Despite the difficulties involved in implementing measures well as financial limitations, in the 1970s the Dept of Labour has, owing to the employment situation, been able to expand the policy of compensatory measures in force to a point where it has become - in its broad outlines - one of actively fostering employment.
5. It is likely that the problem areas of the Japanese employment system will worsen in the future: open unemployment, employment under insecure conditions, and the situation of older workers. This will probably go hand in hand with a decline in the percentage of workers in so-called life-long employment and a reduction in the length of this employment.

Information about Japan always has a political aspect. To this extent the study by Ernst et al, is a constructive contribution to the topical discussion in Germany in which employers tend to present a very one-sided view of conditions in Japan.

One would have liked some information and comment on the employment policies of other institutions in Japan as a complement to government policy. Very little is known outside of Japan of the attitudes adopted by the confederations of Japanese trade unions and the different opposition parties, or of the state of the internal Japanese debate on labour and employment policies.

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