CHAPTER FOUR

THE RISE OF MOVEMENTS AGAINST PRECARITY

Freeters may be free from the companies, but they are terribly chained by capitalism and the market.

– Asato Ken

Beginning in 2004 a new sort of May Day demonstrations appeared on the streets of Tokyo: colourful street parties with dancing demonstrators slowly following a truck blasting out music on high volume. This is how one of the first and still very small-scale “Freedom & Survival May Days” demonstrations in Tokyo is described by a participant.

Amidst the heavy dark clouds and dull colours of the afternoon that covers the pavement along the neon-lit Shibuya Jingu-mae, a sudden downpour of people came in with lively music and resurrected the dead streets with dance, flag waving, banner lifting and megaphone chanting, altogether they broke the monotonous silences of the city that keeps them blindly working every day. (Jong 2005)

While the dancing demonstrators voiced out their “concerns about inhuman labour conditions”, the police “in full battle gear […] tried to forcibly suppress the joyful resistance in the streets” by forcing protesters into a single line. Despite this, the narrator continues, the loud music “spilled out the resistance everywhere, infecting everyone with the virus of rebellion” (ibid.).

The Freedom & Survival May Day is the oldest and probably best known of Japan’s freeter May Days, also referred to as “indie May Days” to distinguish them from traditional May Day demonstrations. Springing up first in Tokyo and then in places like Kyoto, Matsumoto and Fukuoka, they are now held in most major cities and in several provincial towns. The Freedom & Survival May Day has been arranged annually in Tokyo since 2004 by the General Freeter Union (Furītā zenpan rōdō kumiai or Furītā rōso for short). The demonstrations have grown to popular events gathering up to a thousand participants, largely freeters but also with notable elements of older workers, students, activists, self-proclaimed NEET and homeless. They call themselves the “precariat” (purekariāto), a term by which they try to capture the entire stratum of workers with insecure or precarious living conditions that has grown in pace with the deregulation
of the labour market that has accelerated in Japan since the mid-1990s. Together with the participants of similar manifestations around Japan these groups are often referred to as the precarity movement.¹

The precarity movement is well known for its many freeter unions, which work for the empowerment of irregular workers by protesting against abuses, supporting them through counselling, providing information about labour rights and negotiating on their behalf, and influencing public opinion through the mass-media. They also frequently ally with other movements to protest against war, sexism, environmental destruction, racism and the discrimination of groups such as immigrants, homeless, NEET or social withdrawers. Although hardly institutionalised in the sense of having a recognised official role, the movement has today become an institution in the sense of having become an established element within the culture of young freeters in Japan.

The movement’s breakthrough in public consciousness came in the years 2006–2007. Shinoda (2009) points out that especially from 2007 onwards one sees a “mainstreaming” of the labour issue in Japan, with mass media and politicians rushing to position themselves as friends of the workers. Already in 2006, a boom of interest in poverty had taken off when the NHK broadcast a special documentary called “The Working Poor”.² In 2007 the writer and precarity activist Amamiya Karin published Ikisasero! – a book which made a considerable impact on public opinion, describing not only the plight of young workers but also the resistance that had started to emerge though the precarity movement.³ Helped by this public attention, the movement managed to score several small victories in the years that followed. Its relative success can be seen in the popularity of its demonstrations, in the proliferation of new unions and Non-Profit Organisations (NPOs) dealing with the problems of labour, in

¹ Here I use precarity movement in a wide sense, including groups in the so-called ‘anti-poverty’ (han-hinkon) movement.
² The ‘working poor’ (wākingu pua) are people who work but still earn less than the minimum level of public welfare (see NHK Supesharu “Wākingu pua” reporter team ed. 2007). After the NHK documentary other media started picking up the issue and in the following years a flood of publications on issues such as poverty, precarity, or the lost generation appeared.
³ The road to this public breakthrough was paved by a tide of research reports and publications on freeters, NEET and social withdrawers by academics in the field of labour research or the sociology of education (Kosugi Reiko, Genda Yūji, Yamada Masahiro, Honda Yuki), studies on economics and stratification (Tachibanaki Toshiaki, Satō Toshiki), psychiatry (Satō Tamaki) or the sociology of consumption (Miura Atsushi). Although not linked to activism, these publications helped direct public opinion to the work problem of young people.